

Albus Potter and the Fortress of the Dead

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"The war is nearly over" Harry Potter says to his son, and this couldn't be more true. As Albus prepares for his sixth year of Hogwarts, it becomes readily apparent that the Wizarding World is changing before his very eyes; the public is ready to fight. Led by Warren Waddlesworth, whose run for Minister of Magic has him and his followers more popular than ever, the Renegade movement has reached its height, with more additions to the rebel cause of Wands and Redemption every day. What's more, however, the attention has seeped to the younger generation; WAR's presence lingers even in the halls of Hogwarts.

As the battles near their beginnings, Albus is given information that the rest of the world needs to know-even if they choose to ignore it. Now that Sebastian Darvy has all of the necessary requirements to launch his onslaught on the Wizarding World, it's only a matter of time before the destruction truly begins. Albus learns that there is a timetable to these actions, however. Darvy needs a place to breed his army first. And what's more, he may just be planning on taking over already dangerous territory to do it...

As old rivalries die, new complications arise, and the world sinks itself deeper into the slew of propaganda issued by Warren Waddlesworth and WAR, Albus is left to struggle with the difficulties of a normal life and the burden of the uncomfortable truth-that so long as his father is imprisoned, there is no chance of Darvy being stopped. Amidst an array of situations pertaining to friends and family, Albus is forced to come to an understanding; that the world needs a hero now more than ever, sometimes in the most unexpected of ways. And sometimes, he'll soon learn, being a hero doesn't always mean saving the day and getting the girl. Sometimes, it means knowing the difference between what is correct...and what is right...

Chapter 1: New Azkaban

"Do you ever get used to it?" Reginald Ares asked, his face stony. "Walking through those disgusting corridors?"

His mentor shrugged. "I wouldn't say I've become accustomed to it by any means," Harry Potter said boldly, "but it's part of the job, and I've accepted that."

They both turned slightly, allowing their eyes to wander across the exterior of the gigantic prison. They were surrounded by a peculiar variety of vegetation and foliage, from tall trees that blocked the light of the sun, to brambly bushes that stabbed into the skin of any who attempted to pass through them. The island that housed Azkaban was considerably larger than most probably knew-the prison itself obscured this fact, making the surrounding land look small in comparison due to its large size. But it was roughly two miles away from the vertical structure where Harry Potter and his student of a partner stood, surveying it with an intense mixture of awe and repulsion.

"How many times have you visited this place?" Ares asked, turning to stare at his mentor as he spoke.

Harry Potter's emerald eyes flickered away from the formidable building for a moment, taking the time to examine the expression on the face of his apprentice.

Ares looked somewhat uncomfortable. Though somewhat shorter in stature than a few other wizards that Harry knew, he was standing in such a firm and steady upright position that he appeared taller. His face was clean shaven, his hair raven black and ruffled. His small, cold eyes were darting back and forth, occasionally scanning the prison.

"About once a year, since I became Head Auror" Harry responded. "Unless there's trouble, of course, then me and Ron get called up. So several times in total, really."

Ares continued to shift his eyes over the large building, his mouth quivering for a second before he voiced his opinion.

"Those prisoners are too healthy" he said quietly.

"Too healthy?" Harry asked, eyeing him with interest. "How could anyone be *too* healthy?"

"They look strong; intrepid. Barely any of them had the emaciated physique that signifies lethargy. The guards are just begging for a revolt if you ask me, those prisoners need to be broken. How many times a day are they being fed?"

"Three" he was answered simply, and Ares sneered.

"Three is two times too much" he said coldly. "Sufficient nourishment should not be a priority. Do they get dessert when they behave?" he added scathingly.

"They're still people, Red. Dangers to society, yes, but still human."

"If they cared so much for their health, they would not have broken the law. They chose to bathe in their primitive behavior, doing little or nothing to stop themselves from exhibiting the flagitious tendencies of their peers. They want more food? They should have thought about that *prior* to their criminal activities."

Harry sighed, though he appeared to have no answer for this-or perhaps he was simply tired of answering it.

Ares turned his focus solely to Azkaban. "The lack of security worries me" he said sternly.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had not been expecting this particular statement. "Worries you?" he asked, and he resumed walking. "Red, Azkaban is probably the most secure place in the world. Right up there with Gringotts and Hogwarts."

"There isn't enough supervision" Ares rebutted at once, walking at a slow pace as well. "Any talented wizard can perform the wandless magic necessary to attack a guard. Those prisoners in there were exceptionally dangerous; we are not dealing with impecunious cretins who stole food in an attempt to appease their stomachs. The men and women imprisoned here are highly capable. The Ministry should attempt to reconcile with the Dementors."

"Red!" Harry shouted, his voice as reprimanding as it could be. "The Dementors are not an option, nor will they ever be again! They were vile creatures, and their containment is as necessary to the safety of the public as the containment of the men and women that you just saw!"

Ares narrowed his eyes unapologetically. "I am merely concerned" he said. "You asked me here today to cast enchantments around this island, which only serves to prove that you too do not believe it to be as secure as one would hope."

Harry sighed. Scratching at the back of his head, he stopped moving and reached for Red, spinning him around so that he was facing the prison again.

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Red. That right there? That prison you see? That's not Azkaban."

Now it was Ares who raised his eyebrows. He gave his superior an incredulous look.

"It's not" Harry continued. "It's *New Azkaban*."

Ares groaned and rolled his eyes. He went to remove himself, but was stopped abruptly.

"Red, I'm serious!" Harry said, making sure that it sounded in his voice. "It's completely indistinguishable from the old Azkaban in every way visible, but it's ten times more secure!"

Ares snorted.

"You don't get it, do you? The Dementors were holding this place back! They limited the amount of actual manpower we could have, but this prison is guarded day and night by some of the most talented wizards and witches in the Ministry of Magic! And that's not even mentioning the enchantments!"

"Enchantments?" Ares asked, his expression softening slightly.

"Automatic Alarm spells, powerful protective jinxes on the exterior of the prison, Illusion charms on the interior, a variety of hexes and curses triggered by movement or magical presence-deadly ones, at that-and numerous other defensive spells. Red, what you're staring at right now is the crowning achievement in wizarding security."

Ares looked much more comfortable at these words. To help him further, however, Harry threw in an additional comment.

"And if you're worried about these 'highly dangerous' prisoners, as you call them, teaming up and making some kind of a revolt, I can assure you, that's impossible. The most lethal of them are separated from the rest, as well as each other. There's even a high security cell in there for if we ever run in to someone who poses a serious threat-"

"A cell to be occupied by some great waste of magical potential, I am sure, but that has nothing to do with those who attempt to aid from the outside, those who attempt to penetrate the walls of the prison and help-"

"- Red, you haven't the slightest idea of the dangers that someone faces when when they're on this island" Harry said sharply, shaking his head. "If I told you about some of the magical creatures that they have wandering this place, I could *lose my job*. I'm the Head Auror, Red, and *I* could lose my job!"

"But I haven't see anything!" Ares shouted, his nostrils flaring suddenly. "No deadly creatures or anything of the sort! Nor have I felt any enchantment-"

"Well Red, I'm walking you down a very specific path" Harry argued back, pointing down at a shoddily made trail. "And to be honest, the reason I asked you to come with me today on this check-up of security was to ask you to add your own spells to *this* area specifically! Just as additional protection! Think about that now...your own spellwork is just a superfluous layer of magic. What does that tell you about this place, eh? It would take an elite team of the most highly trained Aurors that we have to get in or out of this place without prior knowledge of its dangers. It's impenetrable, Red. In every sense of the word."

Ares said nothing, though his face had returned to normal. He looked almost embarrassed. "I'm sorry, it's just-"

"I know, Red" Harry cut him off quickly. "You're not as confident in the protection that we give as I am-give it time though. You'll learn to realize that the Ministry is extremely effective, on the whole. Especially when pertaining to Azkaban. There have been break-outs and break-ins before, but never again. Not with what we've got now."

"We aren't always effective" Red said, somewhat under his breath.

Harry sighed, deciding not to touch on the subject. He knew exactly what his pupil was alluding to. That single day in Hogsmeade; those dead children. He had hoped that Ares would have understood the way that things worked by now...that not everyone could be saved. That it wasn't always the Ministry's fault when something bad happens.

They continued walking, Harry ducking down slightly to avoid a stray tree branch, while Ares simply walked under it. They weren't far from the disappearance point, when they'd be able to put the entire ordeal to rest. He knew that it had been a bad idea to bring someone to Azkaban so early in their career.

In an attempt to cure the silence, he reverted their conversation back to what it had been before Red had seen the interior of Azkaban.

"So anyway, yeah. I'm proposing."

"To Weasley's sister?" Ares asked.

"Mr. Weasley" Harry corrected him icily. "And yes, Ron's sister. Ginny" he added her name, smiling to himself as he did so.

"Congratulations" Red piped up from behind it, moving aside a collection of vines dangling in his way. He sounded sincere, which Harry took to mean that they could continue with their current conversation.

"I'm having a little trouble figuring out the best way though...I'm not the most romantic type. I'd ask Ron for help, but he's even worse off in that department, and he'd blab anyway."

"Simple words should suffice, nothing special" Red said gruffly. "Perhaps a Patented Potter Pick-Up line, for the young lady?"

Harry couldn't help it; he laughed.

"A Patented Potter Pick-Up line?" he choked out, wheezing. "You just come up with that now, Red?"

He couldn't see his friend behind him, but he was sure that there was a rare sheepish grin on his face.

"I came up with it weeks ago" he said. "I've been waiting for the appropriate time to use it."

Harry gave another chortle. "That's a good one Red...I'll have to remember that."

They continued walking at their slow pace, but Harry knew that they were nearing their destination. Returning to silence, he led his companion around a large cluster of bushes and towards a less dense portion of the island. Waves could be heard crashing at this point, slamming up against the jagged rocks that surrounded the island that housed the infamous wizarding prison. Once they reached the edge, they'd be able to apparate out.

As they drew near, however, Harry heard the footsteps behind him stop. Turning slightly, he saw that Red had turned as well, again facing Azkaban, which could still be seen clearly even from such a far distance.

"Red?"

"Can I ask one more question?" Ares said, turning slightly, his choppy hair blowing fiercely in the wind.

Harry sighed. "Go ahead."

Ares cleared his throat, as though his next question would ultimately decide if Azkaban was truly as powerful of a fortress as it was made out to be. His cold gray eyes stared out into space as he spoke.

"You said that no one individual could possibly penetrate the magical forces of this prison; that no one could possibly break-out. Even you?"

Harry removed his glasses and wiped at them with his robes, considering the question. "Even me, Red" he said truthfully. "Even with all that I know about the protection around it, I couldn't get out by myself. I'd need at least *some* help."

Ares breathed a sigh of relief. Harry continued in a more lighthearted fashion, hoping to clear the air.

"So that means that you have to make me a promise right here, Red. If I ever get locked up in this terrible place, you have to help bust me out. Got it?"

Ares turned to face him completely, his expression strangely grim-perhaps he didn't understand the intended sarcasm.

"Mr. Potter," he started, "I can assure you, if the Ministry of Magic is ever so corrupt that someone like *you* has been imprisoned in Azkaban, then I'll have already been dead for years."

Harry Potter snapped out of his daze with a jolt. His memory vanished on the spot as he wiped at his eyes, attempting to familiarize himself with his current surroundings. He was no longer on the island surrounding New Azkaban-he was inside of it instead. He felt someone tapping him through the bars of his cell.

"Wh-what?" he said calmly, looking up. His high security cell was just as depressing as ever; just as filthy. The hand tapping him through the bars, however, belonged to the kindly guard who always made conversation with him.

"Sorry for disturbing you, Mr. Potter" he said, though his pink face was beaming. "But I thought you could use some good news. You'll be getting out of this cell for a few hours, in just a few days, sir. Mr. Shacklebolt has used all the of the influence he has left to allow you to see your family."

Chapter 2: The Nightmare

Parchment was strewn about the floor. One could hardly consider the assortment of paper organized, but there was certainly something to be said about the different varieties in the writings, and their location as well. On one side of Albus Potter's bed, newspapers covered the carpet. Some of them crumbled up, others stacked neatly; all of them with great moving pictures on them directly underneath tall black letters that radiated importance. On the other side was a pile of smaller pieces of paper; letters. Albus wasn't sure which one he wanted to comb through first.

Returning from the bathroom, he stepped over a flattened newspaper bearing the headline *Kingsley Denies Allegations of Silver Wizard Cooperation*, nearly sliding into a split as his foot connected with the most uncared-for version of the *Prophet* in his collection, the one that read *Waddlesworth Declares Candidacy for Prime Minister*. He picked up the most recent issue, flattened it, and sunk his teeth into the front page.

Fischer Funeral Held; More Than A Hundred Pay Respects

After more than two months of controversy surrounding the nature of former Head Auror Janine Fischer's death, the body was given a proper burial today. Fischer, who was killed in the line of duty by Harry "The Man Who Murdered" Potter (under the guise of the Silver Wizard) in the month of May, was placed in a coffin adorned in lavender robes, the Ministry of Magic emblem emblazoned at the top. The coffin was then ignited by magical fire and subsequently lowered into a plot next to the graves of grandfather Boris and uncle Stuart (killed during the first and second war with Voldemort, respectfully). More than one hundred attended to witness the burial.

"My daughter dedicated her life to the Ministry of Magic" said Fischer's tearful mother, Joanna, 65. "It sounds awful, but this is how she would have wanted to go-or something like it. Doing everything that she could to help the Wizarding World, and doing it in service to the Ministry that she loved."

Fischer's death came during an investigation of Dark Alliance activity, which ultimately led her to a scene of battle between Dark Alliance members, unaffiliated Renegades, and Potter. Her outstanding courage and intense desire to do everything that she could to intervene in the battle was commemorated at the burial with a posthumous awarding of the Order of Merlin, first class. The award was given to her mother.

"She deserves more" says Wizengamot member Grady Roots, 55. "Ms. Fischer exemplified all of the characteristics that the Ministry of Magic values in its Defence Force. Skilled, tenacious, and eager for justice, I believe that Ms. Fischer has sent a powerful message to those who believed that the Ministry of Magic was not fully willing to offer their very lives for the safety of the public!"

Roots was one of several Ministry members in attendance, along side both friends and family of Fischer. Conspicuously absent from the service was Kinglsey Shackbolt, who, since announcing his official resignation in mid-June, has made few public appearances, and was not expected at this one.

In his stead however, current Minister of Magic candidate Warren Waddlesworth was present at the service. Waddlesworth had this to say:

"Ms. Fischer was a brilliant witch and an extraordinary human being. Her surprising and highly untimely death-as well as the bizarre circumstances surrounding it- serve as a harsh reminder of the dangerous times in which we live in. My greatest sympathies go out to Ms. Fischer's family, as well as my assurances that her death-a product of her vehement opposition of terrorism-will not go unavenged."

When inquired about his stance on Fischer's highly vocal anti-Renegade views, Waddlesworth clarified the confusion.

"Ms. Fischer was quite right to be against the vigilante justice portrayed by those who were present at the scene of her death. Debacles like this 'Silver Wizard' fiasco are created by individuals who are unsure of their allegiances and who act upon their confusion with blatant disregard for others. We here at Wands and Redemption aim to eliminate this potential problem by ensuring that the only enemy we face is Sebastian Darvy and those associated with him. Wands and Redemption is for the public, and by extension, we support the Ministry as well. It is my belief that anyone who opposes injustice and terrorism-as Janine Fischer clearly did-is a Renegade at heart; someone who will take a stand against those who would seek to disrupt the safety of the people. Ms. Fishcer's unfortunate death is an indication that now more than ever we all need to band together. No one wizard or group can end this threat alone."

Waddlesworth announced his candidacy for Minister of Magic almost immediately after Shackbolt stepped down. The circumstances for his resignation have led to the approval of the first popular vote election for Minister of Magic since 1827, when Timothy Wallace was elected Minister of Magic with seventy-three percent of the vote-

Albus tossed the paper down, disgusted. Every single article, whether it was on the front page, somewhere in the middle, or even in the very back of the edition, had Waddlesworth's name somewhere. It was not surprising however, considering the amount that had occurred in just the last few weeks.

Since Albus had left the castle, Warren Waddlesworth had easily become the most popular name in all of the Wizarding World. Even in the midst of a soon-to-be fully fledged war, and with his father-once arguably the most famous wizard in the world-imprisoned, it was the announcement of Waddlesworth's run at Minister of Magic that had graced the front page of every Daily Prophet that his eyes caught sight of.

Albus glanced down at the discarded paper, giving a disdainful glare. No mention of any other burials. No comments about any other victims-any other murders that had occurred that day. For a single, wild moment, he wondered if Blackwood's funeral had gotten any attention. Then he remembered that Fairhart had scooped up her body before he'd left. As far as the world knew, Ida Blackwood was still alive. Not that they even knew that she had existed...

He heaved a sigh and removed himself from his bed, now turning the other way to face the side of the room that had letters all over the floor. It was the evening, but as it was a hot August night, it was still bright enough outside for him to read things by the window. Albus took one look at his floor in an attempt to find what he was looking for, his eyes getting caught for a fraction of a second on the only official looking piece of parchment that was there: his O.W.L results. Moving it to a neater location on his bed side table, he allowed himself one more read through of his marks.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS

Pass grades

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Albus Severus Potter has achieved:

Astronomy: A

Care For Magical Creatures: E

Charms: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Herbology: A

History of Magic: P

Muggle Studies: A

Potions: O

Transfiguration: A

Albus had been quite pleased with his scores when they'd first arrived, and indeed, he remained surprised by his good Charms result in particular. At this point in time, however, he was far more interested in a more important letter. He picked up the topmost envelope from the stack near his bed; it was unsealed. He recognized the neat handwriting on the front, as he'd become

accustomed to it, and he gave it a shifty grin as he realized what the letter would probably entail. Last time she had sounded worried. This time, it'd have to be angry.

He tore into Mirra's letter at once, knowing full well that it wouldn't have much, as it was light. Unfolding the letter, his eyes scanned over the few words written down.

You know what, fine. I don't even care anymore. Go!

The dot that was part of the exclamation point was a spiky small "x", a sharp contrast to the miniscule heart used for her second, seventh, and twelfth sent letters. Albus sighed and placed the piece of paper down on top of the stack, his eyes catching sight of the previous letter.

Albus, please don't go. It's not worth it, and you know it. Please.

All of the letters that he'd received thus far from his girlfriend this summer has followed along these lines, bar of course the Happy Birthday card that had ostensibly mentioned all of the reasons why she was with him, including his "ability to make the right decisions" and his "determination in keeping every promise".

Albus sighed as he remembered his birthday from just a few days ago. Just a few days before his mother's (which had been something of a gloomy affair on its own), Albus had had one of his most awkward birthdays to date. The absence of his father had been most notable, as had been the distinct lack of company-even Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione had been too busy to make it to the unwanted and ultimately lackluster celebration. He recollected on four years ago, when he'd been angry with his father for showing up late to his party. Oh how that would have been preferable to this most recent occasion...

Crack!

Albus spun around, sharply inhaling as he did so. From the light of the window he could see that a person had just materialized onto his bed. James flashed him a smile.

"Is that really necessary?" Albus asked irritably, stashing his letters back into the pile on the floor, where a recent one from Scorpius slid into view.

"Once you can apparate mate, you realize how extremely over-rated walking is."

"You got your license a month ago and you've already decided that using your feet is obsolete?" Albus asked incredulously.

James thought about it for a second. "Yes" he finally said. "Now come downstairs, mum wants all three of us."

"Why?"

"I dunno..."

And with another loud crack! he was gone. Albus sighed as he dug through the letters next to his bed, sorting them again so that Mirra's most recent was on top. Again, he caught eye of Scorpius'. His friend had mentioned a nice surprise once they returned to Hogwarts, and had been in good cheer recently, despite everything else that was going on. Albus wondered vaguely what it was, but before he could ponder it he decided it was in his best interest to hurry downstairs.

He met his sister on the stairs, who was wearing a bewildered expression just like his own.

"When did James get home?" he asked her off-handedly.

"About an hour ago" she said. "You didn't hear him apparate in?"

"I've learned to tune it out" Albus replied darkly.

Fresh out of Hogwarts, James had gotten his apparation license. What's more, however, he'd begun working at Uncle George's shop, one of the few business' still booming despite the grim outlook of the world. According to his mother, it was very hard for anyone to find work outside of the Ministry these days, and it was better for James to not get tied into a job that he wouldn't end up wanting later-thus, it was best that he worked with his uncle for a bit. Albus thought that he saw right through this however. If he didn't know any better, he'd of thought that the Potter name had officially become irreparably frowned upon by all things government.

As his brother was now frequently gone, Albus was prone to long periods of time by either himself or with only his sister for company in the large home. Relatives occasionally stopped by-mostly Uncle Ron and his kids-but it wasn't anywhere near as much as it used to be, and Albus found himself secretly glad for this. Hugo barely spoke to him, and Rose spoke far too much. She had went from annoying to downright unbearable over the course of the summer. She was constantly raving about her boyfriend Lance, who, unlike James, had entered the Ministry immediately after he'd graduated; apparently he was now very high up in the Improper Use of Magic office, especially impressive considering his young age. The only other topic she seemed capable of bringing up was that of Albus' own girlfriend-nonchalant comments about how she was doing, as they were out of touch, and indeed, a couple of seemingly non-confrontational questions about her O.W.L results, which Albus knew was only because Rose wanted to compare them to her own.

Albus lollygaged down the stairs with his sister at his side, curious as to why his mother wanted him, but more than anything wanting to return to his room and continue sifting through the stacks of literature. His brother was already in the kitchen when they arrived, looking relaxed with a cup of tea in his hand. His mother was looking as she usually did these days-tense.

His father's imprisonment had taken its toll on everyone in the family, but Albus was sure that no one was more affected than his mother. For all of the effort that she put into concealing it, Albus

knew that it was a truly harrowing experience for her, now forced to watch over the house, deal with all of the family issues, and, perhaps on a more personal note, sleep alone. She was constantly busy these days, though Albus knew that it had little to do with her work as a Quidditch correspondent. Though people rarely visited the house, Albus knew that his mother was now acting very similar to how his father had two years ago, when secretive meetings had been going on under this very roof. It had not taken Albus very long to understand the meaning behind these disappearances. She was keeping in contact with everyone in their circle; assuring everyone that her husband's incarceration was in no way to be a hindrance to whatever it was they had already been doing.

"Good, you're both awake" his mother said upon their entrance, and she placed down a cup of tea for each of them. Lily picked hers up immediately, but Albus simply pulled out a chair.

"I was never asleep" he said, ignoring the steaming cup in front of him.

"Well all three of you need to get to bed soon" his mother said quickly, her eyes looking somewhat sunken from lack of sleep herself.

"That's why you called us down here?" Lily asked, obviously just as bewildered as her siblings.

"Well that and to tell you why" she was answered. "We all need to wake up early tomorrow. We have a busy day ahead of us."

Albus groaned. He had known for a while now that a visit to Diagon Alley was imminent, but he was not keen on walking through the lugubrious streets of the shopping area. James gave a wide smile as he wiped at his mouth.

"Ahh...shopping for school supplies. Memories are flooding my head of the good old days, before I-"

"We're not going to Diagon Alley tomorrow" his mother cut him off, and all three of them raised their eyebrows. "Though we do need to get on that soon...but anyway, we're paying a visit to family tomorrow. Your Uncle Dudley and Aunt Norma, to be exact."

"No!" all three of them shouted indignantly, Albus suddenly hoping that this was all a ruse, meant to put some much needed humor in their lives-that they were indeed going to Diagon Alley tomorrow, which suddenly seemed like the greatest place in the world...

James' growl had been the most noticeable, as it had been accompanied by a sharp fling of the wrist that had knocked his cup to the ground, shattering it.

"James!" his mother yelled.

"Sorry!" he said, whipping out his wand at once. "*Reparo*" he cried, and the cup pieced itself back together quickly. Another flick and it was back on the table. "It's just- mum- really- we didn't do anything-"

"Honest!" Lily said, her expression horrified. "We really didn't!"

"That's enough" their mother said sternly, eyeing them all. "This isn't a punishment! It's good to see family every once in a while! And besides, it's just a pit-stop anyway. Tomorrow- tomorrow we're going to the Ministry as well."

There was silence in the kitchen while the three of them waited for an explanation.

"As there's no current Minister...Kingsley was able to pull a few strings from behind the scenes" their mother told them all. "Your father is being released from Azkaban for a day. It's highly supervised, and it will be in the Ministry but...we're allowed to visit."

All thoughts of Uncle Dudley fled from Albus' mind. He was numb from shock now; in complete disbelief. He was going to see his father tomorrow...after months.

He felt his inside squirm however. Delight had quickly replaced itself with anxiety. His mother had resumed speaking, but her words were lost because of his own thoughts. How would his father look at him? Would he be pleased with his son? Or would he look at him with shame? With a feeling of blame that he would never outwardly say, but surely, that he was dwelling on? And what would his father even look like? What would several long weeks in Azkaban have done to him?

"-I don't know how long we'll be able to see him, but hopefully long enough for you to all hear that he's okay from his own mouth."

Albus looked up, catching the last bit of this sentence. James was trying desperately to conceal his excitement, but it was showing clearly in the lines on his face. Lily was making no effort however, she was beaming and looking close to tears. Albus wondered inwardly what the expression on his face looked like. Fortunately, it appeared as though no one was paying attention.

"I'm not finished yet" their mother continued, sounding somewhat strained. Their smiles all collectively fell slightly. "There's something that we need to go over."

They all exchanged a glance of interest before their mother spoke. When she did so, it sounded as though she'd recited this particular part.

"The Ministry of Magic is not a bad place" she started. "Nor should you feel any animosity towards it. But we still must be careful about what we say and how we act. This meeting with your father is a very private affair. It is best that we not tell anyone why we are there-just because we want to avoid questions. Likewise, and I can't stress this enough, *we must be careful*

about what we say. There's nothing to suggest that this visit won't be monitored closely, and that means no asking your father sensitive questions, and also-" her eyes flickered directly on Albus for a moment-" no recounting any stories. Understood?"

They all nodded in unison, Lily and James' expressions reverting back to how they'd been. Albus, however, grasped more from the conversation than they had. His father's imprisonment was dependant entirely on the story that he'd given the Ministry; the falsified tale of Fischer's murder. More importantly, this was done so only to protect Albus from expulsion and other dangers that could befall him without the safety of the castle throughout the year. If Albus even let one thing slip to indicate that things had went differently than how his father said that they had...

It would probably end up resulting in the eventual release and clearing of his father's name. But this was not what his father wanted at all-for some inexplicable reason, he wanted things exactly how they were now. Albus was not going to betray his trust on that part.

With a pang in his gut, he realized that betraying his father's trust was exactly what he'd been contemplating all summer. Indeed, it was the subject of the constant letters from Mirra. Albus had still not decided what to do with that dilemma however.

"Now you three get to bed" his mother said suddenly, snapping him from his thoughts. "And don't forget to lay out your clothes tonight, I want you all to look your best tomorrow. Uncle Dudley loves healthy looking children!"

"Makes us look more edible" James commented lowly on his way out, something that thankfully wasn't heard by his mother.

Albus trudged up the stairs with his head down, his brother and sister chatting enthusiastically ahead of him. His mind was wondering away when he actually reached his room, where he collapsed on his bed in a single motion.

Tomorrow was going to be an interesting day, that was for sure. He turned on his side, thinking that he'd write back to Mirra tomorrow night-it was probably best that he got some sleep now, like his mother had suggested. He blinked his eyes shut as he pulled the covers over himself, going over again in his head all of the possible scenarios of tomorrow. The meeting with Uncle Dudley and his family would be arduous at best, made even more interminable by the fact that it would be postponing the visit to his father. Or perhaps, it would go by faster because of the impending meeting. After all, time always went by faster when you were in no hurry, and considering what his father's reaction might be to his appearance, maybe he wasn't all that eager to meet him.

Your father loves you! said a voice in his head. *That's why he's in Azkaban!*

That's right, the same voice said, only it was darker. *I'm the reason he's in Azkaban...*

He kept his eyes shut and tried to clear his mind, knowing that it was impossible, but still giving it all of the effort that he could muster. He was nodding off now...his mind was becoming less cramped. Now he was drifting...drifting...further now...and now he was running...

But where he was running, he didn't know. Everything in front of him was pitch black. It was only the sound of his own panting and footsteps that made him realize he was even moving at such a fast pace. He wanted desperately to slow down and catch this breath, but he couldn't be sure that he wasn't already so close...to wherever it was he was going.

Suddenly, a light appeared. A brilliant gold was hovering in mid-air, but it appeared to only be facing one way-the direction in which he was running. But that was strange. How could light be facing a certain way?

The next thing he knew, the footsteps sounded doubled. He was still running through pitch darkness, the light ahead of him moving at almost the same pace, but not really taking him anywhere. He was getting closer to it now, though. Close enough to make out its source...

It was a person. There was a person running, right in front of him, leading him. That explained the light. The golden beam was coming from this person, and the direction that they were facing; it was coming from their face. Their eyes.

Albus sped up to reach the person, intent on asking them how close they were to their destination. He finally managed to reach out a hand, grabbing the shoulder of the person sprinting ahead and spinning them around-

He screamed. It was himself, exactly as he always looked, only his face was harsher, more maleficent. There was a sadistic smirk to it, and those eyes...they were glowing golden. Albus knew this appearance well. His exact relationship with it he couldn't quite figure out, not now, he was too tired. But it was very important, he knew that much-

The golden eyed Albus grabbed him by the throat; he was absurdly strong. Albus felt the air squeeze from his lungs as his doppelganger wrapped both hands around his neck, pressing down viciously, its teeth bared. Albus instinctively clutched the hands of his would-be-killer, trying to pry the fingers away, but he was slipping from consciousness. He sunk down to his knees, too weak to properly combat this foe that, for some reason, he couldn't spot any weakness in. It was superior to him in every visible way.

He collapsed onto the floor, his fingers loosening, unable to do much in his efforts to save himself. The golden eyed Albus was now looking down at him, its hands still wrapped around his neck. It was laughing now, laughing uproariously-

Albus shot up in his bed, breathing heavy. He could feel sweat trickling down his neck as he immediately reached for his own throat, which was cool and unharmed. It had all just been a

dream. He felt pain flicker behind his eyes however; an unsettling pain that made his stomach churn.

"No" he said into the darkness of his room. "Not again..."

Chapter 3: Dining With The Dursley's

Albus stirred all night in his sleep, waking up every now and again only to wipe the sweat from his face. He knew that at one point he actually managed to stay in his slumber, but he wasn't aware of this until the sunlight cracked through his window. Followed, of course, by another *crack!*

"Mum says get up."

Albus felt someone on his legs, understanding it immediately to be his brother. As he wiped at his eyes he allowed them to focus on James, who was, surprisingly, already dressed.

"You're dressed already?" Albus asked, dumbfounded; James was notorious for being slow in the mornings.

"Dressed? Al, I just got back from work!"

As Albus learned only minutes later, his mother was waiting on him. James had went to work hours ago, coming home and dressing in sharp muggle clothes as soon as Uncle George had given him the say so. Lily too had woken up on time. It was only Albus who had had himself alie-in.

"Overslept, I see" his sister said to him as he he moved himself into the kitchen, his hair undoubtedly a mess and his eyes still somewhat closed.

"Yes" he grunted.

"What happened?" she asked as he pulled out a chair and began fiddling around with the lid of the cereal box.

"Nightmare" he added, not wanting to go in to details.

"About what?"

Albus ignored her as he made his breakfast, but before he could so much as move the spoon to his mouth his mother had entered the kitchen.

She too was dressed completely, this time in muggle clothes. She was wearing jeans and a white top, and, Albus noticed with surprise, her face was dolled up somewhat; her tasteful make-up was noticeable, anyway. Albus knew that this was not done on behalf of Uncle Dudley's family, however. This was going to be the first time in months that she'd see her husband.

"Looking good, mum" said James, who had just entered the kitchen as well. Albus now took in his brother's appearance. He was in black slacks, with a button down blue shirt that fit him quite well. Albus knew that he would be unable to pull off the fancy muggle look, however, and he immediately made this known.

"We don't *have* to dress like that, do we mum? I mean, I know you said look nice-"

"You lost your choice-of-clothing privileges when you slept in an hour and a half!" his mother said sharply. "Why didn't you get any sleep?"

"He had a nightmare" Lily chimed in at once, and Albus threw her an offensive look.

"A nightmare?" his mother asked, opening up her purse and checking its contents. "About what?"

"He had this terrible dream that he was going to oversleep and slow us down this morning" James commented. "Blimey Al, you should have taken Divination-"

No longer keen on eating, Albus excused himself wordlessly and went back upstairs. He spent fifteen minutes fishing around his room for appropriate muggle clothing, finally returning downstairs in, sadly, a button-up shirt much like his brother's.

"You look good" his mother told him as he entered the kitchen once more. "Just do something with your hair!"

"Ughh..."

It took twenty more minutes for Albus to look up to scratch by his mother's standards, and even then, it turned out that the morning hadn't been as well planned as they'd previously thought. James was right about to reach into the old pot by the fire place for Floo Powder when his mother stopped him.

"Don't be silly James" she said. "They're muggles!"

"So...Insta-Floo then?" James asked stupidly, reaching for the significantly smaller pot next to it. Insta-Floo was a product that they only had due to their father working in the Ministry, and as such, it seemed unlikely that they'd come across more anytime soon. Albus was right about to object to using it for this very reason when his mother interfered with a much better excuse.

"It doesn't matter what kind of Floo it is, they might not even have a fire place. We're apparating."

"Huh?" Albus and Lily both said at once.

"I'll take Lily, and James, you can take Albus."

Albus squirmed slightly. He had only side-along apparated a few times, and it had been quite uncomfortable on each occasion. He supposed that he should get more used to it however-James had started learning when he was in his sixth year at Hogwarts, which Albus would soon be entering. Still, Albus wasn't sure how he felt about having someone as inexperienced as James take him.

It mattered not though, as James provided his own excuse.

"Mum, I haven't been to Uncle Dudley's in years. I'm not sure I even remember what the place looks like. I'm gonna' end up splinched!"

Their mother sighed, and there was a deafening silence between the four of them. This was one of those occurrences where their father's presence was most missed. With him around, this trip would have been planned days in advance, and then executed perfectly. Now no such thing was happening.

"Okay fine" their mother finally said. "I'll apparate James there, then come back and get each of you in turn. Having two along is always a little risky..."

Minutes later Albus' mother and brother had vanished on the spot, his mother returning a moment later to take Lily next. Just a minute later and it was he and his mother standing in their sizeable sitting room.

"All ready Al?" she asked.

"Yup" he replied, and he grabbed hold of her arm.

At the next moment his body had collapsed into itself; he felt the air drain from his lungs extremely fast, and he was suddenly reminded of the night before as everything turned black-

He took a fresh breath of air as sunlight hit; he was standing outside on a muggle suburban street. James and Lily were both standing slouched, leaning up against a fire hydrant and a mailbox, respectively. Albus glanced up at the street sign that indicated their exact location. His stomach flip-flopped as he read the words *Arcfield St*. He hadn't been here in years.

Every house on the block of row homes was almost identical, all painted white with a silver fence enclosing the yard. Their mother walked them up the street idly, all three of them automatically forming a line behind her. They stopped suddenly however when their mother turned to face them all, her lips pursed slightly.

"I know that we already went over it-"

"We know mum-" they all started.

"Hush! This isn't about your father!" she snapped. "Well- I suppose in a way- look, we have something to discuss briefly about your Uncle Dudley and his family."

"What's that?" James asked for all of them.

"If any of them ask where your father is-he's very busy at work."

"*What!*" Albus and Lily both gasped, but it was James who gave a coherent question.

"You mean they don't *know*?"

"No, they do not" she responded. "Who was going to tell them? But that's kind of the point of this little gathering. I plan on telling them during a cup of tea maybe-leaving out a few extraneous details of course."

Albus merely stared at her, mouth agape at what he was hearing. He and his siblings could do little more however, as at the next second she had continued walking, leading the three of them to a house in the middle of the street. Albus swallowed as they followed her through the gate and up the patio, his nerves racking as his eyes slid over the house ahead of him.

He had been around nine or ten the last time that he had been at the Dursley household, and from the outside, it looked no different. It was the most normal looking house conceivable, plain white in color, two stories, each with two perfectly positioned windows looking outside. As they walked towards the eggshell colored door Albus examined the rather ugly looking flowers that were grown throughout the yard. They looked reasonably well cared for however.

"Okay, you three ready?" their mother asked them all as they approached the door. "Albus tuck in your shirt" she added, and Albus did so only to speed things up.

He watched as his mother took a sharp breath and knocked twice.

They heard bustling behind the door, and a moment later they were greeted.

Uncle Dursley was a big man. Albus recalled his father having described him as being "a tad unhealthy" in his youth, but had also claimed that he'd shaped up due to an increased interest in the muggle sport of Boxing. The adult version was along the same lines. He was a very thick man, but most of his excess weight had been molded into muscle, bar perhaps what was hanging from his gut. He still had a somewhat boyish appearance however; his short blonde hair was thin and looked as though it was glued to the top of his head, and his somewhat pudgy cheeks retained a rosy glimmer even in his old age. Most unique about him was his expression. Uncle Dudley always wore a somewhat nervous grin, as though he wasn't entirely comfortable around company.

"Come in, come in!" he hollered exuberantly, steering clear and allowing them to enter the home.

The Dursley household was exactly as Albus remembered it to be; boring. The furniture was placed around the sitting room in a typical fashion, with the white couch facing the television just as it did in other non wizarding homes. There was a coffee table in between the two, with rather uncomfortable looking (in Albus' opinion) armchairs on either side. The entrance to the dining room was just ahead of the living room, whereas a brown banister took the stairs up to the second floor right next to the television set. A table in the corner had a few pictures of family get togethers; hanging on the wall were two school pictures of the Dursley children.

As if on cue, they came down the stairs neatly. Dougie Dursley-the first born, was a teenager around the same age as Albus. He was hefty looking, closer in physique to what Albus' father had described his cousin as once being. He too had boyish features and blonde hair, only his was longer; neck length. Unlike the well adorned Potter children, however, he was dressed lackadaisically, wearing a striped shirt that hung off of him loosely, and a pair of faded jeans that seemed to require two belts as opposed to one. Despite their similarities in appearance, he could not have worn a more different expression from his father; Dougie had an almost smug look on his face, one that exuded haughtiness.

Albus tried to not to roll his eyes as the boisterous adolescent fumbled his way down the stairs. Dougie Dursley had never really *bullied* him in their previous meetings; as timid as Albus was, he found it almost impossible to be pushed around by someone with no magical abilities, regardless of their size. Likewise, Albus had the shrewd suspicion that the Dursley boy was always kept on his best behavior anyways whenever relatives came around. Knowing his supercilious attitude, Albus was positive that Dougie was much more irksome and treacherous at his school, among his peers.

Not wanting to make eye contact, Albus shifted his gaze upwards to the younger Dursley son, who was walking down after his older brother gingerly.

Miles was much more reserved than his older brother. He was a year older than Lily, and he had a straggly look to him that suggested that though he wasn't quite underfed, most of the table scraps fell upon his elder brother. He too had blonde hair, but it was short like his father's. His beady blue eyes shifted back and forth slowly as he walked.

Albus had never had any problems with Miles, who he considered to be, on the whole, a kind person. He mostly kept to himself, but when he did socialize with them, he was always generally nice. Though Albus had scarcely spent time with him during the visits of their youth, he knew for a fact that Miles and Lily had always played together. Indeed, he gave her a shaky wave as he came down the stairs, which Lily returned.

"Boys, you remember you Uncle Har- hey-"

"Harry couldn't make it" Albus' mother blurted immediately. "He's been very busy recently. We just thought that we'd stop by to say hello however, maybe catch up-"

"Oh" Uncle Dudley cut her off rudely, though Albus was sure that it was unintentional. He suddenly looked crestfallen. "But you're staying for supper, of course?"

All three of the Potter children turned to their mother at once, unable to voice their actual indignation but still eager to get the message across with their faces.

"Erm-"

"Well of course you are!" Uncle Dudley said sweetly. "Norma's got a brisket in the oven!"

"Well- well I suppose-" Albus' mother stammered out, and Albus felt his heart sink.

"Well go on then, make yourself at home!" Uncle Dudley continued, delighted. "As I was saying, boys, you remember your Aunt Gin-"

There was a series of muffled greetings at this point, only punctuated by the arrival of Aunt Norma from the kitchen.

Aunt Norma resembled her younger son more than the older; she was scrawny, with a long, almost equestrian face. Her hair was a straggly black however, and it hung in front of her face in dainty fashion. She was always smiling politely, and, if she was anything like Albus remembered her, she was constantly offering food to everyone, whether they were full or not.

"Tea and cake?" she said as soon as she entered, and they all shuffled into the kitchen, the Potter family slower than their cousins.

"Mum what's going on-" Albus breathed at once.

"Staying for supper?" Lily hissed. "Are we going to be late to meet dad-"

"Kill me now" James mumbled to no one in particular.

"Hush, all of you!" their mother reprimanded them under her breath. "No, we'll miss nothing that has to do with your father, he'll be there all day. We can survive a single meal with your *family*" she stressed the last word. "Honestly, you three..."

"But I don't need to eat!" James continued to protest desperately, and he reached his hands into the pockets of his pants, pulling out multi-colored sweets as he did so. "I brought some candy from the shop-"

"Enough!" their mother screeched, and she quickly covered her own mouth to stop herself from making a scene. "Put those away!" she added to her son.

They followed her into the kitchen, looking as though they were being marched to their deaths. James stuffed the candy back into his pockets with a melancholy face while Albus went in first, where the sparkling clean room greeted them with a well sized cake on a circular kitchen table. Seats were pulled up for them immediately, and then the torment began.

It was agonizing. Uncle Dudley was giving lengthy recounts of his exploits at the company that he worked for, Luggers, an automobile repair shop. Albus could only sit there with his hands supporting his face, watching as Dougie helped himself to piece after piece of the pastry. He occasionally glanced towards the timer on the oven, which measured the duration of his suffering. James looked as though he was sleeping with his eyes open, jolting himself awake

every time there was forced laughter at the table. Lily's eyes were trailing around in a circular motion; she appeared to be counting the tiles on the walls.

Only his mother appeared generally enthused about the conversation, and Albus knew that this facade was instrumental in keeping the peace between everyone at the table. If not for her *clearly* placating questions and comments-which seemed to soar right over the head of everyone named Dursley-Albus was sure that the time spent together would have been outrageously awkward.

A small degree of solace came with around an hour and ten minutes left on the oven, when Aunt Norma suggested that her two boys give the three of them a tour of the garden out back. Albus found himself torn between the two ideas-more uneventful chatter with the admittedly friendly Uncle Dudley, or the prospect of fresh sunlight while accompanied by Dougie. Not that his own choices mattered much however; he and his siblings were ushered out of the door almost instantaneously by their mother.

They were escorted to the small garden area by the two boys, Dougie in the front and Miles right behind him.

"Nicely trimmed" James commented, the second that he'd seen the immaculate hedges. As gregarious as James usually was, Albus could not help but think that even he was uncomfortable.

"I did it" Miles said meekly.

"So Al," Dougie started at once, leading them around the garden at a slow pace. His voice was sharp, and just slightly confrontational. "Got yourself a girlfriend?"

Albus was moderately taken aback by this question, but he supposed that it was perhaps normal for a relative to ask about one's private life after so long without communicating with them. He gave a simple answer.

"Yes" he said, meandering along in the garden with James and Lily behind him.

"One like you?" Dougie asked.

"No, she's a girl" Albus retorted, knowing full well what Dougie was asking, but unwilling to reach the subject of his wizarding abilities so soon. Though both brothers had always been highly curious about the magical nature of their extended family, it was only Dougie who ever prodded for more information.

"No I mean like *you*" Dougie said, not understanding Albus' intentional misconception. "Like what you *are*."

"She's human" Lily piped up at once. "I've met her."

Miles turned and gave a weak smile, though he spun back around immediately when his older brother eyed him.

"No, not like *that*" Dougie said stupidly. "I mean is she a *wizard*."

"They're called witches, actually. When they're girls" James said, and Albus could tell from the tone in his voice that he was exasperated by the very nature of the conversation.

"Ah" Dougie said, leading them passed some moderately pretty flowers and indicating them briefly. "Dandelions" he told them. "So anyway..."

Dougie continued asking idiotic questions, most of them answered by Lily, whose frequent quips made Miles chortle for a moment before returning to silence. Albus did his best to ignore everything that was going on around him, wondering vaguely if anything had ever been cooked slower in the history of the world than the brisket simmering in the Dursley's kitchen. Couldn't Aunt Norma just double the heat? That would cook it in half the time, right? Didn't cooking work like that?

"So Al, I took up junior wrestling at my school" Dougie said, spinning around out of the blue, his questions about the wizarding world extinguished.

"Fascinating" Albus answered.

"Want me to show you some cool moves?"

Albus made to answer, but then saw Miles shaking his head vigorously from behind his brother's back. He looked petrified, and, Albus noticed, he had rolled up the sleeves on his shirt to show a deep bruise on his arm.

"Erm-"

"Can you show me?" James asked at once.

Dougie's smile shifted, and Albus knew why. Though Dougie may have had more in terms of girth, James was still taller, and his physique was more powerful; Quidditch training had crafted his body for athletics.

"No, I don't feel like it anymore anyway-" Dougie started, his voice a little bit more quiet.

"No come on, try out some moves on me!" James said smartly, and Albus knew that his brother had caught on to his cousin's fear.

"No, I'm okay-"

"Come on! I *really* want you to!"

"No-"

The goading stopped at the very next moment however, for something most peculiar had happened. The silence surrounding them outside had been penetrated by music; cheery, almost patriotic music that reeked of publicity. A magnified voice was mouthing muffled words, and Albus, intrigued by what could possibly be disturbing what he surmised was the usual quiet of the neighborhood, sprinted towards the wooden fence surrounding the garden, poking his head over it to see the commotion.

A jet black car was rolling down the street at a slow, smooth pace. Four megaphones were attached to the hood of the car, blaring off recited words in a falsely enthusiastic voice. The windows were all tinted, concealing whoever was driving, but what Albus saw written on the side of the car in bright red both enlightened and shocked him.

Waddlesworth your vote!

Albus merely stood there, stunned from complete disbelief and confusion, his mouth hung wide open as though he was ready to consume food. His brother and sister joined him at the fence, both of them wearing similar looks of surprise. Albus ignored their company and strained his ears to hear what the car was spouting.

"Are you tired of tedious taxation? Do you ever feel like your government isn't putting you or your well-being first? Did you know that someone is ready to stand up for YOU!"

The words rang through Albus' ears, nearly making him faint.

"No way...you've got to be kidding me..." Albus mumbled to himself, while his cousins joined him. The voice continued without stoppage.

"Warren Waddlesworth feels for the common man, for the man just trying to get by! He's not here to help the government, or fix what's not even broken; he's here to hear you! Warren Waddlesworth wants YOUR opinion, and he doesn't want to just stand up for you, he wants to stand by you side!"

Albus spun around on the spot, pushing passed all four of those standing by him and running back through the garden. He didn't know if he was being followed by his family or not, nor did he care; he had to tell his mother. He had to tell *someone*...

He bolted through the back door, finding himself in the Dursley's kitchen seconds later. His mother was still having a falsely interesting conversation with Uncle Dudley, while Aunt Norma was just opening up the door to the oven.

"Mum" Albus said briskly as soon as he entered, and the chatter ceased at once.

"Good, I was right about to call for you" his mother said, turning to him. "Go and get the others for dinner-it looks wonderful by the way, Norma" she added mid-sentence, smiling at her.

Albus ignored this completely. "There was a car outside that was spitting bile about *Warren Waddlesworth!*"

His mother's face went stony. Albus could hear footsteps behind him that indicated the others were coming in, though he next became preoccupied by his Uncle Dudley's loud laugh.

"Blimey, you know Waddlesworth? I guess your dad still reads our papers too..."

"Wait, *what?*" Albus said, breathless. "Y- you know Warren Waddlesworth?"

"Course I do" Uncle Dudley said, and it was now he who looked taken aback; Albus' mother didn't change her expression in the slightest however. "He's campaigning for Prime Minister, isn't he!"

Albus looked back and forth between his mother and uncle; Aunt Norma was busying herself by pouring drinks and getting out silverware. He felt people at his shoulders, though he didn't acknowledge.

"Y- you mean- Prime Minister of- of-"

"Of Britain, that's right. What else would he be running for?"

"But- but- but do you even know who he is?" Albus stammered out.

"I know enough" Uncle Dudley said smartly. "Didn't really get popular until a few months ago, but information slowly slid out. I know he's going for a bit of an odd kind of election-seems to think that with enough public support, he's practically in-but he's got the right idea as far as I'm concerned. He speaks for the regular guy, and I like that. Plus he's filthy rich" he added with a loud laugh, and his wife laughed as well.

"Barely says it"she said, now setting the plates. "Inherited a fortune off of oil, didn't he Dud?"

"Oi- *oil?*" Albus choked, and he again looked at his mother, who *still* wore the same expression. "Are you kid-"

"Albus, take your seat for dinner" his mother said suddenly,snappingout of her stupor. She gave him a meaningful look however, one that Albus understood immediately. *We'll discuss this later.*

His impatient nature bothered him all throughout dinner. Mrs. Dursley had indeed made a lovely brisket, smothered with gravy and with sides of corn and mashed potatoes on the side. Albus stayed distracted though, unable to focus on the meal, regardless of how unexpectedly tasty it was. His mind kept rushing over what he'd just seen.

Waddlesworth is running for muggle minister. He's up to no good. Why isn't anyone making a big deal!

But no one seemed to be paying attention to his frustration, indeed, even James and Lily seemed to have put the matter out of their heads while they enjoyed their dinner.

Dad. I'm talking to dad later, he'll have answers for me.

He was momentarily distracted however. Miles, who was sitting next to his brother, had just reached his fork into the platter for a particularly large piece of juicy beef. Dougie promptly smacked it away though, taking the piece for himself and leaving his younger sibling looking quite irritated; no one else at the table seemed to have noticed.

"So how is Harry?" Uncle Dudley boomed out over the table. "I haven't spoken to him in forever, not since about a year or two after I last saw you lot!"

"He's fine, just busy" Albus' mother lied. "I was actually hoping that we could talk about him a bit later though, after dinner, if you don't mind" she said, a little quietly.

"Well why not now?" she was answered jovially, as Lily was sprayed with bits of food from across the table. Aunt Norma nodded as well, but Albus' mother gave a slight shake of the head.

"Oh, it's just a little personal. I'd rather not speak about it in front of the children" she added in a whisper, and Albus saw James roll his eyes.

"Ohhh, I see" Uncle Dudley said with a wink. "After dinner it is then" he added, apparently with a great deal of understanding that Albus was quite sure was incorrect.

Dinner passed along in this fashion, with Albus tapping his foot eagerly under the table, while discussions carried everyone else through the meal. Finally, after what seemed like hours, the minors-and James-were excused from the table so that the adults could chat.

The second that they'd left they passed over to the sitting room, which, thanks in part to the sliding doors that separated it from the dining room, gave both parties plenty of privacy. While a muffled conversation went on at the dinner table, Albus immediately went to the corner of the sitting room and struck up a conversation with his siblings. His cousins, meanwhile, stayed on the other side of the room, close to the stairs.

"So what do you reckon is going on with that car we saw?" Albus asked them both, his tone low.

"Seems to me like Uncle Dud was pretty spot on" James shrugged immediately. "Waddlesworth is running for more than one job."

"Well you don't find that weird?" Albus asked. "I'm going to tell dad when we see him later-"

"Albus you can't!" Lily piped up. "Mum says we have to be careful about what we say-"

"What are you lot talking about?" said a sharp voice from the other end of the room. Dougie Dursley was eyeing them warily.

"That's rude" Miles said, glancing over at his brother. "They're talking low for a reas-"

But Dougie cut him off by flicking him in the ear. Miles made a noise of annoyance, but stopped speaking.

"Shut it!" Dougie growled to his younger brother, and he then turned back to the three Potters across the room.

Albus stared with repulsion in his face. It was one thing for Dougie to mistreat his brother clandestinely, but doing it in the open like that must have sent a powerful message to Miles; that no one was going to care enough to interfere.

"None of your business" James said coolly, trying clearly to control the situation as an adult would. Lily wore an expression identical to Albus', however.

Neither of them seemed to think that it was their place to get involved however, bar reprimanding Dougie for his interruption, and Albus joined them in returning to the conversation at hand. Ten minutes later, however, the sliding doors opened, and Uncle Dudley emerged. One look on his petrified face told Albus that his aunt and uncle had been informed about the truth of Harry Potter's absence from the early supper.

"It was nice seeing you all again" he told them all, his lips quivering. "I'm- I'm going to go take a shower now..."

And without further ado, he walked passed them all and up the stairs, his eyes bulging as he did so. His wife exited the dining room and followed suit.

"Dudley, Dud!" she called after him, and she too made her way up the stairs, stopping briefly to turn her attention to them all. "It was lovely having you all" she told them. "You- you can help yourselves out-"

And she disappeared up onto the second floor. Albus watched as his mother entered the sitting room next, her face red.

"We'll we'd best be leaving. Say your good-byes now!"

The three of them all exchanged muttered farewells with their two cousins before being ushered towards the door.

"Miles, Dougie, it was wonderful to see you both!" their mother continued with one foot already out of the house. "Please do thank your mother again for me-the brisket was scrumptious-"

And just like that, they were all out of the Dursley household, walking their way down the patio quickly. Albus, surprised but still approving of their abrupt departure, turned his attention to his mother at once.

"What did you tell them?" he asked.

"Just the basics" she said, walking ahead of them all briskly. "Not too many specifics but-well-they know that your father is in Azkaban."

The three of them all made sounds of interest.

"That was a very hard point to get across" their mother told them as they walked through the gate, back onto the concrete strip of average looking houses. "It could have been worse too. Your uncle thought that there were still Dementors in Azkaban. I needed to reassure him that his cousin was in no such danger."

"How does Uncle Dudley even know what a Dementor is?" Lily asked.

Their mother gave a thoughtful expression. "It's a long story" she said. "And I'm not even entirely sure I know it all anyway-"

"Mum" Albus started, slowing down slightly. "What was the point of this trip anyway? All of it-the dinner, and telling them about dad-why?"

"It just seemed like the right thing to do, Albus" his mother said crisply, but Albus wasn't fooled. He'd just made a powerful connection in his head.

"You already knew, didn't you?" he murmured, speeding up again and out of earshot from Lily and James. "About Waddlesworth doing something with the muggle world? And that's why you-well you and dad-wanted us getting in touch with our muggle relatives. You said more in that conversation after dinner, didn't you?" he asked.

His mother heaved a tremendous sigh and began rubbing her forehead. "Why did we let you read so many books when you were younger..." she mumbled to herself. "And yes, Albus, you are correct" she added vehemently, and Albus smiled. "But we'll talk about it more when we get to the Ministry. I just want to get out of here as fast as possible-that was much more difficult than I'd thought it would be. Your aunt and uncle are very nice, but they're somewhat inattentive too."

Albus nodded, but this last sentence made him stare at the ground. Inattentive was certainly an accurate definition of the Dursley parents. Did they even realize what was going on in their own household? With a jolt, Albus realized that even if they did, they probably wouldn't do anything about it anyway. It was only people like his dad that ever really tried to help everyone...

Albus slowed down slightly, until he became shoulder to shoulder with James. Straight ahead was the corner of the street, and he knew that that was where they would all apparate-the typical block away from where they'd been. He'd have to act fast.

"James, what sweets do you have on you?" he asked.

"We just had dinner Al" he replied. "Taking a cue from Dougie eh?"

"Just let me see what you have!"

James pulled out the pile of colorful treats from his pocket while Lily surveyed with interest. Albus skimmed through them with his fingers while they walked, finding the two that he wanted after only a moment of searching.

"Perfect" he said, snatching them up.

"Al, one of those-" James started, but Albus had already spun around and began walking.

"I'll be right back!" he hollered to his family, and his mother turned with indignation.

"Albus we have to go!"

"I'll be right back!" he repeated. "Just forgot to say good-bye to Miles!"

"I watched you-"

But Albus had already taken off, and only a minute later, he was down at the Dursley household again. He marched through the gate and up to the door, and then, sure that his aunt and uncle wouldn't mind and were in no mood to care anyway, helped himself in uninvited.

Dougie and Miles were both on the couch, watching the television set that had obviously been turned on the second that their family had left. They both jumped upon his entrance.

"It's just me" Albus told them both, out of breath. "I'd almost forgotten-"

He extended his hand, showing the two different wrapped pieces of candy. One of them was an average sized, brightly wrapped candy, the other so small that it looked almost like half of the first.

"My brother works at this shop now, I wanted to have you guys try some of their sweets. It's made by wizards, so you know it's the best out there."

Both of them got up from the couch and strolled over to him, Miles smiling thankfully and Dougie grinning greedily. Albus took the brightly colored, sizeable treat and gave it to Miles, then gave the smaller one to Dougie.

"Dougie, that's a Sparker. It's not bad at all. Miles; that's the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Easily the best one at the shop in my opinion-"

Albus didn't even need to finish his sentence before Dougie had snatched the Toffee away from his brother, giving him the more unappealing piece instead.

"We always swap" Dougie explained to Albus quickly.

Miles gave his brother a dark stare, but Albus smiled at the younger brother; he'd been expecting that substitution.

"Okay, well, I've got to go now" Albus told them both. "It was nice seeing you both!"

"By Al, thanks for the candy" Miles said gloomily, though his expression changed to one of perplexity when Albus tipped him an enormous wink. Dougie didn't even bother thanking him; he'd already started unwrapping his piece.

Albus left with a wave, closing the door behind him and grinning to himself. He began jogging up the street, where he found his family waiting for him at the corner.

"Say all of your good-byes?" his mother asked, half sarcastically.

"Yup" Albus responded as he joined them all. "We can go now."

Chapter 4: A People's Minister

Within seconds of Albus' arrival to the gathering at the end of block, they'd all been whisked away. As James' experiences with apparating to the Ministry were not exactly infrequent, he was capable of taking his brother along with him while their sister accompanied their mother. Albus was surprised to see what they arrived to, however.

They were in a dirty alleyway, completely clear of other occupants, facing a dilapidated phone booth. Albus recalled this being the entrance to the Ministry of Magic from his excursion during the summer before his second year, but then, the telephone booth had been somewhere else, and had moved them around through an underground passage. Why were they here now?

"Couldn't we just apparate inside?" Albus asked at once. "Do we really have to ride this-"

"It's not the same one from before" his mother explained. "This one is more straightforward, it leads directly to the atrium."

They all entered the phone booth, which became cramped, and Albus watched as his mother picked up the receiver to the phone, pressing down on five buttons in rapid succession. A cool, crisp voice began speaking instantaneously.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business. Please note that visitors may be subject to a search prior to entrance beyond the atrium."

It was done fluidly, but Albus was quite sure that the last sentence spoken had not been used during his visit four years ago...

"Ginerva Weasley, James Potter, Albus Potter, and Lily Potter" their mother said loudly into the phone. "All visitors today. Here to see Harry Potter."

Only when his mother said it did the chills sink through Albus' arms and torso. He was about to see his father-and very soon for that matter. Was he already here, just underneath their feet?

He could tell that the name had radiated with his siblings as well, for they suddenly looked more alert. His mother was acting calm however, simply snatching the small silver badges that slid out of the coin return slot. She passed them around to each child in turn, Albus examining his badge before pinning it to his shirt.

Albus Potter. Prisoner Visit.

Albus scowled, noticing similar expressions on the faces of Lily and James. He still attached the badge to his clothes however, even if it was begrudgingly. While they all braced themselves for the imminent drop, Albus' mother gave him a delayed answer to his question from a minute ago.

"And as for why we can't just apparate in, Albus, there's too many enchantments now. Without actual authorized places to arrive to-which are handed out scarcely now-it's too difficult. Floo has become the primary method of travel."

She had to end here though, for a terrible sinking feeling had just occurred, and soon enough they could see their surroundings change. The telephone box was lowering itself slowly, and the glass around them now only showed dirt and stone. They finished the drop much quicker than Albus had anticipated, and soon enough, they were facing the long and splendid atrium.

Albus felt stymied. He only had vague recollections of the details of the Ministry of Magic, but he knew that it hadn't looked like this before. There certainly hadn't been any WAR posters back then.

Everything was covered in Wands and Redemption propaganda. From the second that they all emerged from the elevator it enveloped them; a huge banner stretching between two immaculate pillars that read *Support Warren Waddlesworth*, a poster on the wall next to a fireplace that was pitch black, with the silver sword-wand insignia of the Renegade group its only message. The biggest picture on the wall was a moving photograph of Waddlesworth's face. He was bearing down at them all, wearing a look of fierce determination. Words were written underneath it in a dark gold. *The People's Minister*.

"Mum...what's going on here" James asked at once, while wizards walked passed him in a busy manner. The atrium had an assortment of people in it, but this did nothing to conceal what was plastered all over the walls.

Their mother sighed. "Warren Waddlesworth happened."

The four of them began walking forward, Albus examining every facet of the re-designed walls with disgust.

"They're acting like he's already won!" Lily said aloud.

"He practically has" their mother answered them solemnly. "You have to remember, though the two are commonly separated, the public *is* the Ministry. Only the higher ups are really differentiated from the common people. The lower level people here-the people working behind desks and dealing with non-security related issues-are sometimes just as supportive of Wands and Redemption as the people not associated with the Ministry. They want their families safe too, after all."

They approached the Statue of Brethren, a brilliant piece of art in the center of the atrium that showed different individuals-representing both people and magic creatures-standing together, united. Albus gagged as he glanced up at the tallest figure. The wizard's face had been altered to look like a stone-cut version of Waddlesworth.

"Who did that?" Albus barked at once.

"No idea" his mother answered him. "We'd change it back but...it'll just be changed again at some point anyway. Best not to waste the effort."

Albus was beginning to actually feel sick now. His stomach was churning, and sweat was pouring down his face. He knew that there were bigger things to worry about. There was Darvy on the outside, and his father was obviously in prison for a crime that he did not commit. But this knowledge-everything that he had accumulated today pertaining to WAR and their rise-made Albus realize just how screwed up things had gotten. Warren Waddlesworth was running for Minister. *And he was going to win.*

"Mum" Albus piped up. "Are you going to tell me what happened at Uncle Dudley's now?"

"Well I would Albus" his mother started with a sigh, "but I have the strange feeling that you've already figured it out."

Albus nodded-he had.

"We're keeping tabs on Waddlesworth, aren't we? Since we're so out of touch with the muggle world. So we're asking Uncle Dudley to do it for us."

She gave him a wry smile as they walked. "Aside from muggle newspapers and the like, we have a very difficult time learning about the going-ons of the muggle world. Especially with your father where he is. We have the feeling however-we, of course, meaning the people who are actually still involved in all that's going on in the world-that if Warren is going to do anything first, it'll be in the muggle world. He wants control of the entire public, not just one section. Seeing how he spouts his propaganda to your aunt and uncle is good way to figure out his moves over here.

"That is why it is imperative that we remain on good terms with your muggle relatives. They are the flow of information required to make this work. That, and of course, because there's no reason to distance yourself from your family."

Albus grinned weakly at this, suddenly guilty for what he'd just done to Dougie. Ton-Tongue Toffees wore off after a while though. Didn't they?

His thoughts were interrupted by an approaching wizard however. He looked young and scrawny, with a pimply face and a rather beak like nose. He walked directly towards the group, though the first thing that he did was acknowledge Albus.

"Good afternoon sir" he snorted at once.

"Erm- hi-"

The young adult whipped what looked like a red pamphlet out from his robes. "I was just wondering," he started in a monotonous voice, "are you taking your personal security seriously? Wands and Redemption is an organization devoted to-"

"Beat it!" Albus' mother hissed, and she snatched the pamphlet from his hand at once. Without even using her wand, the piece of parchment turned to ash in her palm. The skinny wizard huffed, looking scandalized, and then marched off in a different direction.

"I'd of gotten it" Albus said lamely, but his mother ignored him.

"Like vultures" she muttered as they neared the security stand. "Okay you three, you'll have to have your wands examined here-"

Albus had completely bypassed the security stand on his first trip to the Ministry, but he figured that he'd only done so because he'd been accompanying his father, who was far more reputable at that time. Now however, he watched as his mother handed over her wand to the person behind the desk, who looked extremely familiar...

"Professor Puckerd!" Albus blurted out, and he immediately covered his mouth as Puckerd turned to look at him.

"Oh" he said meekly. "H-hello you three."

Albus stared at his former Potions professor with eyes bulging. He looked the same as he did during the school year, with his round spectacles and slicked back hair, which was now slightly ruffled in a worn out sort of way. The thin man was wearing a different expression than what Albus was used to. He had typically looked supercilious, and had spoken as if he were of great importance. Now however, he appeared meek and timid.

"Hello" James and Lily answered, their voices clearly confused. Albus was unable to mouth anything.

"Here you go" Puckerd said, turning his attention back their mother dutifully and handing her wand back to her. He took a small slip of paper and did something with it that Albus couldn't see. "Next" he said politely as Albus' mother walked passed the security desk.

Albus stepped forward, turning to face Puckerd directly as he handed over his wand. His former professor was avoiding his gaze, though still acting polite as he delicately took the wand from Albus' fingers. It was hard for Albus to believe that just months ago this man had been one of his least liked in the world; he looked so harmless now, almost pathetic. With a jolt, he remembered the last real argument that they'd had was about two extremely obnoxious predictions. One had involved Janine Fischer staying alive and well. The other had been a guarantee that his father would end up Azkaban.

"Hippogriff hair?" Puckerd asked daintily, holding the slip up.

Albus blinked, momentarily confused. He hadn't even realized that his wand had been examined so quickly.

Erm- yes."

Puckerd gave him a weak smile as he handed the wand back. "Good to see you again, Mr. Potter" he said, with sincerity in his voice that Albus had never heard before.

"Uhhhh..."

But Puckerd had already called for the next person, Albus was forced to move passed the counter as Lily stepped through to it. Albus walked over to where his mother was at once.

"Why is Puckerd the wand checker person thingy?" he asked, horrified.

His mother sighed. "Because his old job doesn't exist anymore, Albus. Puckerd was not directly underneath the Head Auror, he was directly underneath Janine Fischer in particular. With her dead, his position has been severely downgraded-he's actually lucky to be where he is."

"Why was he acting so nice?" Albus asked, as Lily came over to join them. Now considering Puckerd's mindset, shouldn't he hate everything Potter? He believed that Fischer had been murdered by one, after all...

"I have no idea" his mother said truthfully. "He could be frightened, perhaps his ego suffered irreparably when Fischer died. Could be both. Best not to talk about it, Albus..."

James joined them next, and they proceeded forward towards the golden lifts that Albus knew served as an elevator. Albus allowed his mind to wander as they walked. He had known all along that Puckerd was not going to be returning next year, but seeing him with some other occupation had him wondering for the first time who his new Potions professor would be. Likewise, he realized, just now, that both of the Co-Aurors from last year were now inactive.

"Mum, who's the current Head Auror?" Albus asked suddenly.

His mother gave him an incredulous look. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious" Albus said.

"Someone named Riley Baker" she answered. "Doesn't really matter though, he's just a scapegoat. With the Ministry all but taken over by WAR, the Head Auror-position is just a way to make people think that the Ministry is still active in the fight against Darvy. It's a joke job, like everything else here now."

Albus opened his mouth in surprise-he'd never heard his mother speak so bluntly before. He supposed that he shouldn't be too surprised however. Given the state of things, she had several good reasons to loathe the Ministry of Magic.

They approached the golden lift, which opened for them at once. They were the only four standing in it, bar a paper airplane that had occupied it when they'd entered. It zoomed away quickly though, clearly meant for someone in the atrium. The lift door closed, and the cool voice from the telephone booth commentated their movement as they descended.

"Level Nine, the Department of Mysteries."

They stepped out of the lift as quickly as they'd gotten in it, a feeling of foreboding filling Albus as they did so. The Department of Mysteries. This is where his first confrontation with Darvy and Ares had been, outside of Hogwarts. He remembered his maniacal professor chaining him up and ridiculing him. Remembered that is was then when he'd had his first taste of inexplicable power...something that he still didn't understand to this day.

Rather than going through the door that they were facing however, they made a sharp turn to the left and began following a dungeon like corridor illuminated by torches. The hallway had a very dismal feel to it, but Albus was hurrying along it so fast that he didn't really have time to inspect what he was seeing. His mother led the three of them passed a withered door and further down the hall, reaching yet another door that ended the passageway. It too had a withered look to it. His mother opened it slowly, and Albus, who had expected something far worse, was pleasantly surprised at what he saw.

The room was all white, and highly polished with sets of comfortable looking chairs scattered around it. A young woman sat behind a desk, a smile on her face; behind her was another door that had a crisp appearance.

"Good afternoon" the woman said to them, and he took notice of her big eyes and dimples. Her brown hair was tucked back in a short ponytail. "Here to see-"

"Harry Potter" Albus' mother finished for her. The receptionist smiled politely.

"I'm sorry" she said sweetly. "But you'll have to wait just a few minutes. They're still getting things set up back there."

All of them stood there, the tension that Albus had evaporating, as the knowledge that he'd be waiting comforted him. He took a seat in one of the chairs, wondering what the lady had meant by getting things "set up".

Was his father behind that door? Suddenly, just like that, his nerves were cracked again. Was he going to be in shackles? Bound by magic? This area looked generally nice...probably far better than the cell that his father usually resided in. Would it look the same way wherever they met?

James and Lily sat down as well, but their mother remained standing, her lips pursed. A small table was positioned next to some of the chairs, wizarding magazines scattered across the top.

Albus and James both dove for the Quidditch magazine at the same time, but his brother managed to snatch up first. He reclined in his chair, holding it up with a smirk on his face.

"Still got it" he said, opening the magazine leisurely.

Albus settled for the *Transfiguration Today* instead, though he skimmed through it only for a moment before discarding it; pleased though he was of his performance on the O.W.L, he still had little interest in it. Lily was blowing her hair back and forth out of her face to pass the time. His mother remained in the standing position, staring daggers at the benevolent lady behind the desk, who didn't seem to notice the unwarranted antagonism.

Five minutes into their wait, however, they were interrupted, for the door that they'd entered through had opened once more. Albus turned, baffled as to who it could be, and received a shock that far surpassed the one of seeing Puckerd.

The man had rough features, with a white beard that extended somewhat to make it look like snow was powdered on his face. He was wearing Ministry of Magic robes, but Albus had previously seen him in a different set-wearing all black with the WAR insignia, to be exact.

Albus tried to fix the expression on his face as Donovan Hornsbrook's father strolled by them all, walking over to the desk and addressing the woman curtly.

"Afternoon, Lola" he said.

Albus allowed his eyes to bore into the back of Hornsbrook's father's head. It was astounding how this man could walk right by them, especially as he had, along with so many others from WAR two years ago, wanted Albus dead. But he had meandered right on by them, not caring in the slightest who else occupied the room.

"How can I help you today Hank?" the woman named Lola said cheerfully.

He leaned in a bit before saying in an undertone, "I'll need those papers that I sent a memo about earlier."

Lola frowned. "I'm sorry Hank, didn't you get my memo earlier? I don't have access to those. Security issues pertaining to that *particular* department can only be addressed up there."

"But the Department of International Magical Cooperation referred me down here" he said somewhat icily. "They insisted that I give you this, if anything were to come up" he added lowly.

Though Albus couldn't see exactly what it was, he was sure that whatever had been passed along had been more than paper-Albus had detected a slight jingle, anyway. Lola cleared her throat.

"" she said serenely, "I really can't-"

"I'm also to inform you that Mr. Waddlesworth-"

His voice got considerably lower after these words, but whatever Hornsbrook's father had said, it had finally done the trick. Lola had determinedly opened up a drawer that had magically stretched itself out, grabbing at official-looking files and handing them over once.

"We appreciate your support" Hornsbrook said curtly, nodding his head and walking away. He turned slightly as he did so however, allowing his eyes to float absentmindedly across the four individuals in the room with him. He left without speaking though.

Lola was looking a tad bit chipper now; her eyes kept shifting left and right. After a moment or two, she rose from her chair.

"I'll go see what's going on back there" she said, and she exited the room through the door behind her desk. The second that she'd left, Albus started speaking.

"I know that guy" he said to his mother. "His son goes to Hogwarts."

"I thought that he looked familiar" Lily spoke up. "Is that Donny's dad?"

"I recognize him too" James said nonchalantly. "I didn't know he worked at the Ministry though..."

"He doesn't" Albus said stiffly. "He's a Renegade, and he's in tight with Wands and Redemption."

The four of them all sat there in silence. When his mother finally spoke, it was in a dark tone.

"Many members of WAR are working here now" she said. "With Waddlesworth running for Minister, he's keeping his men close to home. Likewise, it's easy for them to attain positions here because so many people who were already in the Ministry supported WAR clandestinely already. Again...it's *really* best not to talk about it."

Albus sighed, trying not to let his mind wander back to the disheartening thoughts that he'd had earlier. Before the opportunity could even arise, however, Lola had returned.

"Okay" she said, leaving the door ajar behind her. "You can go in and see him now."

Albus felt as though he was going to burst. Innumerable emotions were now coursing through his veins. This was it...

They all started walking forward, Albus in the back end of the line, trying to hide that he was wiping the sweat from his palms on his shirt.

"I'm sorry, only one at a time" Lola said placidly.

"What?" the four of them asked altogether.

"Only one at a time" she responded clearly and slowly, as if they'd actually been unable to hear her.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"This wasn't specified beforehand-" Albus' mother began.

"For security purposes" Lola said, smiling apologetically. "Also, your wand will be confiscated upon entrance. To be returned immediately after, of course!" she added quickly, as though this made things better.

The four of them all turned to each other.

"I'm going in first-" James started

"No, me!" Lily piped up. "I miss him the most-"

"Enough, all three of you" their mother said, despite Albus having not even spoken. "I'm going in first. Just- just to see" she said, and she didn't elaborate further.

"The three of you are welcome to help yourself to our variety of magazines again while you wait" Lola told them. "You'll each get a turn in due time."

The three of them stared at her, and Albus knew that they were all wearing expressions of exhaustion. Lola crouched down to speak to Lily.

"Or maybe a coloring book?"

"I'm fourteen" Lily growled at once, her teeth bared like an animal. "That means 'no'" she added, when Lola didn't appear to have understood her statement.

"So I just go right in?" Albus' mother asked the distracted Lola.

She stood up once more. "Yes, right through that door" she said, indicating it.

Albus watched as his mother moved through the doorway wordlessly. Lola closed it as soon as she'd walked through, then stood in front of it with her hands folded downwards, as though she were some sort of angelic bodyguard. The three of them then moved their way back to the chairs slowly, none of them taking magazines.

Albus wished that he had some way of knowing how much time had passed, but he did not have a watch on him and there was no clock in the room. All that he could do was sit there, slouched back, wondering in his head what was happening. What were his parents discussing? Obviously, important matters about what was going on in the outside world, but certainly, there was a personal touch as well? Was his mother divulging all of the hardships that being without her husband was putting them all through? How would his father look at him, after learning of these

things? Would he then finally begin to see how much his own son had cost him and the rest of his family?

A door creaked open after what felt like twenty minutes. Albus watched as his mother emerged, her face stoic. Her eyes were somewhat blotchy. Lola called for the next person, and James immediately stood up, but he was stopped.

"No" his mother said simply. "Albus next."

Albus stared, while James and Lily both made disgruntled noises. Albus felt as though he was the unfortunate one now though. Why had he been specified as next? Was this his mother's idea...or his father's? Why was it so imperative that he be next in line?

"Go on, Albus" his mother said, her expression warm, but somewhat strained.

Albus stood up and walked forward gingerly, his mother stepping out of the way as he did so. He reached the door behind the desk and looked back. Everyone was staring at him. Taking a deep breath, he walked through.

Chapter 5: The Prisoner

Albus turned around to look behind him the second that he'd passed through the door, but it had already been closed silently. Looking ahead, he saw that he was not in a room at all; it was a corridor.

It was entirely white, made up of pristine tiles on the floor and blank drywall on the sides. It was narrow, but not so much so that it was uncomfortable. At the other end of the hallway was yet another door, this one a heavily polished oak color. A man was standing in front of it in black robes, immobile, his chin square and his hair short.

Albus approached him cautiously, but as soon as he was in reach he was acknowledged.

"Please stand still" the man said briskly, and he removed his wand and aimed it directly at him.

"W- wait-"

He felt a peculiar sweeping motion around his body, one that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up straight. This single test did not appear enough however, for at the next moment the security wizard had removed a long, black stick too thin to be a wand from within his robes. He stepped forward and began prodding Albus with it.

"Watch it!" Albus said as he jumped back.

"Just a Secrecy Sensor" the man said bluntly. "Standard protocol. Okay, arms up."

"Huh?" Albus said, though he raised them subconsciously anyway, while the man patted him down.

"Please remove your wand sir" he said.

"I-"

"It will be returned to you following the visit. I can assure you that it will be safe."

Albus sighed, though he knew that he was getting nowhere if he didn't oblige. Begrudgingly, he removed his wand and handed it over for the second time today, this time probably not to have it returned to him for quite a bit. The man addressed him as he pocketed his wand.

"I am to inform you that for security purposes, this visit is to be monitored. You are not allowed to touch the prisoner-"

"I can't hug my dad-"

"-and that you are permitted twenty minutes of time at the maximum. I will come to inform you when your time is up, at which point your wand will be returned to you."

Albus stood on the spot, both livid and eager to be out of this man's company. When he did not speak, the man stepped aside to allow him entrance through the next door.

"Enjoy your visit" the man said without looking at him.

"Tosspot..." Albus mumbled under his breath, before opening the door and walking through it quickly. It too closed behind him silently.

He was now in a dimly lit room, quite large in comparison to the place where Lola had been, but almost completely barren. A few candles hung above the center of the room magically, illuminating only that patch of space, with which the one noticeable item of furniture was under. A square white table, with only one person sitting down at it. His father.

He looked...bad. Just bad. Not awful, not repugnant, nor did he have the appearance of a healthy or reasonably cared for person. His face was dirty, and his eyes had a sunken look to him that indicated lack of sleep-strange, considering Albus figured that his father would have plenty of time for it. The most noticeable visible change in visage however was the considerable amount of facial hair. His father had grown a full beard and mustache, jet black like the hair on his head, which was a bit longer as well. The beard appeared highly unkept and scruffy, though it didn't hide the prominent chin that it covered.

And yet, still, it was clearly his father. The emerald, almond shaped eyes were peering right through a pair of extremely clean looking spectacles; Albus could only assume that someone had mercifully cleaned them to grant his father vision. His faded scar hadn't moved an inch from his forehead, as Albus knew that it wouldn't have, and his face was still thin overall. He was also quite sure that if he got to see his father stand up, his impressive physique would be supported by what Albus knew were knobby knees.

His robes were grimy and grey colored-the hue of dirty stone.

Albus strode forward a little quicker than he thought that he would have, realizing immediately that a small silver chair had been placed there for him to sit. Albus pulled it out immediately and sat down.

"Dad" he breathed, and his father smiled at him.

"My Albus" he uttered. "How have you been?"

His voice was raspy, and Albus noted that there were no remnants of wisdom or peace in it. It just sounded as though there was gravel in his mouth.

"I- I've been okay-"

His father let loose an enormous sigh of relief. For a moment, Albus thought that he was going to clutch at his heart, before realizing that his hands, folded on the table, had chains around them, no doubt magically reinforced.

"Good, good...good to hear. I was worried..."

"Y- you- *you were worried*-"

"How's your mother?" his father cut him off. "And James and Lily?"

"They're fine" Albus said. "And didn't you just talk to mum...?"

His father coughed, then raised his chained hands and batted the question away.

"You know your mother, she wouldn't spill anything. I want to hear it from *you*. Is everything okay back at the house?"

Albus wasn't quite sure what he meant. Money, obviously, was not a problem. Albus was quite sure that there was enough in their Gringotts vault to last a couple lifetimes. Was he perhaps referring to the overall morale of the household?

"We're...we're all getting along. Just feels a little empty."

Truer words had never been spoken, though Albus was sure that he was holding back on the severity of them. Empty was a powerful understatement. Things felt extremely odd without his father; everything seemed out of place, and the rooms themselves felt desolate without his presence in the household as a whole. Despite it being summer, Albus found himself unnaturally cold at various points, something that he had not noticed until just now, when forced to think about it.

His father nodded, inexplicably looking apologetic. "Well I'm glad that you're all staying strong. I was worried that you'd be getting a hard time."

"Why would anyone give me a hard time?" Albus asked lowly.

"For the same reason you've undoubtedly been giving yourself one" his father answered him, and Albus hung his head. His father continued in the same tone.

"And it's completely unwarranted, for that matter. What does dwelling do, Albus, if not waste time? Events occur, and all consequent events are determined not just by their predecessors, but by the choices of those involved. Do not fuss over what may or may not have happened had something may or may not have happened. What is important now is that we look ahead. Now, I must ask you something."

Albus braced himself.

"How was your birthday?"

"Huh? What?"

"Did you think that I'd forgotten?" his father asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"No!" Albus said quickly. "It's just- it was good" he finished lamely. "Mum got me some books and stuff."

"Good" his father said. "And a cake?"

Albus stared blankly before answering.

"Yes."

"What flavor?"

"Erm...chocolate" Albus said blandly.

His father gave him a wry smile. "Good" he said.

There was a small, awkward silence following this exchange, in which Albus tried to avert the gaze of his father's eyes. He had, for a moment, been foolishly close to asking his father how *his* birthday had been.

"Your mother tells me that you got your O.W.L results" his father said swiftly, cutting Albus away from his thoughts.

"Yeah" he said weakly. "Eight."

His father gave a wide grin; considering his weary state, it made him look somewhat demented.

"That's excellent" he beamed. "More than I had. I'm *very* proud of you, Albus."

Albus stared blankly ahead. Was he serious? Everything that Albus had done...and *that* was what he had to say to him...

Not wanting to even comment on it, Albus changed the subject. Without thinking, he took one look at his father's relatively unhealthy appearance and asked the first thing that came to his mind.

"So how- how are they feeding you dad? I mean like, how's the food-"

His father gave a low shrug. "I'm a prisoner, so it's not exactly scrumptious. But I do get regular meals. Nothing compared to your mother's cooking, of course, or your grandmother's, for that matter."

Albus gave him a shaky smile. "Better than the birthday breakfast I made you that one time?" Albus asked, suddenly remembering a disaster from more than ten years ago, in which he and his brother had made an incredible mess only to wake his father to an extremely burnt breakfast.

His father gave a hoarse laugh. "Anything's better than that" he said, and Albus laughed as well. He was cut off, however, by a sudden cough from somewhere else in the room. Spinning around in his chair at once, he peered through the darkness, searching for the source of the noise. His eyes ultimately found a shadowy figure, barely visible due to the low light hanging above them. The shape appeared to be of a relatively thin man, but then again, it may have only appeared that way because he was standing so far off and to the left.

Albus fell silent at once, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at the barely illuminated figure. He had just remember that this visit was supposed to be monitored.

His father seemed to have caught on to his thought process, however, and he immediately spoke up.

"Pay him no mind, Albus. He's merely doing what is ordered of him."

"Who is he?" Albus asked at once, still leering at the unmoving individual. "And can he hear us?"

"No, he can't" his father said smoothly. "Though he should be listening, he has instead opted to give me privacy with my family."

"Really?" Albus asked, astounded.

His father leaned in a bit to speak, his lips barely moving as he did so.

"Believe it or not, Albus, before I was a murderer, I was pretty well liked in the Wizarding World. Some of the younger folk still recognize me for my achievements, not my disgraces. To put it simply: I still have allies. Even in Azkaban. And indeed, in the Ministry as well. Prior to my imprisonment, I was able to ensure that my wand was kept in tact- it is currently in the safest place that I can think of."

"Gringotts?"

"Your Aunt Hermione" his father said off-handedly. "I had Ron slip it to her..."

"Ah" Albus said.

"Though it is important that you let no one know of these things" he continued. "Mr. Conway over there is one of my prison guards, and he's the only thing keeping me from dying of boredom. If anyone received word that he was treating a prisoner with anything other than

indifference, he would be removed from his post. This would be a shame for many reasons, the most notable that he really needs the gold-his wife, Judy, is pregnant."

Albus nodded slowly, somewhat relieved that there were people outside of their own circle who were on their side. But still, how much difference could that one person really make? Even as his thoughts slid to his father's situation inside of Azkaban, however, a more important one pressed in his head...

"Dad" Albus stated suddenly. "How- I mean- wh- when are you going to get out of here?"

His father reclined back in his seat.

"I honestly have no idea, Albus. As long as it takes, I suppose."

"As long as *what* takes?" Albus asked, confused.

"The public needs to think that something is happening, Albus. My imprisonment both unites them and let's them know that their government is still active. Remember, Janine Fischer died trying to expose me. The second I'm let loose for anything other than sufficient payment for my crimes, her sacrifice becomes in vain. My fate is in the hands of both the Ministry and the public at this point."

"But you can get out" Albus said through gritted teeth. "If we could prove your innocence-"

"I won't allow it" his father said sternly, and he sat up straight. For the first time in the conversation, he was speaking like the strict patriarch that Albus knew that he could be. "Albus, I knowingly did this. I do not expect to be released due to anything other than serving time in Azkaban, and if that means I'm in here until I pass away, then so be."

"And what about your family!" Albus hissed. "Is what the people want more important than-"

"Of course not!" his father barked, and from the corner of his eye, Albus saw the shadowy figure squirm slightly. "Don't you understand why I'm doing this? It's to protect *you* Albus. You, and your mother, and your brother, and your sister. My imprisonment conceals your actions outside of Hogwarts, keeping you safe within its walls, and in turn, it keeps the public active, providing support for anyone who opposes the dangers that we now face-including my own loved ones. The second I lose any of you, there's no reason for me to be out of here anyway! You *must* understand this!"

It was not a question by any means, but rather, a demand. Albus slumped down in his chair, knowing that the discussion would turn to this, but still disappointed that it did.

"What's really going on out there dad?" he asked. "You know more than any of us, even locked up. The war's really started, hasn't it?"

His father shook his head solemnly. "The war is nearly over" he said, and Albus' jaw dropped. "Do not only address a battle as being one of a physical nature. This war started years ago, when Reginald Ares decided to test the people by raising his hand against them. Believe it or not, Albus, everything that Ares had planned was highly copacetic until his death at the hands of his brother. He first wanted to turn the people against the Ministry, and then overthrow it. He very nearly succeeded.

"Darvy has discarded this plan, taking everything that his brother worked so hard for—the support, the publicity, the Dragonfang Wand—and twisted it to launch a full blown attack. Darvy craves attention. He's lingered in the Wizarding World as a mediocre vagabond, and then spent the rest of his time in the shadow of a vastly superior brother. What he wants more than anything else is his name in the history books. Just because he's only attacked a few small villages doesn't mean that the war is just starting, Albus. The people rebelling, the Ministry falling into the hands of vigilantism, these were the first steps of Ares' war. Darvy is just continuing it, and plans on finishing it."

"But I haven't heard anything yet outside of a few—"

"Soon you will" his father cut him off, and he gave a quick, shifty gaze towards the the prison guard to the left. "Darvy has everything that he needs. It's just a matter of how he approaches it. The Executioner's Veil is the primary variable now. Ares never bothered with it because he was confident in his own power, but Darvy now has an invaluable tool, and if used correctly, the Veil can be the most deleterious item that Darvy possesses."

"So if the war is almost over, how does Darvy plan on ending it?" Albus said.

"I don't know" his father admitted. "It's hard to tell, considering how unpredictable he is, but I have a feeling I know what is next on his list. Like Ares, he will not want the company of wizards who have already been shown to be little more than fodder to Ministry members. Darvy will want his entire army to comprise of those awful creatures. You may have heard reports of dangerous beasts accompanying the already infamous Silhouettes; these tales have been scarcely exaggerated. Darvy will be able to produce these creatures at an accelerated rate with the Veil. What he needs most now is a place where he won't be disturbed as he creates his army. A breeding ground of sorts."

"And then...?"

"The physical part of the war begins, signifying it's end."

Albus nodded. He had expected grim news, but then again, hearing it so perfectly summarized for him had only increased his understanding. Simultaneously, however, it had piqued his interest.

"Waddlesworth must have a plan" Albus said briskly. "I mean...he may be a terrible person, but at least he's doing *something*. You should see it out there, dad. He's running for-

"- Minister of Magic" his father finished for him. "And the muggle Prime Minister position as well. Very clever on Warren's part, I admit. By merging the two factions together, he can orchestrate in the muggle world and execute in ours. That being said though, he is every bit as difficult an obstacle to overcome as Darvy is."

Albus nodded. "Things aren't as they seem with him, are they dad?"

"Are they ever?" his father sighed. "Warren's strategies are good on paper, but he is too theoretical, and for that matter, he doesn't even have a full understanding of the situation. Do you know what he's going to do, Albus? Can you maybe guess, as to what his ultimate goal is?"

Albus frowned. "No" he said honestly.

His father nodded. "Good" he said. "That means that you have not sunk so low as to think like Warren Waddlesworth. The soon-to-be Minister-and yes Albus, he will undoubtedly win, whenever the impromptu election takes place-is not just joining muggles and wizards our own world too he is blending things together. I take it, in just one day here, you have seen a number of changes that involve Wands and Redemption?"

Albus nodded.

"That is because Warren plans on merging the Ministry with WAR. He wants to double the amount of manpower, and join together the unlawfulness of his own organization with the resources of ours."

The words jolted through Albus' body, though strangely, they did not register with the disgust that he thought that they would. He had been ready to bare his teeth at the idea, but now that he thought about it, combining forces to fight wasn't a bad idea at all considering the alternatives...

"I was never skilled in Legilimency, Albus, but I think I can safely assume from the look on your face that you agree with Warren."

Albus hadn't even realized that he'd been staring into space thinking. Upon his acknowledgement, however, he quickly shook his head. "No. Well- I mean- it reall..." but he trailed off.

"It's okay" his father told him meekly. "Like I said, as simple, on-paper plans, Warren typically provides good ideas. But you forget, Albus, that Warren plays a very dangerous game; he sacrifices pieces. In every battle, there is always a front line. A group of individuals meant to test the opposition, to penetrate, to simply poke and prod for weaknesses; to die. The first group of the battle is never expected to survive. Of the two Albus, WAR and the Ministry, which do you think Warren is more likely to put on the front lines?"

Albus felt horror wash over his body.

"The Ministry" Albus uttered, and his father nodded.

"Warren will no doubt send in the Aurors first- those who are contractually obligated to die for their Minister and his wishes-and it will certainly occur that way. Where Warren is wrong, however, is that they will have little to no effect. He doesn't understand that these creatures are not of this world, and thus, it will require more than brute force to overcome them. He will anticipate Darvy's forces to be weakened, allowing WAR to clean up the mess, but will find that all that he did was lose lives.

"You've seen how Warren treats most of his subordinates, so willing to disassociate himself from them when something does not go according to plan. Though WAR is not as well trained as the Ministry, it is their support that keeps him as a him, members of the Ministry of Magic are expendable. Your Uncle Ron and hundreds of others will be sent into a battle with no chance of victory, and Warren will proudly announce it to the world as the first step in his plan to eliminate the threat that Darvy presents. By the time that it has become clear that this idea has failed, the Ministry will be severely weakened, as will the security of the innocent, and Darvy will already have had enough practice with his army to launch them not on just us, but the world as a whole."

"Someone has to stop him!" Albus bellowed, not caring how loud he was being; he couldn't believe what he was hearing, and yet, it all made sense to him. "You can! If the world knew that you hadn't-"

"I will not say it again" his father said darkly. "That is not an option. As you can see, however, we are on a timer. We must defeat Darvy-or at least show that he can be beaten-before Warren launches his attack. My guess is that he will do this almost as soon as he is we can show that Darvy will require a different tactic than brute force to conquer, then maybe the public will not be so hasty to hand over all of their support to WAR's revered leader."

"But how could *we* stop Darvy-"

"Well I'm in here Albus" his father said, holding up his chained hands. "Right where I need to be to stop the public from turning on each other. But I have a handful of people on the outside who are trying to locate Darvy and perhaps formulate a plan to stop him before things get out of hand. I confess it is extremely difficult however. He is always on the move, and the best tracker that I know of is the reason I'm in here" he said, allowing the irony to sound on his voice.

"So until then what I am supposed to do?" Albus asked heatedly, and his father narrowed his eyes.

"*You* are supposed to stay safe, as intended" his father told him sharply. "Hogwarts is more than just a school now, Albus, it is one of the few places that Darvy is incapable of attacking. Until his army is amassed, he has no chance in attacking a location filled with wizards, as young as

some of them may be, especially as Hogwarts is being so closely monitored by both WAR and the Ministry. And that's excluding the enchantments and protections of the castle itself. Spells may do little against those Silhouettes, but the Forbidden Forest is no slouch when it comes to dangerous creatures that will fight for their territory. Sadly, however, it appears as though non-humans are staying out of this one. Too many casualties during the previous war."

Albus sighed, already feeling restless. He had contemplated all summer leaving the security of the castle, but this conversation with his father had dampened all of those ideas. Not only did he now realize that finding Fairhart was an almost impossible task, but his father wouldn't want to be freed anyway...

"I can't make you any promises, Albus" his father said abruptly, and he looked truly disheartened. "Things have been this bad before, but they've never been more complex. We are fighting two separate entities now, both of them opposing each other, and both of them with their own methods for destroying society-one of them unintentional."

"I hate Waddlesworth" Albus said bitterly.

"Hate is a powerful word-

"Things would be so much easier if we didn't have him to worry about too!" Albus said.

"Without his renegades there would have been no Fischer or Silver Wizard, and you wouldn't be here! And now he's going to make some stupid decision that will get people killed!"

"Indeed, I empathize" his father commented sadly. "But we can not play the what-if game, not this late in the fight. At a certain point, hypotheticals are just detriments to pragmatism. We must work with what we have."

Albus nodded, but this understanding did little to abate his bad attitude.

"I just can't believe he's went this far" he said. "I liked it better when he was trying to kill me" he added, half-sarcastically. "If the people knew-

"It wouldn't make a difference" his father said. "Warren is too powerful. Not as a wizard, but as a business man. He knows how to work the people, and his wealth provides any additional means of persuasion. He's a very smart man, Warren. It is only when it comes to the actual fighting that he makes miscalculations."

Albus snorted. "It's just his money" he said. "It's not fair. Why'd he have to be born with so much gold?"

"Warren was indeed born auspicious" his father told him tenderly. "But don't mistake his affluence as good fortune; look at what it has done for his character. Do not envy those born into riches, pity them. They will know the gift of giving, yes, but never the wonder of sharing."

Albus sat still, mulling things over in his head. Before he could say anything, however, his father had addressed him.

"Albus, I know that it is cruel that our little time together had to be spent discussing such grim matters. But we must be clear on things. You now know what the world is like-and what it may very well soon become. Everything that you heard today is just proof that you must stay-"

"Inside of the castle" Albus finished weakly. "So am I banned from Hogsmeade visits again?"

His father raised a finger to his dirty beard in thought. "I'm not entirely sure that you'll be having them this year, but if you do, I'd prefer that you go only if necessary-that is to say, if you have a disgruntled date to keep happy. I am fairly certain that Darvy will not attack Hogsmeade, as it will be as closely watched as the castle, and all that it would do is show that he was unwilling to wage war on Hogwarts; it will reveal his hesitance, thus making him less frightening. Always stay with others though, and always have your Cloak on you."

Albus nodded, realizing that his father was placating him-there was next to no chance of Hogsmeade visits this year. Permitting him to go was just to show trust that didn't exist.

"I'm sorry, Albus".

Albus snapped his eyes upwards, allowing his own to make contact with their twins, the emerald eyes that he'd inherited in the first place.

"What? Dad- no. Dad, *I'm sor-*"

"I tried so hard, Albus" his father croaked. "To let you and your brother and sister live the childhood that I didn't. Darkness can never truly be erased, but the perpetual nature of it is what makes us appreciate the rays of light we have in our lives. I had hoped to give you so much more time...but now I fear that you will soon be seeing things that I never wanted you to witness."

Whether his father had started to tear or not he did not know, for before he could get a good look they were approached by the man that Albus had spotted earlier. He nearly jumped at his arrival; he hadn't heard him coming at all.

"I'm sorry" the man said lightly, and Albus took in his features. He was a little younger than expected, with prominent ears and a jagged shaped head. "But it's been about twenty-five minutes. I have to-"

"Thank you Eamon" his father said, smiling.

"I'll give you a minute to say good-bye" Eamon Conway said gently, turning on his heel and leaving back into the darkness.

His father heaved a tremendous sigh before smiling sourly. His eyes didn't appear to be wet, but then again, he'd just wiped at his face with the sleeve of his robes.

"I'm afraid this may be the last time we speak for quite a bit" he said, and Albus nodded. He felt tears well up in his own eyes at the thought, though he quickly wiped them away.

"Yeah" he said shakily.

"Be good now" his father told him. "Look after your sister; and your brother too, for that matter."

Albus nodded as he swallowed the lump in his throat. Leaving now was beginning a daunting period of frustration. How long would it be until he saw his father again? Would these visits be allowed once Waddlesworth was elected? With a sinking feeling, Albus answered his own question in his head.

"I love you, Albus" his father said, and Albus stared at him. These words never needed to be spoken again-his father had done too much to demonstrate it. But how much had Albus done to show it? Were words all that he could offer?

"I love you too, dad" he said, and he remembered that the burly man outside had forbidden him from making contact. He bit his lip angrily, but it was unnecessary; his father had risen from his chair and moved his way around the table, throwing his chained hands around Albus' neck and hugging him tightly, no words spoken.

Albus didn't care that he was pressed up against filthy robes, or that the cold chains were making his skin crawl. He allowed himself to savor this silent moment, interrupted only when the prison guard approached them.

"I'm sorry Mr. Potter, I really am-"

"It's quite alright" Albus' father said, lifting his arms up and backing away. Albus caught a glance of his father's face and saw fresh tears for a fleeting moment. "He was just leaving."

He nodded at his son, and Albus returned the gesture, backing away slowly from his father, who stood next to the prison guard looking withered and worn, but still as the greatest wizard that Albus knew of...

"Send in your sister next" his father called to him as he neared the door. "I think I'll make James wait a bit" he added with a light smile.

Chapter 6: Death's Right Hand

Albus mulled over what his father had told him for the remainder of the summer, searching through every available article in the newspapers for corroboration of his words. He had plenty of spare time to do this, of course, as his mother had grounded him for a week after learning of his skullduggery on Dougie Dursley, but even with all of the extra hours of skimming through literature, it was to no avail. Waddlesworth's face continued to plaster each and every front page, and Albus was sure that if there was any news of Darvy making moves, it was being carefully concealed.

James and Lily had both had the same amount of time in the presence of their father as he had, but Albus was almost positive that their conversations had been considerably less grim. They'd both left somewhat crestfallen, but he knew that this was only because they had accepted the reality of their father's exclusion from their lives. It appeared as though, of the three of them, Albus had been the only one to receive the dismal news of Darvy's impending attack and Warren's ultimate, nefarious plan. He understood that this meant at least one thing: that his father wanted him on his toes.

But no reports of attacks came in, or mysterious disappearances, or anything that Albus would typically associate with dark activity. Strangely, he could not see the tactical advantage of it; everyone already knew of the Dark Alliance, they'd even attacked a few small towns within the last few months. Their lack of attacks now had an almost eye-of-the-storm feel to it however. Albus was sure that when something did happen, it was going to be big.

He did more than ponder for the last few weeks of his holiday though, his fingers constantly busy with sending letters back and forth with Mirra, who was both happy that he'd seen his father and pleased with the result ; her last letter had ended with a statement suggesting such, anyway.

See Albus! Even your dad thinks that it would be stupid for you to leave the castle for anything. And you can bet that no one knows how bad it is in there for him than he does! So are you finally done with all of this running away nonsense?

Lots of love,

Mirra

His other two usual correspondents were writing back with far less frequency. Scorpius' answers were always short and to the point, typically involving classes and his worries about juggling Prefect duties along with the increased workload of their N.E.W.T classes. Morrison, who hadn't sent him a letter since his birthday, had finally managed to send him one back just a few days before term was to start, explaining his absence.

Al,

Sorry I'm late getting back to you mate, I've had Mel over for the last week or so and haven't really had the time to answer. But remember what I said last time about my sister finally moving completely out and in with Mike? It happened. All of her stuff's gone, and there's more room than ever here. You should definitely stay with us sometime.

As for classes and what not, I haven't really been paying attention. I got the new books, but I'm not even entirely sure that they'll let me in some of the classes with A's in a few subjects. Do you know who the new Potions professor is by the way? I asked Scorpius but he ignored me, I was hoping that maybe you had an idea. Either way though, I must've missed you in Diagon Alley last week when I got my books, but I'll be seeing you soon so it's not big deal.

And that's awesome that you got to see your dad! How was he? Is he ready to bust out of there yet, or is he giving the guards a little bit more false sense of security? Let me know-

Morrison

Strangely, Albus had little to write back to on this occasion, as most of the points were mute anyway. Albus had no Diagon Alley story to tell, as he hadn't even gone; his mother had picked up what was on he and his sister's list just a few days ago. As for the new Potions professor, however, Albus was equally clueless. They had been assigned a book though, so someone had obviously taken the post.

He chose to not put what his father had said in writing, overly paranoid that it would fall into the wrong hands, which, though unlikely, would still be disastrous. He didn't want anyone knowing how much his father knew, or, more importantly, that he was only imprisoned to save his son's skin.

He wouldn't have to wait long to tell Morrison in person, for he'd be seeing him soon enough on the Hogwarts express. It was only on the night before their departure however, that Albus learned their mode of transportation.

"You'll both need to head to bed early tonight" his mother told he and Lily at the kitchen table, while they sipped down some evening tea. "We have to be up earlier than usual tomorrow."

"Why?" Albus asked. "James isn't even going..."

"It has nothing to do with who's going, it's how we're getting there" his mother replied.

Albus gave her a curious look, before what she had said had dawned on him. Two years ago, when his father had been removed from the post of Head Auror, they had been forced drive there as regular muggles would, his father taking the wheel. Though the official-looking Ministry of Magic workers had returned the next year due to his surge in popularity, there was no chance of it this time around; there was no point to escorting the children of a murderer.

"Who's driving?" Albus asked meekly.

His mother sighed. "I am. And I drive slow, so like I said, we're getting up early."

"Have you ever driven before?" both Albus and his sister asked simultaneously; neither of them could recall such an occurrence in their lives.

Their mother avoided their gaze as she stood up to grab their empty plates.

"I've been on test runs with your father before" she told them stubbornly. "I'll figure it out."

As warned, they arose early the next morning. So early, in fact, that it was still somewhat dark out when Albus' mother shook him awake.

"Up you get now" she said. "Breakfast is on the table."

Albus rolled over immediately, flipping his pillow in a swift motion to get the cool side of it under his head. A second later and he'd been shaken again.

"Your breakfast is getting ice cold!"

"I'm up, I'm up..."

It proved to be one of the more tedious mornings of Albus' life. Cold toast and cereal accompanied him at the breakfast table, where Lily was looking equally tired.

"Where's James?" Lily yawned.

"In bed" their mother answered. "He has work in a few hours."

"He's not going with us to the train?" Albus asked, but he was ignored.

They were forced to scarf down their breakfast, and even then, they didn't have the time to go over and check their things. Albus did an extremely quick sweep of his room, grabbing at a few quills and organizing his stack of letters before closing the door behind him. When he met his mother and sister in the sitting room, the latter was complaining loudly.

"Why can't we just floo to somewhere near King's Cross? Or you could apparate us-"

"Because it doesn't work like that Lily" she was answered sternly. "There are no active wizarding fireplaces in the area, and whatever may be going on in our world right now, our secrecy is still of utmost importance; we cannot be seen apparating anywhere!"

Lily huffed in an immature fashion, but at the next moment their mother was leading them out of the door, the morning sun barely shining as they pushed their trunks along in front of them.

Though Albus was still quite groggy, he allowed tiny bubbles of excitement to expand in the pit of his stomach. Even with everything else on his mind, the idea of returning to Hogwarts was a welcome one. He'd be seeing Mirra and Morrison and Scorpius again...

"In the back now!" their mother said, and out in the light, Albus noticed the tired expression on his mother's face, as well as the staleness of her movements.

"Mum, did you sleep last night?" Albus asked as he loaded his trunk into the back of the rusty red car.

"I'll get some sleep later" he was answered promptly, and at the next moment they were both helping Lily load her things as well. Two minutes later, and Albus was next to his mother in the passenger's side, Lily stretched out in the back, pleased with all of the additional room.

"Couldn't we get Uncle Ron to take us?" Albus asked his mother tensely as she put the keys in the ignition. His uncle had a reputation for road rage, but that didn't stop him from being adequate at the wheel-an experience that Albus had not yet had with his mother.

"Your uncle has his own two kids to take" his mother told him. "We'll be fine Albus!" she added when he made a distinct noise of discomfort. "Like I said, I'll just be going a bit slower than most."

A bit proved to be a powerful understatement. Fifteen minutes into the car ride and Albus was positive that he could still make out their home in the rearview mirror. His mother was stopping for a full minute at every stop sign, and was never going more than ten miles below the speed limit, which Albus was sure was unsafe in itself.

"People are honking at us mum" Lily chirped up from the back, looking out her window.

"Automobile accidents claim the lives of numerous muggles everyday!" her mother barked back to her. "And it's almost always because someone was going over the speed limit! They're angry now, but when they get to wherever it is they're going completely unharmed, they'll be thanking me in their heads!"

Albus was quite sure that this was untrue, and in the back of his own head, he had to admit that he was worried about their timing. Waking up with the moon still visible had seemed like overkill at first, but now that he realized his mother's driving tendencies, he thought that they probably should have gotten up a little bit earlier. Albus voiced this after nearly an hour of watching cars blow by them from their stationary position. They had to turn on to a large street with multiple lanes, but each time that they were about to do so, they were forced to stop by an oncoming vehicle.

"Mum take the initiative!" Albus moaned.

"We'll wait our turn Albus!"

"But no one's coming it! It *is* our turn!" Albus added, waving his hand towards the open lane. His mother squinted and peered down the road however.

"No, I can make out another car coming-"

"But if we *turn now it will slow down*" Albus said, but his mother would hear none of it. They simply waited the thirty seconds for the car to go by,

"Are we going to get there in time?" Lily muttered to him, pressing her face up against the back of his seat.

"I don't know, are you good on a broomstick?"

But at that very moment, their mother seemed to have worked up the courage to turn onto the large road.

"There! Happy!" she said, and Albus noticed that she appeared to have goose bumps.

From here it appeared to be mostly smooth sailing, though Albus was growing restless in the car, especially with his mother making small chatter with the two of them for the entirety of the way.

"And also," she said to them out of the blue, "your cousin Roxy is being sorted this year. Look after her, both of you."

"Okay, mum" Lily said, though Albus gave a snort.

"I'll see what I can do, but I probably won't be near her all year. She's going to Gryffindor."

"You don't know that" his mother rebutted.

Albus did a mental count of the rest of his family currently attending Hogwarts.

"Yeah mum, I do."

It was a relief when they finally pulled in to King's Cross station, the giant clock hanging outside telling them that they still had half of an hour or so to spare. Albus practically jumped out of the rusty old car, his legs aching from having been forced to sit for so long, and immediately went to the back of the car to remove his things.

"See?" his mother said briskly as she exited the car, pointing at the clock. "And you thought that we were going to be late..."

Albus and his sister ignored this, sloppily withdrawing their things and organizing their trunks accordingly. Their mother locked up the car, then escorted them over to the barrier in between platforms nine and ten.

"Now remember" their mother told them both. "Nice and casual-"

"Mum" Albus cut her off. "Are you serious?"

"What! Just reminding..."

Albus went towards the barrier first. It felt a little strange being the first to go through, as this right was normally given to James, the oldest. With a pang, he realized that he was now going to be the oldest of his family at Hogwarts...

He leaned up against the barrier in an aloof fashion, whistling lowly as people walked passed him, unaware that he was a second from disappearing into thin air. He closed his eyes, and at the next moment, he'd slid through the solid concrete with his trunk in hand.

The picture here was an interesting parallel; just as noisy, but more attentive. Heads turned as he emerged from the grey rock, then quickly turned back to whatever it was they were focused on prior. Albus stepped aside, and moments later his sister emerged. His mother came seconds later.

The two of them were conversing, but Albus turned his attention to the scarlet engine that highlighted the scene. He'd be boarding it soon, but first, he'd like to find his friends. He turned to his mother to voice this, but she batted it away.

"Go on" she said. "Just meet back here in ten minutes."

Albus waved, then walked off through the crowds of people. He passed by anxious looking parents speaking to their soon-to-be starting children, as well as a few familiar faces. He saw Barnabus Curder, a current member of his own Quidditch team, speaking to his rather sinister looking mother, and not far from him were Dante Haug and Bartleby Bing, who both gave him strangely mild waves when he acknowledged them.

This pattern continued for a few other typically friendly classmates. Tiffani Garrett, another member of the Quidditch team who was annoying but still generally polite, ignored his smile. And a Ravenclaw girl whose name he didn't know, but who he'd borrowed a quill from once and had never had any bad blood with, gave him a dark stare and walked by him as though he was possessed. In five minutes, Albus had deduced the reason.

His father's reputation, already a delicate one, had officially shattered for the students following the revelation that he was a murderer. The earliest signs of this had been at the end of his fifth year, but with all of the articles written over the summer slandering him and making Janine Fischer out to be the greatest martyr of all time, things could only have intensified.

Another thing that Albus noticed after only a few moments of meandering the platform was the radical amount of WAR paraphernalia being adorned. About a quarter of the people that he saw were wearing a T-shirt with some sort of stylized Wands and Redemption logo, though it was usually the plain black with sword-wand insignia that he loathed. A few others were not so much

supporting the Renegades as a whole as they were one individual; Warren Waddlesworth's face graced several torsos as well.

Albus shook his head as he searched for his friends, his eyes finally finding someone who he thought might actually be on his side. Standing near her trunk and looking bored was Melonie Grue, Morrison's girlfriend who Albus had become quite accustomed to over the past year or so.

"Hi Mel" he said as he approached. She turned to him and smiled.

"Hi Al!"

Melone looked somewhat different than usual now that Albus saw her up close. It had little to do with actual appearance however; she was still only slightly rotund, with the same long brown hair, pudgy cheeks, and large eyes that he'd identified her with before. The difference was instead in her composure; she looked unusually collected and relaxed. It seemed as though she'd had an excellent summer.

"I see *someone* isn't mad at me" Albus said weakly, jerking his head randomly to indicate the entirety of the platform.

Melonie made a huffing noise. "Well that's because some people don't judge others like it's their job" she said, eyeing a group of girls warily; they'd been throwing their own aggressive stares over to the two of them.

"You've gotten more confrontational over the summer" Albus beamed.

Melonie shrugged. "Morrison's rubbed off on me" she said. Then, blushing slightly, she pointed to her left. "And speaking of Morrison, he's over there catching up..."

Albus turned to where she was pointing, and saw that his friend was indeed chatting animatedly. His conversation partner was equally welcome; it was Scorpius.

Albus walked over to his two unsuspecting friends, noticing their appearances as well. Morrison looked the same, tall and somewhat goofy, with straggly hair that looked exactly as it had last year. Strangely, however, he was entirely clean shaven. Scorpius had grown a bit as well, but his pale and pointed face remained the same, as did his slicked back, blonde hair. Albus approached them both grinning.

"What are you lot up to?"

Both turned at once, giving large grins. Scorpius immediately slapped his hand coolly, but Morrison gave him a ferocious bear hug that lifted him off of his feet.

"Albus m'boy" he said in a mock-pompous voice. "Spiffing to see you dear chum, spiffing..."

"How's it goin' Al?" Scorpius said normally.

"Can't complain" Albus lied. He then jerked his thumb over to Melonie. "Why is she standing all alone?" he asked his friend.

"Ahh. She's waiting for Denise" Morrison said, his voice returning to normal. "But anyway..."

The three of them began walking through the platform aimlessly, immediately launching into conversation about the WAR merchandise being paraded around and the disdainful expressions being thrown their way.

"I fully expected this after the end of last year" Scorpius said with a shrug. "And my dad warned me that Hogwarts would be turned against me too because I'm friends with you" he added.

Albus frowned. "Sorry-"

"No not like that!" Scorpius said, holding his hands up. "My dad's real supportive of your dad and stuff, he was only mentioning it because- well- you'll find out" he added cryptically, smiling darkly.

"Because what?" Albus inquired, but Morrison grumpy noise.

"He's not saying" Morrison said. "So don't bother...but anyway, you don't have to feel bad about us getting crap for you and your dad, Al. I don't like half of these people anyway."

Even as he said this, a tall boy with long bangs covering his face walked by them giving them all a villainous look.

"What are you looking at?" Morrison said, agitated, but the boy had continued walking.

"Anyway," Morrison continued, "really don't sweat it man..."

They continued walking for a few more minutes, Albus's nerves growing more and more calm with every sentence spoken. Still however, there was one component of his eagerness to return Hogwarts that he had not yet encountered. A very important one...

"Have you guys seen Mirra?" Albus asked both of his friends, but they shook their heads.

"Sorry mate" Scorpius said.

"She'll turn up" Morrison added.

Time was pressing him however, as soon enough Albus had to go back to the gate and find his family. He bade a temporary farewell to his two friends as he returned to his mother, who, predictably, was far from alone at this point.

Uncle Ron was standing with her, as was Rose and Hugo. Uncle George was there as well, waiting with both Fred and a very timid looking Roxanne. Lily too was back.

"There he is" Uncle Ron said, grinning at him as he approached. "We were just talking about you!"

"About what exactly?" Albus asked.

"Well with James gone your pride and joy of Gryf- never mind" he joked.

Albus rolled his eyes before turning his attention to Roxanne.

"All excited for your first year?" he asked

She merely shrugged, then moved somewhat closer to her more obstreperous brother.

"She was chatting up a frenzy on the way here, she'll be alright..." Fred said.

"Where's your girlfriend Al?" Uncle George asked cheekily. "Or did you get a nasty surprise over the summer...?"

"Haha" Albus said. "I just can't find her now, she'll turn up though..."

A whistle sounded, signaling that those who had not yet boarded the train needed to say their good-byes. Albus gave casual waves to most of his family, allowing his mother to plant a wet kiss on his cheek as well. As Lily was speaking to Roxanne, his mother leaned in close to him and spoke in a low voice.

"Take care of yourself Albus."

"I know mum" he replied.

"I know you don't have high hopes for this year" she continued. "And I can't blame you. But this will pass; we simply must persist."

Albus nodded. He thought back to last year, on the platform. His father had not been present, but he had certain, choice words passed along through his wife for his son. This was not the case here. There was no correspondence to guide him as he prepared himself for his next year at Hogwarts. The most that he could do was what his mother had just told him; brace himself.

Steam was billowing from the scarlet engine now. Albus gave his mother another hug and his uncles claps on the shoulders, then lead Lily towards the train, Rose and Hugo following along behind them. When they reached the train it unspokenly fell on Albus to raise all of their trunks up and through the entrance, aggravating him slightly. Strangely, however, he received some help from an unlikely source.

"Thanks" he said, as he felt his struggles alleviate; someone was helping him lift.

"Mhm" someone grunted.

Albus turned and saw Charles Eckley standing by his side. His hair was still thin and straw colored, his arms bigger than Albus' and his face more full and handsome. Albus's animosity with Eckley (as well as his friend Donovan Hornsbrook) had slowly evaporated over the years, but it was still a strange sight to see him helping without request. Albus supposed it wasn't that unusual however-he was friends with Rose.

"Thanks Charlie" Rose said, beaming as her trunk was lifted.

Albus handled Lily's trunk while Eckley next took care of Hugo's, and then their own were covered. They split almost immediately afterwards, Albus sure that Lily would be joining them in an all Gryffindor compartment, or perhaps her own friends. Fred would undoubtedly be leading Roxanne towards his Gryffindor friends as well, meaning that Albus had no reservations about joining Morrison and Scorpius, wherever they may be. And hopefully he'd find Mirra too.

He moved his way through the train slowly, poking his head into compartments and looking for his friends. Like on the platform, those who noticed him were not giving him pleasant looks. Those who didn't collide with his shoulder stepped out of his way dramatically as he went by, wearing either contemptuous glares or looks of something that resembled, oddly enough, fear.

Albus finally found his friends in a compartment towards the middle; four of them. Morrison had his arm around Melonie already, and Scorpius was sitting next to-

"There you are!" Albus breathed as he slid the glass door shut.

Mirra looked up at him, beaming. She looked virtually identical to how she had last year, which was perfect, as Albus wouldn't have changed anything anyway. She stood up, the top of her head reaching just over the bottom of his chin, then leaned forward and kissed him. Albus felt his body relax as their lips met, though Morrison quickly snapped them both out of it.

"That's disgusting!" he roared, running his hands through Melonie's hair in an intended hypocritical fashion.

Albus smiled, ignoring him. "Where were you on the platform?" he asked his girlfriend, sitting down next to her, in between she and Scorpius.

"Just speaking to my grandparents" she said. "Figured I'd see you on the train. No need to rush."

She sounded genuine, but there was something about the false sweetness on her face that made him think that there was more to it. After a second of deep thinking, he thought that he'd figured it out. Mirra wanted to be nowhere near Rose.

"Well how was your summer?" Albus asked her.

"Good" she responded, but she stood up at once. "But I'll fill you in on the details later, I really should be going..."

"Huh? Oh right..."

Albus frowned as he took notice of the silver Prefect's badge already pinned to her. He waved his wand. "Go on then..."

She smiled and gave him another quick kiss on the cheek. Melonie stood too, but Morrison pulled her back down.

"Stop following rules!" he whined. "Go in later, say you were getting settled! That's what Scorpius is doing" he added, nodding his head towards his friend, who gave a bored looking thumbs-up.

"Well some of us take our positions seriously" Melone said, and Mirra nodded in approval. They both turned on their heels and left immediately afterwards.

Morrison reclined and stretched himself out, taking up the entirety of his side of the compartment. Albus turned to Scorpius, who was already digging through his things for something.

"Why are you going in late?" Albus asked; Scorpius rarely did anything that could jeopardize his Prefect role.

"It's boring for the first fifteen minutes, and I wanted to catch up on reading" he said, withdrawing the *Prophet*.

Albus stretched himself out now too; it was more relaxing being on the Hogwarts Express, simply waiting for an intended destination. Only a few things were bothering him now.

"So this'll be a fun year for making friends" Albus said to them both disdainfully.

"Getting sick of us, mate?" Morrison asked.

"I had people bumping into me as I was finding you guys. You'd think that some of them would at least mind their own business..."

"I reckon I saw a few people on the platform looking at you like they were going to wet themselves!" Morrison roared with laughter.

"Yeah I saw that on the train!" Albus said, sitting up. "Why would they be scared-"

"They think that your dad is a murderer" Scorpius piped up, not averting his gaze from the newspaper as he spoke. "By extension, they're afraid of you. The less informed ones, anyway."

Albus huffed; what a ridiculous idea. He wondered whether the rest of his family was getting similar treatment. Lily probably would, but what about his cousins? Would this behavior extend to Roxanne, during her first year, simply because she was associated with the Potters?

"Any word on the new Potions teacher yet?" Morrison asked, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Nope" Albus admitted. "Probably another Ministry lapdog though..."

"Wrong" Scorpius said, still not looking at them.

"Scorpius is right" Morrison said knowingly. "If anything, it will be one of Waddlesworth's men-"

"Incorrect" Scorpius cut him off.

Albus felt his face burn slightly. "Anything you want to tell us mate?" he asked his friend.

Scorpius licked his thumb in a grandfatherly fashion and simply turned the page.

"Nope."

Morrison gave a light laugh. "That makes two secrets then, eh?"

Scorpius smiled from behind his literature. "Not really" he said, but he didn't elaborate.

"What are you doing reading that garbage anyway?" Albus said indignantly, nodding his head towards Scorpius. "It's just more of Waddlesworth's nonsense. Which by the way, I've got something to tell you guys about that! When I was in the muggle-"

"I'm not reading about Warren Waddlesworth" Scorpius cut him off curtly. "This is on Darvy."

Albus felt as though water was boiling inside of his head. "What? Darvy? The *Prophet* hasn't mentioned Dar-"

"Who said anything about the *Prophet*?" Scorpius asked, and he flipped the newspaper around. What Albus had originally assumed was the *Daily Prophet* was no such thing. More surprisingly, however, was the headline at the top.

Death's Right Hand Tightens Around United States Ministry

Albus' jaw dropped. "What the-"

"It's the *WAR Weekly*, mate" Scorpius told him, apparently astonished by Albus' confusion. "You haven't heard-"

Albus snatched the paper out of his hands, staring down at it passionately.

"What is this?" he barked.

"I'd like to here this too" Morrison chimed in.

"I was in the middle of explaining in" Scorpius said. "Before I was rudely interrupted. Anyway, it's a newspaper published by Wands and Redemption. Starting coming out in maybe...I dunno, June?"

"And you believe it? Even though it comes from WAR?" Albus tossed out incredulously.

"Yeah I do" Scorpius said sternly.

"Not cool mate" Morrison said, shaking his head.

Scorpius snatched his newspaper back however, looking extremely irritable.

"Use your heads" he said. "This paper wasn't published until Waddlesworth started running for Minister. This is the information that the Ministry *should* have been giving us, but wasn't. And you can bet it's all true too, because otherwise Waddlesowrth wouldn't be putting it out."

"How do you figure that?" Albus said swiftly.

"Waddlesworth wants to show everyone why it's so imperative that they elect him as soon as possible. He may tell lies on other things, but he needs to show *proof* of how the war against Darvy is getting out of hand, and it's all here. He wants the people knowing exactly how backed up against a wall we all are. When it comes to Darvy and his lot, you can pretty much expect everything that WAR says to be legitimate."

Albus snorted-though it was impressive logic. Either way, however, he frowned at the thought of his father.

"My dad says that there's been little activity period" he told Scorpius pointedly. "How's Waddlesworth ending up with all this?"

"With all due respect mate," Scorpius said hesitantly, " your dad's been behind bars for about three months now. And this issue, anyway, came out just yesterday. When did you talk to your dad?"

Albus sighed. "Two weeks ago or so" he mumbled.

He crossed his arms over, defeated. But more so than that, he was unnerved. If this was true, how much else was his dad not aware of?

"And what's 'Death's Right Hand', anyways" Albus asked after a moment, peering at the paper.

"Darvy's new name" Scorpius said simply. Albus made a grotesque face, but Morrison bursted out with laughter.

"Are you serious?" he said, clutching at his chest. "That's so incredibly cheesy-who- who came up with that? I want to punch him or her in the face!"

"I think Darvy did" Scorpius said, his smile sideways.

"Her, then..."

"I thought it was a little weird" Scorpius admitted. "But it's the name he gave to the Irish Ministry last week, and it's the one that he's giving the Americans here" he added, tapping the paper with his finger.

"It isn't weird at all" Albus said scathingly. "It actually sounds just like him..."

This could not be more true. However ill-informed his father may have been about Sebastian Darvy's activities, he still had his personality completely correct; he did crave attention. Albus too knew this, his experiences with the psychopath had been the proof. Creating a lame nickname and forcing it on his victims was only going to expand his ego...

"Well I'm out anyway" Scorpius said suddenly, standing and yawning. He removed his silver badge from his pocket and pinned it to his chest. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Mind if I take a look at that?" Albus asked quickly as Scorpius went to stash his *WAR Weekly* back in his bag.

"Sure" his friend said, tossing the paper over to him.

"Ughhh you're going to be *reading*" Morrison asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I read fast" Albus said as Scorpius departed. "I'll be done in two minutes..."

But Morrison had already stood up and stretched himself out. "Fine" he said, his tone flat. "I'll go look around for the lady with the food trolley; she always comes too late."

"Suit yourself" Albus said, waving as Morrison left.

He was now completely alone in the compartment, the good mood from his anticipation of riding the train having evaporated somewhat. He held up the newspaper to his face, taking notice of how crisp it felt in his hands. It's overall design was better too; Albus thought that it looked better than what the *Prophet* presented, which always appeared as a blotchy mess. At the very top of the page it read *WAR WEEKLY: August 31 Edition*. Below that were small captions randomly thrown in around the title to the front page article, which all bore messages like "*What you need to know*" and "*Inside: The true state of the Wizarding World.*"

Albus sighed, though his curiosity-and general thirst for information on Darvy, for that matter-superseded his dislike of anything associated with WAR. Having already read the main headline, he lowered his eyes to the article below it and began to read.

Even outside of Britain, not all is well. Last week the Department for International Magical Cooperation revealed that it had been contacted by Joseph Devlin, a prominent member of the

Irish Ministry of Magic, who had confessed that the Irish had indeed communicated with Death's Right Hand. A terroristic threat had been issued, demanding locations throughout Ireland that were uninhabited and unmonitored by the Ministry. If the locations were not given, the population would be attacked. Devlin has issued the following statement.

"We here at the Irish Ministry of Magic regret to inform those of the British Ministry that Death's Right Hand-who those of Great Britain may know by the name of Sebastian Darvy- may currently be residing in our land."

The statement, obviously an indication the threats were given in to, roused a considerable amount of interest in the Wizarding Community-no one knew, after all, that Death's Right Hand was on the move. Staggering news has just reached us again however. Just two days ago, word came in that the United States Ministry of Magic had been approached with a similar threat. Not having given in, however, proved to only exemplify the tenacity of the Dark Alliance. Several towns all across the Western United States were destroyed within hours.

Eyewitness accounts who managed to survive the destruction indicated that actual people had not been responsible. The skeletal creatures first seen in the Hogsmeade Massacre almost two years ago (referred to by many in the Ministry as Silhouettes) were the primary assailants. What's more, however, reports show that the creatures were acting in a more intelligent and controlled manner, moving in combat groups and somewhat communicating as well. Even worse, the often- rumored charcoal horses of months ago (colloquially known as Necrosteeds) were confirmed as both existing and taking part in the destruction.

The Dark Alliance's reasons for invading other nations, says expert on magical warfare Thaddeus Cannon, are somewhat obvious to anyone aware of what is in both Ireland and the United States.

"When a terroristic group is on the move, it means that they want to gather resources away from home" Cannon tells WAR Weekly in a private interview. "Most people don't realize that Leprechauns are most commonly seen in Ireland, and trolls in the United States. These are two highly sentient magical creatures-one with brains, one with brawn- that mostly stood out of the way of almost every wizarding war of the last two hundred years. If Death's Right Hand really is advancing his army passed what we've already seen from the Dark Alliance, he'll be aiming to recruit creatures that are likely to pick what they deem as a winning side."

Warren Waddlesworth, currently running for British Minister of Magic, has a different, but equally valid point on the matter. Though busy with the upcoming election (no actual date yet scheduled) Waddlesworth found the time to give a rousing speech just yesterday in Bristol. Quoted here:

"There may indeed be trivial reasons for these invasions to other nations, and they may just involve other magical creatures, but make no mistake, at its core, this is an attack on our unity.

Sebastian Darvy-and yes, I am not afraid to use his real name-" Waddlesworth said emphatically, to tumultuous applause-" Sebastian Darvy believes that if he convinces other nations to conceal him, that he is destroying bridges between us. He fears our Ministry, because we are the ones that he knows can stop him! And from his fear, he and his Dark Alliance have tried to sever us from one another, turning us against each other, making us ashamed or angry towards our fellow wizards. But Sebastian Darvy, you see, doesn't understand that there are wizards who serve the common good, and stick together, not in spite of his attacks on our integrity, but because of them. We are there for our brethren, especially when they are intimidated, or wounded. What Sebastian Darvy fails to understand is that his strength in dividing our lands pails in comparison to our strength when joining together in heart and soul!"

Albus paused here, his breathing shallow. Both Waddlesworth and this Cannon fellow were wrong. His father had been right about Darvy's movements after all; he was looking for a place to breed his army. A place away from where he was most likely to be attacked, the place in which his army had been formed in the first place.

Both WAR and the Ministry did not realize this, however, because they weren't aware that Darvy had the very thing that he needed to make this possible: the Executioner's Veil. WAR knew that he was in possession of it, perhaps, but they had no way of knowing how closely it tied in to the creation of this army. They were under the impression that Darvy was hiding...when in fact, he was preparing.

He turned back to the article, wiping sweat from his eyebrows as he did so.

Waddlesworth further went on to reveal his intentions for the prevention of these situations in the future.

"Inter-Magical communication has always been a pivotal part in the way that we wizards live. In recent years, however, it has thinned. If I am elected Minsiter of Magic, my first order of business will be to completely reconstruct the Department for International Magical Cooperation, ensuring that knowledge is shared with our sister governments faster and more frequently. In addition to helping us prepare for these occurrences, in which one nation is approached rather than another, we will address the issue as a single entity! No more waiting to speak until it's too late! The Wizarding World-the entire world for that matter- can be separated by languages and oceans, but it cannot be separated in ideas and actions. Our Department for International Magical Cooperation can no longer simply receive information-it must deal it out as well. Only then can we maintain our connection at a pace that will allow us to stand together at a moment's notice, as we need to now!"

Waddlesworth's speech proved to be one of the most effective morale booster's of the summer, something desperately needed by the public in the wake of both the Dark Alliance's activities and the death of Janine Fischer. Egbert Sentry, 91 and sufferer of chronic Doxicutis (a semi-rare

skin disease brought about from prolonged exposure to Doxy bite venom when younger), managed to witness the speech in person, and had this to say:

"I haven't felt that alive in years" Egbert told WAR Weekly. "I remember being a boy and asking my father why we weren't really helping in the war against Grindelwald, and he told me it was because it wasn't really our business until he came here. I didn't approve of it then, and now, I'm just glad to see that someone agrees with me and is ready to revamp our government because of it. That's why I'm voting for Warren Waddlesworth; because he-"

Albus rolled up the paper here and tossed it aside. He had known that it would inevitably transform itself into a cleverly designed tool for showing how good Waddlesworth was, and hadn't been disappointed in that regard. Still, however, the article had been extremely interesting; he wondered what he'd missed from previous issues.

He relaxed his back against his seat, letting his mind filter through the garbage of the report for the important pieces of information. Darvy was taking big steps, and in different directions too. He was spreading his fear to other places, using corny titles for himself to elevate his status, and at the same time, he was showing that he was capable of making due on his threats. Outside of his immediate damage, however, his father's theory on Darvy seeking a breeding ground was so far turning out to be, unfortunately, accurate. How long until the inept Dark Alliance members that Albus had dealt with so far were erased by waves of powerful dark monsters?

He slid down onto his back, laying in the same fashion that Morrison had been. With the adrenaline of meeting his friends out of the way, he was just now starting to realize how tired he was. He'd woken up extremely early, and his exasperation had only increased since stepping on the train...maybe he'd close his eyes for a bit, while he was alone...

Only when he was laying down, completely unfocused, were his senses capable of distinguishing the nuances of the train. He could smell the fresh leather of the seats now that his nostrils were only inches away; could feel the gentle bumps of the train tracks, impossible to notice without one's face pressed up against a part of the train. Even with his eyes blinking slowly every couple of seconds, he could see scarlet paint chipping from just underneath the window...

Footsteps. They echoed loudly through the darkness, the only other noise his own panting. He was running through the darkness, panic coursing through him. For a moment, he was unsure why, but then light issued from behind him. He turned and saw golden beams coming towards him fast; the indicator of strangely lit eyes and a nefarious smirk. He sped up; he was being chased by the golden eyed Albus.

It was a very good thing that there were no objects obstructing his path, for he was running in an extremely lopsided manner. He had a pain in his side already, and was thus forced to cling to it as he hobbled through the darkness, a second pair of footsteps getting closer and closer, the light behind him gaining on him-

Something collided with him from behind, sending him head first to the ground. The top of his head met pain as he rolled over onto his back, clinging at his arm as well. His seeker stared down at him, and Albus saw his double smirk sadistically as he looked up. Grinning from ear to ear, hair jet black and ruffled, and eyes glowing menacingly, the other Albus crouched down and went face to face with him.

"What do you want from me?" Albus asked coldly, fear etched into every word.

The Albus staring down at him said nothing. And then, at the next moment, air was slipping from his lungs. A hand had curled itself around his throat, icy fingers squeezing just as they had before.

Albus grabbed at his double's arm with both of his own, frantically trying to wrestle it away. He'd only been fighting back for ten seconds when the golden eyed Albus removed a wand from its robes with its other hand- a wand with a fang for a handle. It pressed the Dragonfang Wand up against his face, and Albus knew that he was about to receive the finishing blow-

He took a fresh breath of air as the Albus on top of him was thrown off. Hoisting himself up, he saw more golden light. His jaw dropped-there was another Albus in the picture now, this one too with glowing golden eyes, their wand raised and aimed at the one that had been strangling him. Rather than wearing a smirk however, this one was wearing a look of defiance-or possibly even something that resembled heroism.

Albus stared at the two identical beings, clueless. The one that had attacked him still had its wand raised, now at its own attacker. Both of them were eyeing one another with determination on their faces, and if Albus hadn't know that his savior was to his right and his assailant to the left, he wouldn't have been able to tell them apart. He stayed in his position on the ground, sweat pouring down his face, unable-or perhaps just unwilling-to interfere...

The scene dissolved on the spot, and the next thing that he knew, a warm hand was on his forehead.

"What's wrong?" said a worried voice in his ear.

Albus bolted upright, suddenly cold. He wiped at his eyes and found that his fingers had a clammy feel to them. Blinking foolishly, he saw that Mirra was sitting down next to him, an expression of confusion on her face.

"What?" Albus said. "I was sleep- I was resting my eyes. I was out for two minutes."

"Well you've been out since I got back" came another voice, and Albus now realized that it was not just he and Mirra in the compartment. Morrison, Scorpius, and Melonie were all crowded around him.

"How long have you been back?" Albus asked Morrison, and he felt a twinge of pain in his skull; he had a slight headache.

"About ten minutes" Morrison said, shrugging.

Albus repositioned himself so that he was sitting like everyone else. It was just he and Mirra on his side of the compartment, the other three on the other side.

"Well I was just sleeping" he said. "I was...waiting for you guys to get done...that thing...you were doing..."

"The Prefect meeting?" Scorpius asked lamely.

"Yeah, that's the one" Albus remarked.

"Are you sick?" Mirra asked, pressing the back of her hand to his cheek; he pulled himself away though.

"I'm fine" he said, though he didn't feel it. He was nauseous, and images of his nightmare were still flashing through his head. "Just tired."

"You feel *really* warm."

"I'm okay" Albus said firmly. "How- how was the Prefect meeting?"

Scorpius launched into an explanation of how the Prefects had been given strict new rules to follow about the safety of the castle, including closely monitoring any suspicious behavior inside. These stringent measures were being taken out of fear that students could be acting under the Imperius Curse, which, though it hadn't been confirmed to be used regularly by the Dark Alliance yet, had been a popular curse during the previous wizarding war.

Mirra barely spoke while Scorpius explained how he'd then had a lengthy chat with Anastasia Anifur, the Hufflepuff Prefect. She kept her gaze on Albus the whole time, apparently watching him for signs of diminished health, which, though a loving gesture, made him feel somewhat uncomfortable. He did not want to seem so weak in front of her; he was simply tired.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Mirra asked him lowly while Morrison asked Melonie and Scorpius for more details.

"I'm positive" Albus said. "Just not talkative, 's all."

This stayed true for most of the rest of the journey. Morrison had already demolished the snacks from the trolley lady while Albus had been sleeping, but was quick to buy more when she came again, and kept his face stuffed periodically. Mirra, Melonie, and Scorpius however were all hindered by patrolling duties, though only the latter twodid regular rounds. Mirra left only for minutes at a time, returning to keep a very stubborn Albus company.

"I'm fine!" he insisted.

"He's fine Mirra, I've got my eye on him" Morrison said, lounging back and chewing on a Chocolate Frog.

"Well...that's not as comforting as you'd think" Mirra said with a smile, though she did accept the Frog thrown her way.

Albus mostly stayed with his head pressed against the cool window, literally watching as the sky turned dark, occasionally distracted by Mirra squeezing his hand.

It ended up being one of the oddest Hogwarts Express journeys of his life, simultaneously passing by slowly and quickly. Before he knew it the train was slowing down, but by then his stomach was in so many knots that it seemed to take forever to come to a complete stop. When Mirra clung to him to help him move off the train, he didn't even reject.

Following the others, they stepped side by side with Eckley and Hornsbrook on their way.

"He okay?" Eckley asked, jerking his head towards Albus. "Looks sick."

"I'm fine" Albus rattled, perhaps a bit more forcefully than intended, and indeed, Mirra threw him a sharp look.

"Firs' years this way!" bellowed Hagrid's voice through the darkness.

"Lo Hagrid" Albus said weakly, just making out his shape from the lantern that he was holding up.

"Hello Al! How yeh- blimey, you look terrible!" the Care For Magical Creatures professor changed his sentence mid-way, peering down at him with his beetle black eyes.

"Thanks Hagrid..."

He was escorted to the Thestral-drawn carriages by his girlfriend, where Morrison, Melonie, and Scorpius were already settled. Albus exchanged a quick glance with the reptilian creature pulling the carriage, knowing full well that he was the only one capable of seeing them. He was right about to step in with Mirra when Hagrid's voice boomed towards them.

"Only four to a carriage, sorry you two" he said, timid looking first years gathering around him.

"Come on Hagrid..." Albus whined.

"Not up ter me" Hagrid said sullenly. "Thestrals are stron', but we don't like over workin' 'em..."

Albus sighed, and Mirra groaned.

"Now I have to go sit with Rose don't I?" she said.

Morrison interjected at this point however.

"Out, Mel!"

She gave him a bewildered look. "Excuse me!"

"Albus is sick, he needs his girlfriend and his best friends. You don't make the cut" he said honestly, smiling widely.

Albus raised his eyebrows in disbelief as Melonie helped herself out of the carriage.

"Fine. I'll go sit with Denise. But we are *through*, Morrison Vincent!" she barked, and only now did Albus notice her thankfully playful attitude.

"Yeah yeah, get out of here" Morrison said with a wave of his hand as she walked away. "And do me a favor would you?" he called after her. "Tell Denise I'm single and looking!"

"One day you're going to play fight with her, mate, and she's going to end it with you for real" Scorpius said, helping both Albus and Mirra step into the carriage.

"Nah, I've got her roped" Morrison said, cracking his knuckles.

"Did you shave your face over the summer?" Scorpius asked suddenly, and Albus too remembered being curious about this on the platform.

"Huh?" Morrison said, feeling at his chin. "Oh, yeah. Mel likes me clean-shaven..."

The carriage ride was a bumpy one, but Albus had no other choice but to endure it. Why did he feel so terrible? The nightmare that he'd had last time, in his room, had not made him sick. Exhausted maybe, but not sick...

"Maybe we should go to the Hospital Wing once we get there" Mirra said.

"Mirra" Albus said earnestly, hoping to get her mind off of it. He was sure that he'd get better once he sat down and helped himself to the feast...

The carriages pulled up to the castle sooner than expected, Albus removing himself and taking large breaths of the crisp air. He stroked the Thestral that had pulled the carriage on the top of its elongated, inky black face as a thank-you, forgetting that he probably looked stupid to most of the surrounding people, who undoubtedly saw him petting thin air. He followed his friends towards the castle entrance, but only when they reached the top of the stairs along with the rest of the students did Albus see what he was sure would *truly* make him sick.

Two wizards were flanking either side of the grand door that led to the Great Hall, both of them wearing identical black robes with sword emblems on them.

"What's going on?" Albus said tensely, though he realized that no one else seemed to care. Two seventh years marched right by them and opened the doors for the rest of the students.

"Ah, right" Scorpius said sorrowfully. "Forgot to mention what else they told us at the Prefect gathering mate" he added, though Albus could tell that it had not been forgotten at all.

"And what's that?" Albus said acidly.

"WAR is handling security at Hogwarts this year" Mirra told him, a wry smile on her face.

"Waddlesworth's orders."

Albus felt his entire body go cold with rage. Fighting back the urge to vomit, he marched up the stairs.

Chapter 7: Master Malfoy

Albus practically carried his way through the giant doors leading into the castle, staring fervently ahead and ignoring the Renegade security guards as he passed. His friends followed behind him as he pushed his way through gaggles of people, many of whom looked at him indignantly, then quickly moved away from him. Albus was sure that this had a great deal to do with his father's status, but part of him felt like it may have been his appearance.

Though he could not see himself, he knew that he was sweating, and his face was probably as green as his eyes. He ran his hands through his hair and nearly had to blow on his palm afterwards; his forehead was scorching hot.

"Albus wait up!"

He turned and saw Mirra catching up to him. She took a single look at him, cupped her hands to her mouth for a moment, and then laced her arms through his.

"Come on" she said.

"Where are we-"

"Come on!" she repeated, her voice a growl.

"What's going on?" came the voice of Morrison, who had caught up to them with Scorpius by his side.

"I'm taking Albus to the Hospital Wing" Mirra said, and Albus groaned.

"I'm fine-"

"Shut up" she responded acidly, and Albus was so taken aback by this aggression that he partially acquiesced. He allowed her to steer him anyway.

"That's actually a really good idea" Scorpius said, frowning slightly. "You look *really* sick mate."

Albus moaned; he felt it.

"I'm going to miss the sorting" he croaked.

"It's going to be lame anyway mate" Morrison said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"We'll save you a seat" Scorpius added, and without further ado, Mirra whisked him away.

Albus waved to his friends as Mirra pulled him along, weaving in and out of people and leading him towards a staircase just on the side of the entrance to the Great Hall. They walked up the stairs carefully, the voices of the students growing more and more muffled as they distanced themselves.

"What did you eat for breakfast?" Mirra asked sharply. "Was it old meat?"

"It's not food" Albus said. "I just feel tired."

"Does your stomach hurt? Headaches? Are you seeing spots?"

"Just tired" Albus repeated. "And a little nauseous" he admitted.

They reached the second floor and turned sharply, heading down passed the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom and towards the Hospital Wing. Albus felt a strange mixture of glee and irritation as his girlfriend led him to the door; he was thankful, but wasn't too keen on being in such a pathetic state.

Almost as if their presence had been sensed, Madam Clearwater emerged from the Hospital Wing, an inquisitive look on her face.

"An injury already?" she asked. "Bump your heads on the way to the feast, did you?"

"He's sick" Mirra said.

Albus said nothing as Madam Clearwater examined him.

"Come on in, come on in" she said. "We'll give you an Infection Solution, then maybe something to perk you up; get rid of that fatigue."

Albus followed her in, but Madam Clearwater rounded on them and addressed Mirra.

"You can go now" she said politely. "No point in staying and missing the feast-he'll be as good as new soon enough."

"I don't mind waiting-"

"No-" Albus started, but Madam Clearwater came to his defence.

"He hasn't been checked yet, and he could be contagious! You can run along now dear, I promise I'll take good care of him."

Mirra moved her mouth sideways, then waved to Albus, before turning on the spot and leaving. Albus followed his caretaker into the Hospital Wing, where she immediately ushered him towards the nearest white bed.

"First case of the year" Madam Clearwater said simply, turning her back to him and pouring something that sizzled and smoked. "When did you come down with it?"

"On the train" Albus said weakly, laying back and feeling his head pound.

"Did anything trigger it? Maybe something bad to eat beforehand-"

"No" Albus said quickly. "Nothing triggered it."

He did not want to discuss his nightmare now, and he especially did not want to mention the adverse effects that it had had on his physical health.

"Well just take this" Madam Clearwater said, handing him the potion, which Albus recognized as being a correctly brewed Infection Solution-it was a smoking gray color, and he knew that it would be far from tasty. He took it with his nose pinched.

"And Lester is coming in now with a potion for any lethargy" she added. Albus raised his eyebrows.

"Who?"

But he was answered by the sound of footsteps. Coming down from the other side of the Hospital Wing was a young man with short curly brown hair and a flat nose. He was wearing black robes identical to the likes of the security guards outside of Hogwarts.

"Here you go" the man said, smiling and handing Albus a small cup of green liquid that he did not recognize.

Albus stared at the member of Wands and Redemption coldly, not taking the goblet that he was offering.

"It's okay dear, Lester is my assistant this year" Madam Clearwater assured him. "He's part of the security that WAR is lending us."

Lester grinned, showing straight teeth. He practically forced the cup of green potion into Albus' hands, who gave it a disgusting look. The acid green substance inside was bubbling somewhat; it looked almost like poison. WAR had tried to have him killed before...

His stomach gave a lurch, and the urge to vomit from earlier returned. Deciding that he couldn't possibly feel worse than he did now, he knocked the potion back in one swig, and found that it surprisingly wasn't bad. It had a fruity taste to it.

"And now I'll check what's going on with your body, Mr. Potter, and see what's troubling that immune system of yours. Lester if you could pass me the- thank you-"

Madam Clearwater took a silver instrument from her assistant's fingers, one that was almost completely straight, bar a miniscule pin wheel looking device at the end. Without warning she jammed the pin wheel portion into Albus' ear, making him jump back uncomfortably as the wheel began spinning inside of his head.

"What the-"

"Just relax" Madam Clearwater said, and she left for a moment, leaving the magical device to defy gravity and hang in his ear, where the slight vibrations were doing little to help his nausea.

Lester stared down at him politely, unspeaking. Albus avoided his gaze, wanting nothing to do with the man. Madam Clearwater returned just as the instrument made a loud buzzing noise-directly in his ear.

"Okay, I'll take this now" she said, graciously removing it from the hole in Albus' head, and he saw that it was glowing a cerulean color. Madam Clearwater surveyed it with interest.

"Hmm" she said lightly.

"What?" Albus asked, expecting the worst, considering how awful he was feeling.

"That's strange. There appears to be nothing wrong with you."

"Huh?" Albus said, dumbfounded.

"Nothing internal anyway. No virus, nothing."

Albus stared, then laid back down and took a deep breath.

"Possibly just exhaustion" Madam Clearwater said.

"Motion sickness may have contributed, Ms. Clearwater" Lester said. "The Hogwarts Express can be a little stuffy, I'm sure-"

Albus groaned. He knew that that neither of these two things had contributed to his deteriorated health. Now that he focused on how bad he felt, however, he noticed that his symptoms had alleviated somewhat since taking the two potions. His headaches had already vanished.

"I suppose that it could be a combination of factors" Madam Clearwater said with a sigh. "Either way I want you back here if you're ever feeling like this again, Mr. Potter. Just to check."

Albus nodded. "Can I go down to the feast then?" he asked. "I'm already feeling better."

She sighed. "Why don't you rest just a few minutes, clear your head. Then you're free to go."

Lester kept an eye on him as Madam Clearwater went away and busied herself with something else. Albus turned over on to his side to avoid so much as acknowledging him. He stayed in this position until his head stopped spinning and his skin felt noticeably less clammy, then rose up without a word and left.

He walked down the corridor and towards the stairs, knowing full well that he was going to make a scene as he entered the Great Hall. Hopefully, he wouldn't have missed the sorting and could see where Roxanne went, though he was already quite sure as to her destination anyways.

In the back of his head, however, he was focused on what had just happened. His sickness-though relatively brief-had been unusual to say the least. If he truly was completely healthy in body, what did that mean of his mind? Was his illness and the nightmare even connected, or had their close proximity to one another been strictly coincidental? Apart from being tired, he had not developed any of the same symptoms after his first nightmare over the summer...

He pushed the doors of the Great Hall open slowly once he reached them, though to his immense relief, he wasn't noticed. There was chatter all throughout the Hall, and Neville was carrying off the three legged stool and Sorting Hat, which looked completely immobile; he had just barely missed the sorting.

He walked in between the tables and took a seat directly across from Morrison and Melonie and next to Scorpius.

"You're looking better already" Scorpius said as he sat down.

"Madam Clearwater gave me some potions" Albus grunted.

"Did they find out what was wrong with you?" Morrison asked.

"Apparently nothing" Albus sighed. "You wouldn't happen to know where Roxan-"

"Gryffindor" Scorpius answered before he could even finish, but Albus paid it no mind. He wasn't even sure why'd he asked. "Along with about three others, actually" his friend added.

Albus raised his eyebrows, surprised by this piece of information.

"Almost everyone went to Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw" Melonie explained from across the table.

"That's weird" Albus said, intrigued. He glanced around and saw that the Ravenclaw table, the one next to them, did indeed look unusually full. "I wonder why-"

"Can't put two and two together, can you Potter?"

Albus turned back around. Just a few seats down from Morrison was a burly fifth year with large front teeth and messy, golden hair. He was sitting next to Barnabus Curder, who was in his year and who Albus immediately assumed to be a friend; he personally barely recognized him however. Perhaps he'd been to a Quidditch tryout a year or two ago...

"Say what?" Albus said, disturbed that this person, who didn't even qualify as an acquaintance, was addressing him in such an argumentative manner.

The boy sneered. "People don't want to go to Gryffindor because that's where your dad went."

Albus flushed. Before he could say anything however, Morrison had turned and hollered down the table.

"Hey kid" he said abruptly, his face both serious and inquisitive. "Who are you and why are you talking? I didn't say you could speak..."

A couple of the older Slytherins at the table chuckled, but before anything else could happen, a throat had cleared. Albus turned, his attention now solely on headmistress McGonagall.

She looked identical to how she had last year, and indeed, every year since she'd taken the post of Headmistress. There was something about her demeanor that seemed somewhat off however, something that Albus could notice despite the fact that she hadn't even actually spoken yet. She looked unnaturally edgy.

"Welcome! For those returning to the castle, welcome to another year at Hogwarts! To those ready to start their tutelage, we welcome you with open arms!"

She cleared her throat once more; she looked a bit uncomfortable. Albus maintained his gaze on her, not allowing his eyes to wander to the other professors-he was too busy reading her expressions.

"Hogwarts has always been more than a school; more than a place to learn from books and teachers. Here at Hogwarts we are a community; a family. We learn from sharing and taking part in one another's experiences, and this year, I am sure, will be no different!"

She said it all enthusiastically, but her face fell before the next part of her welcoming speech.

"There is, however, a few noteworthy items that must be discussed before our magnificent feast, and the start of our new year. First, and foremost, is security."

A couple people cringed or made noises of interest at this. Albus did not. He stayed silent, his eyes not moving from their spot. The Headmistress had started to flush.

"As just mentioned, Hogwarts is a community. And as a group of individuals so tightly woven together, it is of the utmost importance that our community be kept safe; that it be protected. You have all no doubt heard of what is occurring on the outside world. You havenoticed, surely, the whispers and murmurs of insecurity, and of impending attack. Rest assured when I say to you that the place in which you now reside is heavily fortified-Hogwarts is a place of safety. These walls have served to protect the student body before, and they will continue to do so!"

There was a smatter of applause at this, though Albus was sure that there was more to it-and indeed, Headmistress McGonagall raised her hand to silence them all almost at once.

"That being said, however" she continued, "the magic of inanimate walls only goes so far when protecting from the penetration of all exterior forces. In these times of hardship, it has been proven that a more personal touch to security is sometimes required. That is why, this year, we are very fortunate to have our own personal guards amongst us."

She waved her hand to the side, and the heads of every single student turned. Lining the walls on both sides of the Great Hall were men that Albus was sure had not been present before-men dressed in identical black, with the same insignia clarifying their allegiance.

"Wands and Redemption, whom you have all undoubtedly heard of, has taken it upon themselves to watch us over the duration of the year, providing us all with both moral and literal support. Warren Waddlesworth-the organization's leader-had assured me that their presence here will not interfere with the learning process in the slightest. These men, some of whom you may have already met at the front doors to the castle, are our personal protectors; here to guarantee us additional, interior safety. They are also here to provide us with a special degree of comfort; not only are they guardians, but they are people-people just like you. If you have any questions or concerns, or needs relating to your worries about the outside world, I implore you to seek one of them out-they are here to support you in any sense of the word.

"In addition, any suspicious behavior in or outside of the castle should be reported to either one of the professors, or to the members of Wands and Redemption. We will always have time to here your concerns, however slight they may be, and we can not stress enough how valuable your input is."

This portion of the speech seemed to end here, though Albus knew that it would continue in his head for the rest of the night. He finally took his eyes from McGonagall, instead surveying the men standing upright around the tables. He did not recognize any of them from his previous dealings with WAR, though that made him no more pleased with them.

What weighed more on Albus' mind was reading between the lines of McGonagall's speech. However much of it should have been flat-out told to recite, there was still important information hidden underneath the praising of the renegades. Albus loosely translated the entire thing to only one core concept: WAR had invaded Hogwarts.

Ostensibly to protect the students, Warren Waddlesworth has further bolstered his appearance to the public-hundreds of students would probably be writing home within the next few days to their constituent parents, telling them how much better they felt knowing that Warren Waddlesworth's men were watching over them as they slept. What's more, Waddlesworth may have also found a way to keep an eye on the student population, for reasons that Albus couldn't even fathom. This was not a new tactic however; the Minsitry had done the same thing last year with Puckerd. Perhaps WAR didn't need to merge with the Ministry afterall. They were already pulling the same stuff...

"In other news," McGonagall said, and Albus looked up once more, "we have yet another staff change this year. Professor Puckerd, the Potions master of last year, left due to personal reasons. The position is being filled this year, by Professor Malfoy."

Albus' eyes widened in shock. A few seats down from the Headmistress, Scorpius' father had stood up and waved, trying his hardest not to grin but failing miserably.

There was a bit of chatter from the four tables, undoubtedly because the name had resonated with several people. Albus instead turned to Scorpius, who was grinning as wide as his father.

"Why didn't-"

"Because that look on your face when my father stood up was priceless" Scorpius cut him off. Morrison too was smiling widely.

"You knew?" Albus asked.

"Saw him as soon as I walked in-I'm surprised you didn't mate-"

Scorpius hushed them however, as McGonagall had continued to speak.

"Professor Malfoy is no stranger to Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, and we are delighted to have him here this year, serving as our professor. He will also, as some of you may have deduced, be taking the role of Head of Slytherin House."

"Boom" Morrison muttered, doing a kind of little dance with his shoulders. "Can you say exclusive privileges?"

Both Scorpius and Melonie silenced him with a glare however, and McGonagall continued.

"And now the usual" the Headmistress said. "I know that you are all eager to dig in, and I apologize for the announcements occurring beforehand, but considering the nature of the announcements, I thought it best you be informed early. The usual announcements are as follows: The Forbidden Forest is, of course, forbidden. Flying lessons for first years are not mandatory, but are strongly recommended. Quidditch captains," she said, and Albus' ears perked up; he'd almost forgotten that this honor applied to him, "you are to meet with your heads of houses to discuss the times of your tryouts.

Albus nodded silently, realizing that he'd be having this discussion, strangely, with someone that he'd actually flown with before.

"And now" McGonagall called out, "let the feast begin!"

At once the plates in front of them became filled with all manner of delicious looking food, the goblets rising to the brim in pumpkin juice as found his face splattered with mashed potatoes as Morrison made a grab for the bowl, though he himself did little to add to his plate. Perhaps it was the residual effect of his sickness from earlier, but he wasn't particularly hungry. Instead, he gently loaded his plate and addressed Scorpius.

"So how exactly did your dad land the job?" he asked curiously.

"You saying he doesn't have the credentials?" Scorpius asked sternly.

"I meant-"

"Nah I'm just kidding" Scorpius said, waving his hand in a chipper fashion. "But believe it or not, they approached him. He was pretty good at Potions when he attended Hogwarts, actually, and as he went here and knows how the castle works and all that, he was already a stand-out. Plus, there wasn't exactly a line or anything. He was one of the first they went to, and he accepted right away."

"So I guess your- erm- financial-"

"We've got money now" Scorpius smiled. "Not exactly rich but...this is a big turn around for us, it really is. I feel a bit bad for my mum though. She's all alone at home now."

Albus nodded in understanding. As he turned to cut his turkey however, he noticed a menacing look thrown his way. The curly haired boy from earlier turned his head quickly when eye contact was made.

"Do you know that kid?" Albus asked Scorpius lowly.

"I think his name's Lucas or something" his friend answered. "I think I remember him being a bit of a prat-he borrowed a book off me once and he was real annoying about it."

"Ahh..."

Albus ignored this glare for the rest of the feast, taking care to notice that it was one of the few being thrown his way- a pleasant surprise considering the state of things on the platform. The Slytherin table was instead jolly on the whole, with most of the jokes, unsurprisingly, being thrown Scorpius' way.

"I reckon I just found my new best friend" said the Slytherin on the other side of Scorpius, a fourth year that Albus only recognized from the Common Room, elbowing him lightly while everyone else laughed.

"Me and Scorpius go way back" said Barry Bryant, who did at least know him. "Almost won a championship last year, didn't we? Eh?"

"It's not going to matter guys" Scorpius said, holding up his hands, though Albus knew that he enjoyed being the center-of-attention for once; he was not among the most popular students in the school, despite his intelligence. "My dad's not going to give me any special treatment, and you can rest assured the same goes for my friends."

Several people rolled their eyes, though Scorpius leaned in to Albus with an undertone.

"I'm serious" he said. "My dad cleared it up with me weeks ago-being related isn't going to get me anywhere. If anything, now he can just keep a closer eye on my studies."

"I'm sure you'll be okay" Albus said. "You're good at Potions, your dad will have no reason to harp on you..."

"I didn't even know that they'd let someone teach here with their child being a student in the school" Melonie piped up.

Morrison snorted. "I don't see why not. I mean, if someone's good at Potions, they should be teaching Potions! Doesn't matter where their kid goes to school..."

"Morrison's right" Scorpius said. "Somehow" he added. "My dad was just the right man for the job I guess...it's irrelevant that I'm here. "

The conversation about Scorpius' father died down towards the end of the feast, and soon enough the plates were all cleared. Students rose to their feet yawning and clutching their full stomachs, and then the Prefects were told to escort the first years to their houses.

Albus wobbled alongside Morrison while Melonie and Scorpius did their job, taking care to keep an eye for Mirra. As they were going separate ways entirely, however, it seemed as though he'd have wait until tomorrow to speak to her. As he and his friend moved along with a crowd of older students, Albus asked something that had randomly come up in his head.

"Hey you were here for the sorting right? What did the song go like?"

"It was really weird, actually" Morrison said, scratching at his nose. "You know how recently it's been about unity and and where we belong and stuff? It was that again-for almost the entire thing. There were maybe four sentences at the end about the houses, one for each. It sounded much more urgent this year..."

"Yeah" Albus said grimly. "I figured that'd be the case."

They reached the blank stretch of wall early, but had to wait for Scorpius to arrive and explain the password protocols to the new students before they could finally get in. After reciting the password-"Derwent"-they entered the Slytheirn Common Room in all of it's familiar glory.

Albus gave the dim, green lit room a fleeting smile as he shuffled through it, his eyes resting on the familiar tapestry of Severus Snape briefly as he did so. He and Morrison were among the first to reach their dormitory, and his face hit the bed as soon as he'd done so.

"Another year" Morrison said, pulling the curtains around his own bed.

"I wonder when we'll have our first lesson with your dad, Scorpius" Bartleby Bing spoke up from his side of the room.

"No idea" said a sleepy Scorpius.

Dante Haug spoke up next, asking Scorpius yet another question about his father. Albus simply laid back, his hangings shielding him from view, pleased that someone else was taking the attention from him-he did not want his father brought up again tonight.

Instead, he allowed his eyes to close, the voices around him lulling him into what he hoped was a dreamless sleep.

Albus awoke somewhat earlier than usual the next morning, which was strange considering how little sleep he'd gotten recently. Rubbing at his eyes and taking note of how everyone else's bed hangings were still drawn, he moseyed along down to the Common Room, expecting it to be almost entirely empty. Strangely, however, he was greeted at once by Scorpius.

"Good morning" his friend said. He was sitting on the floor, just inches from the lit fireplace, a tattered textbook opened up on his lap.

"Mornin'" Albus yawned. "What are you- are you studying already?"

Scorpius gave him a meek smile. "Just a little bit."

"How long have you been up?"

"About an hour or so..."

Albus stifled yet another yawn before moving in close. Glancing down, he recognized the textbook at once.

"*Advanced Potion Making?*" he read off.

"What?" Scorpius said indignantly, turning the page. "I want to make a good first impression..."

Albus shook his head and slung himself down into a comfortable stone cut armchair. It was terribly boring watching Scorpius obsessively cram information that he probably wouldn't be needing anyway, but within half of an hour more people had joined the Common Room, and finally, with a groggy Morrison by their side, the three of them made their way down to breakfast.

"Blimey, they're watching us as we eat?" Albus scoffed as he sat down. A few WAR members were lined against the walls of the Great Hall, overly serious expressions on their faces.

"Let them do what they want, they're not hurting anybody" Morrison said, pulling a tray of sausages towards him.

Albus huffed, but still piled his plate full of bacon. Almost subconsciously, he glanced up at the high table and saw Scorpius' dad-or Professor Malfoy, now-engaging in light conversation with Hagrid. His eyes snapped back to the table however as Neville came charging through, holding their schedules. Strangely, he was addressing each student individually and speaking to them briefly as he went.

"What's going on?" Albus asked the table as a whole. Morrison and Scorpius ogled at him, but Melonie, who he hadn't noticed was sitting across from him before, answered.

"He's checking to make sure everyone's taking the right N.E.W.T classes" she said. "People have different schedules this year, remember Al?"

Albus choked on his bacon, horrified. How could he have possibly forgotten that? Everyone else had undoubtedly spent the whole summer organizing their schedules accordingly, ensuring that upon their return to Hogwarts, they'd be pursuing the occupation that they desired. Albus had put no such thought into it, however.

Of course, his negligence on the matter wasn't entirely his fault. Professor Puckerd had done a very poor job of giving him career advice; indeed, his bigger priority at the time had been making sure that Albus felt as though he had no future at all...

Albus waited, stewing in his own sweat as Neville neared them. He had a lengthy conversation with Scorpius, a relatively short one with Morrison, and then turned to Albus.

"Albus...Albus..." he said, flipping through schedules. "Aha! Yes, I actually wanted to speak to you about this. Your schedule is completely clear! It was never filled out last year by your career counselor-"

"Well, the thing about that is..." Albus trailed off, giving his Herbology professor a wry smile and scratching at the back of his head. Trying to find the right words to describe the situation, he ended up blurting out the truth.

"Puckerd was an awful career advice giver. We actually never really...worked anything out" he finished lightly.

"I see" Neville said, flashing a matching smile. "Well, off the top of your head, before the discussions turned awry last year, was there any particular career path that you were interested in?"

Albus' mouth curled somewhat. "Well I kind of- I mean, I've always kind of been good at- I was thinking of maybe becoming a Potions Professor" he finished lamely.

Oddly, Neville gave him an impressed look. "Well you certainly have the O.W.L results for it. However, there's more to it than just Potions. You will definitely at least need Herbology and Care For Magical Creatures as well; both provide information on necessary potion components."

"But I could do it though, right?" Albus asked. "I mean, you could make my schedule right now?"

Neville tapped the sheet of paper he was looking at, then handed it over to an extremely relieved Albus.

"You'll have to work out the specifics with your head of house, but this tentative schedule should cover the basics. You'll probably want to rework a few things..."

"Thanks so much professor" Albus breathed, and he truly meant it.

Neville gave him a warm smile, then leaned in and spoke in a low tone. "Hang in there Albus" he said cryptically, and he then progressed to the next person.

Albus returned to his breakfast, but kept his eye on his schedule as well.

"Not bad" he said, scanning it. "First class is Care for Magical Creatures, and then I get a free period!"

"I've got a lot of those..." Morrison said, eyeing his own schedule.

Albus saw that he had Potions twice a week; double period in the afternoon today, and the same thing for Friday. He craned his neck to see Scorpius's schedule, and saw that his friend had the same thing for Potions.

"Morrison, Potions today and Friday?" Albus asked.

"Somehow" his friend replied. "I only got an 'A' on my O.W.L."

"That'll be my dad" Scorpius said. "Giving everyone a chance."

The bell sounded just as they were finishing their breakfast, but were then forced to split up somewhat. Albus and Morrison were going down to Hagrid's hut for their first class, while Scorpius was departing for Muggle Studies.

"Why are you still taking that stupid class anyway?" Morrison asked as they began to separate in the hall.

"Ministry members typically need to be good with muggles" Scorpius explained quickly. "See you later..."

Scorpius immediately started up a staircase, but Albus and Morrison both passed through a door into a corridor that led to the grounds; Morrison too was taking Care For Magical Creatures, though this seemed to have less to do with any career of choice and more to do with a simple fondness of the subject.

"So what do you reckon Hagrid's got in store for us as N.E.W.T students?" Albus asked.

"I've narrowed it down to Manticores and Chimeras" Morrison answered with a grin.

They had just entered the fresh air and crisp grass when someone called to them.

"Heading down to the grounds?"

It was Mirra, who was jogging lightly to catch up with them. Strangely, she was alone.

"Al, you look better!" she exclaimed as she neared them, giving Albus a swift kiss on the cheek upon arrival.

"Yeah, Madam Clearwater fixed me right up. I was better by the feast" he told her.

"So what was wrong with you?" she asked.

"Erm" Albus started, weighing his options. "I ate bad food. You were right."

"I knew it!" Mirra said, shaking her head. "You really need to pay more attention to your eating habits, you know!"

Morrison threw Albus a curious look, and he knew why; he'd told him and Scorpius something else. But he did not want his girlfriend learning that his sickness had, apparently, been psychosomatic. He knew that if she was aware of this, the resulting conversation would end up being much more longer and more serious than a single comment about his food intake.

"So you guys are heading down for Care for Magical Creatures?" Mirra asked, now walking at the same pace as the two of them.

"Yup" Morrison said jovially. "And Scorpius is stuck in Muggle Studies right now! Ha!"

"Can you believe that about his dad?" Mirra asked them both quickly. "I was shocked; I mean, I'm sure he'll be a good professor, but that *really* took me by surprise."

"Well I'll find out just how good he is this afternoon" Albus said. "I have him later for double Potions..."

"Me too!" Mirra said excitedly, and she dove into his pockets and withdrew his schedule. After a second of scanning she handed it back.

"We'll only see each other Mondays and Fridays" she said, slightly crestfallen. "And why are you taking Herbology?" she added.

"I want to be a Potions professor" Albus said with a shrug. "So I need to know about...you know. Herbs."

"What are you doing in Care for Magical Monsters?" Morrison asked Mirra.

She blushed somewhat. "Well...to be honest, last year, when I was doing my career advice thing, we kind of weighed my options, and I didn't completely veer towards anything in particular. But back when me and Rose were talking-like, more than we do now anyway-she mentioned that her uncle studied dragons for years. I'd like to get in to that line of work."

Albus gave her an alarmed look, but she batted it away with her hand.

"Not dragons!" she said. "Just creatures in general. I think that they're all fascinating-I'd kind of like to be a Magizoologist."

Albus, who already knew this somewhat from his exchanges with Mirra over the summer, turned his attention to something else that she'd mentioned.

"Speaking of Rose," he started lightly, "are you guys...?"

"We talked a little bit last night" Mirra said coolly. "But we're still a long ways away from where we were. I'm still kind of expecting that apology" she said grimly, sounding as though she was well aware of how little the chances were of such a thing occurring.

They reached the clearing near Hagrid's cabin, where the caretaker was nowhere to be found yet and only a handful of other students were waiting. Albus was quick to realize that he and Morrison were the only students from Slytherin there, and that Mirra was one of only two Gryffindors, the other being a girl whose name Albus didn't know.

"Where's the rest of your group?" Albus said, thinking of Eckley and Hornsbrook.

"Charlie and Donny both aren't taking anything out of the usual. They both want to work in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; they're actually in Transfiguration right now."

Albus snorted, but he quickly turned it into a powerful cough to mask it, something which Mirra thankfully didn't and Hornsbrook may indeed both truly want to enter the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but knowing what Hornsbrook's father was, it was most certainly a different kind of Ministry that they had hopes of being a part of. They were both clearly counting on the fact that by the time that they left Hogwarts, the Ministry would be under Waddlesworth's control, thus making the department in question more of a gathering of renegades than anything else.

Still, this gave Albus an interesting question to ask, and he did so at once.

"Hey, just out of curiosity," Albus started, "what do Ec- Charlie and Donny think of this whole WAR thing? With them monitoring at Hogwarts and all that?"

Mirra gave a sigh of exasperation. "We've been here about twelve hours Albus, do really want me to start playing spy already?"

"I was just curious!" Albus said, holding up his hands defensively while Morrison chortled. The conversation ended abruptly once they saw Hagrid in the distance. He was walking towards them all with a large grin on his face, and, Albus noticed, he was carrying himself in a very unusual fashion. From the way his arms were held out, it appeared as though he was carrying something- though there was clearly nothing there.

"Good mornin' students!" he said as he neared them all, beaming. Albus thought that perhaps he would voice his displeasure at so few people taking his N.E.W.T class, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Good morning" the small group mumbled back, Morrison being the only one to shout it.

Hagrid gave him a wink before continuing. "Now yer all here for one reason; yeh want to learn more about magical creatures. And yeh want to see new ones too. Yeh don' want the same, run of the mill stuff yeh've been seein' these las' few years. You all want to experience the *danger*" he added darkly, and he then gave a hearty chuckle.

No one in the class laughed however. They all simply exchanged the same look; that of immediate regret for having selected the class.

Hagrid continued in a light tone however, and what he said next seemed to calm some people.

"Not today though!" he boomed out. "Today, as yeh can see, the creature I got with me is far from dangerous! No, he's more of the defensive type, to be hones'. What do you lot think of him?"

The class a whole simply stared at him, scratching at their heads. Albus did as well, unsure as to whether Hagrid was kidding or not; there were, after all, no magical creatures in sight.

And then, it came to him.

"Are you holding a Demiguise?" Albus asked aloud.

Hagrid smiled. "Right yeh are Al, take five points ter Slytherin!"

Some members of the class made noises of understanding, but others still seemed clueless. As if to demonstrate, Hagrid bent down on his knees and gently moved his arms into a position that showed he holding something. Then, he began to gently stroke mid-air.

It would have been very comical had something not happened at once. Slowly, a three foot tall, ape like creature materialized in front of them, and Hagrid was revealed to be stroking its head. The Demiguise had a very peaceful look to its primal face, with its large black eyes remaining

firmly focused on the group of people in front of it. Its hair was a bright shade of white that made it appear as though it was covered in snow. To some degree, it was quite cute.

"Now he's a scared little thing" Hagrid told them all. "So you'll want to keep your distance. But he's mighty peaceful, so you mind yourself and act the same!"

"Now, this here Demiguise isn't a regular residen' of our Forest. They're usually found in the far east, and it's only by chance that I managed to getta' hol' on this one here. The first thing that yeh might want ter know about these little fellows, though, is tha' they're very sought after, and that sometimes leads to complications. Can anyone tell me why tha' might be?"

When no one else raised their hand, Albus did.

"Because people use their fur to make Invisibility Cloaks" he stated, remembering what his Uncle Ron had told him once.

"Right again Al!" Hagrid exclaimed. "Five more points!"

Mirra smiled at him, and Albus too grinned sheepishly. It was very strange being in a class that didn't have Scorpius in it; he actually had time to think about the questions asked before someone else had answered it.

"Demiguise hair is extremely valuable, on the coun' of its magical properties" Hagrid said, his voice a tad bit melancholy at this point. "Demiguise can make themselves completely invisible when they feel threatened, jus' like this one here was doin' a moment ago. And that hair is used to make Invisibility Cloaks, jus' like Al said. Now there is a way to properly get the hair without harmin' the creature...but sadly, most don't bother, and that makes these poor things endangered."

There were soft noises of sadness from the few girls among the group, Mirra included. The Demiguise simply continued to sit there and stare at them all, looking quite helpless and extremely cuddly indeed.

"I know, I know" Hagrid said, shaking his head so that his big bushy beard swayed somewhat. "I once met a fellow in a pub who reckoned that he tried to illegally make them Cloaks, and admitted that he'd killed one of 'em before! I ended up- well, not important what I did, but anyway..." he trailed off.

Albus cringed. Aware of Hagrid's love for magical creatures and knowing full well just how dangerous he could be-especially if he was somewhat intoxicated- he was sure that the stranger in the pub ended up regretting his actions very much indeed.

Hagrid cleared his throat before he continued.

"Now, though they're not much in terms of power, Demiguise can be awful sneaky, usin' their invisibility to trick their predators. You lot won't be seein' any of tha' though. I've got a really

timid one here, so we're mostly gonna' be takin' notes today. If he looks comfortin' enough, I might let ya pet him, but no promises."

All in all, it ended up being the tamest lesson that Albus could ever recall having in Hagrid's class. Even the Flobberworms had involved some sort of work-even if it had been simply pushing lettuce into their mouths. The Demiguise simply stood there however, relatively still, only occasionally moving, such as when it rubbed up against Hagrid affectionately for handing it purple berries that it seemed to enjoy greatly.

When it did move however, it ended up causing problems. In addition to taking notes on the creature, they were supposed to sketch it. Most problematic was the invisibility powers of the ape like beast. The scratching of paper sometimes made it jolt and turn invisible for a second or two, in which it would sometimes change positions and force the class to alter their pictures.

The class went by rather quickly however, and before they all knew it, they were hiking back up the grassy slopes towards the castle.

"Wasn't so bad" Albus said. "Certainly not Manticores" he added, throwing Morrison a look.

"That's next week's lesson, you just wait" he quipped.

"Where are you two headed now?" Mirra asked.

"Free period" Morrison said, smiling widely.

"Up for a game of chess-" Albus started to ask his friend, but Mirra cut him off.

"Albus, free periods are meant to help with the additional work load of the year. You should really be using this time to get a bit further in your studies."

"We've had one class so far!" Albus argued. "And I could barely see the thing I was studying half the time!"

"He makes a fair point" Morrison said. "And chess will get his brain pumping before Potions..."

Mirra shook her head, but didn't bother arguing further. "Well I have Charms now" she said. "I'll see you two in Potions then?"

They both nodded as they entered the castle. Albus and Mirra shared a quick kiss, and then she was off on her way up the stairs. Albus and Morrison however, descended down into the dungeons, eventually entering the Common Room and setting up the chess board.

"Mirra wasn't kidding, was she?" Morrison said, looking around the Common Room.

They were not the only two enjoying a free period, but they certainly were the only two participating in a leisure activity during it. Everyone else had their nose crammed into a book,

even if it was after only a single class, and it stayed this way all the way through three decisive victories by Albus. He was in the middle of taking his fourth when Scorpius entered, signaling that the period was over.

"Why are you two playing that?" he asked. "Shouldn't you have studying to do?"

"You and Mirra both" Albus said, cringing slightly. "There's nothing wrong with taking a break..."

"Yeah, and we didn't get any homework or anything from Hagrid-" Morrison started.

"Well bully for Hagrid!" Scorpius spat disdainfully, throwing down two notebooks on the floor next to them. Albus skimmed through them both and saw that they were already half way full.

"Muggle Studies and History of Magic" Scorpius said, wiping sweat from his brow. "And don't even get me started on the essays I need done by Wednesday..."

Melonie walked in shortly afterwards, though she didn't make as big a deal about Albus and Morrison wasting away their free period-perhaps she'd expected it. Either way, the four of them all headed to the Great Hall for lunch afterwards, where Scorpius, predictably, ending up passing on his meal in favor of starting on his History of Magic essay.

While at the table, Albus heard his name called by Tiffani Garrett, a Chaser from last year's Quidditch team.

"What's up?" he answered her.

"Any idea when Quidditch tryouts will be?"

Garth Moone, another Chaser on the team, looked up hopefully as well.

"Not yet" Albus said. "I'm going to work it out with the new head this week though. Hopefully this weekend.

They both nodded and returned to their meals, but Scorpius looked up.

"I just realized something" he said.

"What's that?" Albus asked.

"My dad's going to watch me play Quidditch this year" he said thoughtfully, suddenly turning bright red. "I need to get practicing. Maybe tonight-"

"Relax mate" Albus said clapping him on the back. "You're one of the most dominant Keepers I've ever seen" he said truthfully. "But you should really eat something before Potions..."

The bell rang soon after this, signaling that their double period of Potions was set to begin. Albus, Scorpius, Morrison, and Melonie all headed down to the dungeons together; it was the only class this year that all four were taking, Melonie doing so because of her interest in becoming a Healer. The labyrinth was slightly more crowded than usual however; all four house colors were clogging the passageway, but even more than that, tall, completely black robed figures were moving as well.

"What's going on?" Albus asked those nearest him. A Gryffindor boy who Albus had once seen hanging around Charles Eckley turned to answer him, but then, upon seeing who'd asked, sneered and turned away.

"That's rude" Albus said hotly, but Milton Parish, a boy from Ravenclaw that Albus was somewhat familiar with, turned to give him an appropriate response.

"It's the WAR guardians" he said. "They're just monitoring the dungeons; it's causing a bit of blockage."

Albus groaned as people stepped aside, allowing the renegades to pass by.

"All clear" one of them hollered to another, before they all finally went up the stairs.

"That's going to get really annoying, *really* fast" Albus said, once the floor was completely clear of WAR members.

"Just let them make pretend like they're actually doing something" Morrison said with a shrug, and the four of them followed everyone else through the narrow passageways, and eventually, into the Potions room.

The door was open, but upon entering, no professor was found. Mirra was already there, waiting at the front table, with Eckley, Hornsbrook, and Rose behind her. Albus took a seat next to her, along with Scorpius, while Morrison and Melonie moved to an adjacent table so that they could sit next to one another.

The Gryffindor boy who had had sneered at Albus joined Eckley at his table, but everyone else in the class ended up being from Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. Many people were already whispering, asking one another what their expectations were for the class, some of them mentioning Scorpius' name as well.

The dungeon door bust open, and Professor Malfoy swept through, his black robes billowing along behind him. There was something different about the way that he carried himself now against how Albus had seen him before. There was more confidence on his unsmiling face, and his posture was more upright; dignified. Landing a job as a Hogwarts professor appeared to have been a serious ego boost.

"N.E.W.T level Potions" he said forcefully, and all whispering stopped at once while the new professor stood by his desk, speaking. "You are all here because you have mastered the simplicity of Potions; you can mix ingredients, and you can stir them. Congratulations" he said, his drawl heavy with sarcasm. Albus felt chills go up his spine; Professor Malfoy's voice had, for a second, been a perfect replica of Scorpius'.

"You are now at the point in your education," Professor Malfoy continued, "where simply knowing *enough* is not good enough. Potionry is an art form. It carries intricacies and nuances, with every aspect of it controlled by a series of predetermined steps. To be an expert Potioneer, you must be able to both plan intelligently, and think quickly. Inability to do either can result in, at the very worst, prolonged and gruesome death."

Albus raised his eyebrows, eager to get brewing. He was not sure of how many people here wanted to truly master Potions-many of them simply wanted the N.E.W.T as it would be required for their careers. But Albus wanted Potions to *be* his career. Professor Malfoy continued in a soft whisper.

"On the other side, however, those who master the art of Potions will find themselves with unparalleled power at their finger tips. That is my goal here, with all of you. I can teach you how to brew fame, bottle glory-"

The door opened, ending the speech abruptly. Standing in the door frame was a wizard in all black-one of the WAR members. He had large front teeth and sandy blonde hair. Albus recognized him as being one of those who had been standing guard the night before.

"Can I help you?" Professor Malfoy asked shortly, his nostrils flared.

"Just checking up" the WAR member said curtly. "Making sure that everything is danger free."

"If you'd like," Professor Malfoy started, and Albus was sure that it was going to be a biting remark that issued from his lips, "you can search all of my students manually for this 'danger' that you are so intent on finding. Several of them are carrying quills that I noticed looked suspiciously sharp as they entered."

A couple of people sniggered, and Scorpius beamed. The WAR member simply stood there however, staring. Albus felt the hair stick up on the back of his neck. Other people may not have realized it, but something deeply personal was going on here. The Malfoy name was tainted, and almost always immediately connotated to the war with Voldemort. Renegades like the man in the door frame right now had risen up on the principle of executing vigilante justice against people like the Malfoy's. In a different setting, wands would have been undoubtedly drawn.

The WAR member held his silence however, closing the door shut after just a few more moments of staring. Professor Malfoy turned back to the class as though nothing had happened.

"As I was saying," he continued crisply, " the fine art of Potionry can be just as beneficial to a wizard or witch's capabilities as mastering a wand could be, if not more so. But of course, such things do not happen over night. You are all no doubt expecting to treat this class as you would any other, but I can assure you, allocating too much time towards other endeavors will undoubtedly hinder your performance here. I will not coddle you. I will not slow down my tutelage for stragglers, nor will I alleviate the workload for those who find it overwhelming. Like all N.E.W.T classes, this one is not mandatory. If the burden is too much, you are free to leave. Fail to keep up with the workload-and I will blatantly, vocally, and strongly recommend the same."

Several of the students looked around anxiously at one another, and even Mirra looked somewhat tense. Albus, however, was completely fine with what he'd just heard. Indeed, he couldn't help but admire his new professor-who he had to remind himself quite strongly was one of his best friend's fathers-for their intimidating, but extremely honest teaching presence. He wondered vaguely who had inspired it...

"We will not be brewing Potions today" Professor Malfoy said quickly, and several people made noises of relief. "Potions is a highly theoretical subject, and that means note taking. What I write on the board, I expect you to put on your parchment word-for-word."

People dug into their bags at once, Albus among them. Though somewhat disappointed by the lack of actual potion making, Albus didn't mind scribbling notes down vigorously as much as he usually did. Most of what the professor wrote on the board by waving his wand Albus already knew, mostly because he'd figured it out for himself while acing previous years. Some information was new to him however, like, for instance, the fact that most poisons and their antidotes were virtually identical in nature, bar one or two different components.

It did end up being a rather slow hour and a half however, with Albus' hands cramping up towards the end. The class was dismissed with the news of an extremely long homework assignment being due on Friday, and then the door behind them all was closed, no words of politeness spared by Professor Malfoy on their way out.

"I think my hand is dead" Mirra said as soon as they left.

"Sorry" Scorpius said quickly, but she gave him a inquisitive look.

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because it's his dad doing it" Morrison said, yawning. "Yup, I reckon Potions isn't for me this year, sorry chaps-"

"Giving up already?" Melonie asked, shaking her head. "You're quite the fighter Morrison..."

Albus said nothing however, he was too busy looking at Scorpius. His friend didn't seem to be in as good a mood as he was during the beginning of the lesson. He had a sullen look on his face, anyway. What had he been expecting?

"Ughh, not again" Mirra said.

The labyrinth was clogged once more. This time it had the added affect of additional, younger Slytherins navigating it, fresh from their classes. But the biggest problem was again the WAR members, three of them this time, who were loitering in the middle of the passageway conversing.

"It's like they think that Darvy is going to bust into Hogwarts and head straight for the dungeons first" Albus said irritably.

A passing by first year Slytherin stopped dead in his tracks, two of his dormitory mates behind him.

"Did you hear that?" he gasped to them both. "They think that Death's Right Hand is going to break in here!"

Albus rolled his eyes, and then, unexpectedly, felt rage course through him. "Darvy!" he shouted at them both. "His name is *Darvy*! You know how I know that? Because he used to *teach here!*"

The three of them squealed, then hurried by quickly.

"You don't have to be so harsh on them mate" Morrison said lightly.

"You know what," Albus started, throwing his hands up in the air, "when they say stuff like that, I really do. 'Death's Right Hand', honestly. Doesn't even make sense..."

"It actually does" Mirra piped up from next to him. "To be someone's right-hand man means to be a valuable assistant to them, or in this case, their enforcer. He's personifying Death and making it seem like he's the one doing Death's work."

"Really" Albus said, peering at her with a blank expression. "You too?"

"I'm not saying it's clever!" she said defensively. "I'm just saying that it makes sense..."

The passageway cleared at that moment, giving those who weren't in Slytherin the opportunity to flee upstairs towards the less crowded hallways that led to their own Common Room's. Mirra gave Albus a quick kiss on the cheek before maneuvering her way around other students, eventually catching up to the other Gryffindors. She did however, Albus noticed, keep her distance from them as well, possibly due to Rose's presence. Albus and his friend turned at a corner, heading to their own Common Room to relax before dinner.

But only Morrison was keen on relaxing. Scorpius had already started work on his Potions essay, which seemed to have taken precedence over all other assignments, and Melonie was studying for a test that wasn't supposed to be taken for two weeks.

Albus simply chatted with Morrison, discussing Quidditch and other things that didn't pertain to schoolwork, which seemed to irritate Scorpius a bit. He stayed silent though, up until just before dinner, when he finally addressed them both. It wasn't about their conversation however.

"What was with that guy barging in on my dad like that?" he asked. "I mean, that didn't happen in any of my other classes."

Albus tensed up a bit. He did not want to tell Scorpius his suspicions, but then again, his friend wasn't exactly an idiot. If he'd figured it out, certainly Scorpius had...

"I reckon it's because of our reputation" Scorpius said, shaking his head. "Stupid WAR. Hear my dad's name, and the first thing they do is play close to him. What, did they think he was in there murdering us all? People change. What, are people always going to see him as what he was before?"

Albus, though glad that he didn't have to voice it first, had a sudden thought pop into his head, though it was quickly interrupted of course.

"Agreed" Morrison said, nodding his head. "And the guy wasn't even slick about it either...dunderhead..."

"I don't see what the problem is" said Melonie, who didn't even lift her eyes from her book. The two of them stared at her.

"What?" they both said.

Melonie looked up. "I'm not saying that it was justified, but people *do* feel safer with WAR around. I know you three aren't fond of them-nor am I-but when they pop their heads in like that, it just shows people that they're not just here for publicity. They're legitimately doing their jobs."

"*Doing their job?*" Scorpius hissed, but, perhaps for Morrison's sake, he didn't stress the point. Melonie's boyfriend simply shook his head in disbelief however.

"Mel, Mel, Mel" he crooned, now shaking his head. "So pretty. But nothing up there in that head of yours, is there?"

She threw him a half-jocular look before returning to her studying. Soon enough, however, people had already started walking down to dinner.

"Shall we get a move on then?" Morrison asked them all, and they all stood-except for Albus.

"I think I'll skip it tonight" Albus said. "Just have a lie-down."

They all gave him curious glances, which he batted away simply.

"I really am okay" he said. "Just not hungry...had a lot to eat for breakfast, and I didn't really do much today except for copy notes and draw. I'll see you all later."

"Suit yourself" Morrison said with a shrug, and the three of them all left together. Albus did indeed end up retreating to his dormitory, but it was not due to lack of hunger. Something that Scorpius had said had gotten him thinking...

As he pulled his hangings around him and collapsed onto his bed, he thought deeply about what Scorpius had just said about his own father.

People change. What, are people always going to see him as what he was before?

Why was this the case with Draco Malfoy, but not with Harry Potter? Scorpius' father was a professor now, and Albus was sure that he'd end up being a good one, but still...he'd been a Death Eater first. But his own father, who hadn't even actually committed the crime that he was in prison for, was now universally loathed, his past deeds all but forgotten. Why was this? Did the public simply just want to hate people? Is that why they were so prone to pointing fingers, and acknowledging mistakes and errors, as opposed to everything good?

A former Death Eater was teaching at Hogwarts. And the person who'd once saved the world-a person who had once been a hero among wizard kind-was rotting in a cell. Albus rolled over onto his side, trying to make sense of his life.

Chapter 8: Heroic Deeds

The next week passed by in a strangely normal fashion for Albus, who was used to much more exciting things happening around the time of his arrival at Hogwarts. Classes followed a simple pattern, with a few breaks thrown in to help him keep up with his work. The roster that Neville had made for him on the spot ended up being just right for him, including the five classes necessary to pursue his career of choice: Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Care for Magical Creatures, and, obviously, Potions.

Unique to this year, however, was how little he got to see his friends during class time. Scorpius was not with him during Care for Magical Creatures, and Morrison was not with him for Charms. What was more, he shared Herbology with neither of them, or Mirra for that matter, which made his hours in the greenhouse especially long and difficult. Still, he had no qualms with his schedule, and even thought that he'd be able to adapt to it with time. The one thing that he didn't think he'd get used to, however, were the stares in the hallway.

"Who cares what she thinks, she was ugly anyways" Morrison said assuredly as they walked passed a Ravenclaw girl who'd thrown a distasteful look their way.

"It has nothing to do with attractiveness" Albus said. "It's unnerving no matter who it is..."

The first day of classes had only proven to be a taste of the negativity headed Albus' way. Once everyone had settled into their schedule of classes, they were able to pay more attention to him, which resulted in him seeing between ten to fifteen dirty expressions a day.

On the other side of the coin, however, only two lessons in and Scorpius' father had ended up as being one of the more liked professors in recent history. He was tough-he was certainly not afraid to pile work on them, that was for sure-but he was also extremely competent, and didn't waste class time on silly things like surveys. As N.E.W.T students were typically more concerned with learning the proper elements of their trade than they were breezing through lessons uninformed, most people seemed quite fond of the new teacher. Albus was quite sure that not since Fairhart had the students been so enthusiastic about a newcomer to the castle; though of course, Draco Malfoy had indeed once walked the halls of Hogwarts.

And the added effect of such was the popularity that Scorpius obtained through it all. Once only held in high regard for his superb keeping skills, Scorpius was given appreciative looks and waves every day by those who enjoyed his father's teaching, regardless of the house. It was sometimes a very unusual moment, actually; people would wave at Scorpius and throw Albus a sour look when they were standing right next to one another.

"You know, I was a bit worried about my father teaching here at first" Scorpius said one day in their second week of school, as they walked back to the Common Room together for a rare joint

free period, "but I have to admit, even I'm impressed by him. I knew he was good at potions, but I didn't know he'd be such a good professor..."

"Or that he'd be sofanciabile" Morrison quipped up.

Albus gave him a bemused expression; Scorpius' teetered more on horror.

"What?"

"Well it's true!" Morrison said loudly. "I mean not by *me*, but I reckon a lot of the older girls here think so, and some of the young ones too! I was on my way to the loo yesterday and I overheard two third years talking about him all dreamy like..."

"Well he's taken" Scorpius said with narrowed eyes. "By my mum..."

They had just entered the Common Room when Albus suddenly felt the urge to leave. It was packed for some odd reason, and Albus knew that he'd end up taking a lot of guff if he stayed.

"Why is it so full?" he muttered to his friends, rooted in the entrance. There was an irregular amount of fourth years lounging around.

"I think that Care for Magical Creatures was canceled today on the count of rain" Scorpius said. "You want to head somewhere else?" he offered, clearly noticing the uncomfortable look on Albus' face.

Albus was irked that he'd be unable to enjoy the luxury of his own Common Room, but even more, he felt bad that his friends would have to suffer for it.

"No...it's cool" he said. "We can hang here."

"Why don't we just go to the Room?" Scorpius suggested.

"Or visit Hagrid!" Morrison added excitedly. "If his class was canceled, then he's free too!"

Albus had to admit that this was a good idea; he'd forgotten that more than just a professor, Hagrid was a good friend as well. They settled on Hagrid's cabin as a destination, and within minutes, they were trekking down muddy slopes while a light drizzle pounded their heads.

It was Albus who knocked twice at the cabin door, and moments later, Hagrid had appeared.

"Had a feelin' it'd be you three" he said, beaming. "Come in, come in, I'll put on a cup o' tea..."

They were welcomed into Hagrid's dry home, where Scorpius immediately and most graciously dried all three of them with his wand. They all took a seat at the familiar table, and within seconds, a tin of treacle fudge had been placed in front of Morrison.

"You're a life saver Hagrid" Morrison said, smacking his lips and rubbing his hands together. "I haven't eaten in about two hours..."

"I'll never get how you stay lanky, boy" Hagrid said, shaking his head. He took a seat with them all while the water boiled for the tea. "So!" he continued in a booming voice, "sixth years now...yeh grow up fast, I tell yeh. I still 'member the firs' time you came to visi'. You weren't even wit' 'em, Scorpius!" he said with a chuckle.

"Cheers, Hagrid" Scorpius said blandly.

"So you three all got you your futures planned out yet?" Hagrid asked, his tone turning into a more serious one. "I guess yeh all must, if you got yer classes all picked out..."

"Not me, so much" Morrison said through a mouthful of fudge. "I'm still kind of just winging it. My girlfriend though," he continued proudly, "wants to be a Healer. So I figure if worst comes to worst, I'll just kind of live off of her" he added with a smile.

Scorpius put his palm to his face, but Hagrid gave a simple shrug. "'S long as you got yourself a back-up plan" he said. "But yeh know, Morrison, if yeh *really* want somethin' that's rewardin', I could always take yeh under my wing. You could end up gamekeeper here!"

Morrison swallowed and stared in awe, as though he'd just had an epiphany. "Hagrid you're *brilliant!* That would be wicked!"

Hagrid smiled at him, then turned to Scorpius. "And you?"

"Best case scenario, I end up Minister of Magic" Scorpius said dully. "Worst case...I end up somewhere high enough up so that I still take over should anything happen."

"Dreamin' big, dreamin' big" Hagrid said approvingly, and he then got up to pour their tea. With his back turned, he addressed Albus, who was already prepared with an answer.

"And Al?"

"Potions professor" he said at once, and Hagrid spun around, a bemused expression on his face.

"Yeh don' say?" he said. "I heard yeh were a dab hand at Potions, but I didn' think you'd go that far with it. I guess yeh've got a bit of a role model now too eh? Ain't that right Scorpius? With yer old man teachin'?"

Scorpius rolled his eyes and Hagrid smiled cheekily. Morrison downed his cup of tea in a single gulp as Albus continued to converse with Hagrid.

"I may end up teaching alongside you one day, Hagrid" he said, with a rare genuine smile; it wasn't too often that he thought of the future in positive light anymore.

"I'd be delighted" Hagrid grinned. "But I reckon I may be done before that. Even part giants don't stay healthy forever, Al. Got ter settle down eventually."

"That's where I come in!" Morrison said enthusiastically.

Albus grinned; he couldn't imagine Hogwarts without Hagrid, and he figured that there would be few who could. Hagrid got back on track to what he was saying before however.

"Anyways, like I was sayin' Al, that's real surprisin' what you plan on doin'. Don' get me wrong though, I'm sure you can han'le it. Now yer dad, he wasn't tha' good at Potions if I recall, but he knew what he wanted to do and he wen-"

He stopped abruptly however, clearing his throat and looking tense. There was an odd silence in the cabin, one in which Hagrid appeared to be trying to reduce his eye contact with Albus to a minimum.

"I mean- I'm sorry Al-"

"Sorry for what?" Albus asked, though he thought he knew exactly what was going on.

"Nothin'" Hagrid said quickly. "So anyway, how was you lot's firs' week back?"

Scorpius launched into a detailed synopsis of his first few days of classes, including the timely interruption of a WAR member during his father's first class, which Hagrid shook his head at vehemently. Morrison went next, and then Albus gave his summary as well-though it was cut short by Scorpius, who had realized that their break was nearly over and that they should be going. They excused themselves out after thanking Hagrid for his hospitality, and then trudged through the mud back up to the castle.

"Even Hagrid's treating me differently" Albus said morosely as they walked.

"Nah, he just didn't want to bring up something that would upset you" Morrison said knowingly.

"I know" Albus replied. "But still...I don't want people to have to watch what they say around me" he admitted.

"Quit complaining" Scorpius said smartly. "With the way that people have been looking at you, someone who strays away from the topic should be a relief."

Though he had little on his mind other than classwork, this proved to be enough to distract him from other parts of his Hogwarts experience. As they went through their second week of classes, Albus had still not yet managed to meet Scorpius' father to schedule Quidditch tryouts, which was getting him in trouble with a few members of the previous team who didn't seem to think that his heart was in it.

"I'll get on it this weekend" Albus hissed at Barnabus Curder in the Common Room, just as he was approaching to ask yet again when it would be.

"Well you look so busy now" he retorted, staring down at the game of Gobstones that Albus and Morrison were playing.

"We've got a test to study for in Defence Against the Dark Arts!" Morrison said. "Let us relax first...you wouldn't get it, you're not taking any N.E.W.T classes."

"No, I'm taking O.W.L's this year!" Barnabus argued.

"Then stop worrying about Quidditch and go study you little prat!" Morrison hollered, and Barnabus stalked off back to his friend, the obnoxious looking Lucas who Albus had first seen at the feast, and who was one of the most adamant at giving him menacing leers.

"Can't stand that kid's friend either" Albus muttered, shaking his head.

"Oh, Luke, or whatever his name is?" Morrison commented. "Yeah he's a loser. And he smells like *owl* food too, it's so bizarre..."

"Didn't know that, but okay" Albus said, scratching at the back of his head. "Anyway, we should actually get on studying..."

They pulled their Defence Against the Dark Arts notebooks out, Morrison doing so with an exasperated sigh. Albus' friend was not used to studying so much, but he had forced him into it, as he didn't want to study alone. Scorpius rarely had the time with all of his classes, plus prefect duties, and as *both* of their girlfriends were prefects taking more classes than them as well, they were forced to suffer through learning periods together.

Professor Handit had taken a very unusual turn with his coursework, one that Albus was sure wouldn't benefit him in anyway towards his profession of choice, but one which he was almost positive was designed for the outside world. His normal lessons always composed of learning defensive magic, as well as a handful of dark creatures. Curses were the primary coursework now though, all about countering them and preparing for the worst. They'd even been given a lengthy description of the Unforgivable Curses, which had been a very depressing lesson indeed. Their current essay was supposed to be on the importance of will power and identity when fending off the Imperius Curse.

"Blimey mate, I don't want to do this" Albus said restlessly, pausing with his quill halfway through the first word on the paper.

"Same" Morrison said, and he immediately started packing things up. "Copy off Scorpius later" he commented, and Albus nodded. Morrison raised his eyebrows however. "By the way, have you noticed something weird about Scorpius recently?" he asked.

"Not really" Albus admitted. "Should I have?"

"I dunno" Morrison said lightly. "He just hasn't been around at all recently."

"We see him all the time..."

"Yeah, but like- ah never mind" he said.

"It just seems like he's gone so much because he takes more classes and we get left here during breaks" Albus said truthfully.

"I guess" Morrison said. "But I noticed even that he comes back from patrolling a little late..."

"Getting lonely at night?" Albus asked sarcastically.

"No!" Morrison said loudly. "If I was I'd hang with Melonie. But she comes back a bit late from patrolling too sometimes..."

They sat still in silence momentarily, before Albus started to pack up his things too.

"I dunno what to tell you mate" he said. "But anyway, I think I actually will go have that chat with Scorpius' dad now" he told his friend pointedly, deciding that he would get nothing done now and that procrastinating would only get him more nonsense from the likes of Barnabus Curder.

"See you" Morrison said, waving to him as he stood up and left.

Albus avoided meeting the eyes of the others in the Common Room as he exited through the blank stretch of wall, breathing a sigh of relief when he entered what was an empty labyrinth. He felt an odd mix of suspense and curiosity as he maneuvered his way around the twisted walls of concrete; he had not yet spoken to Professor Malfoy one on one, and he couldn't help but wonder if, in their privacy, he'd be treated as a student or a former house guest.

As he rounded the corner that led to the Potions classroom, however, he saw that the labyrinth was not as empty as he'd previously thought. Leaning up against the wall next to the door of the classroom was a WAR member; a "guard", so to speak. He was looking rather bored, but there was still something suspicious about his stillness, and even his mere presence there for that matter.

"What are you doing here?" Albus asked him, taking in his appearance in an instant. He had salt and pepper colored hair, and white fluff for a beard; he was one of the few WAR members patrolling the castle who looked somewhat elderly.

"It's my job to patrol" the man said fiercely, looking somewhat taken aback at how he was addressed. "I am here for your safety."

"Patrolling? You mean standing still next to a single door?"

The man narrowed his eyes. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked.

"My head of house is here" Albus said bluntly. "And you're in the way, could you- thanks" he said as the man moved away a few inches.

Albus knocked once on the door to the Potions classroom, and it was answered immediately. Professor Malfoy was standing in the doorway in an instant, looking very much like he was aware of the conversation that had just occurred.

"Albus!" he exclaimed. "Come right in" he added, stepping aside to allow Albus to pass through, which he did. "I'm sorry" he continued, turning his attention to the WAR member. "Are you Mr. Potter's escort?"

"I-" the man started, but the door was promptly shut in his face.

Albus smiled from inside of the classroom, watching as his professor tapped the lock once with his wand, sealing it magically. He turned and extended an arm, as if to signal that Albus was permitted to sit down.

"How can I help you today, Albus?"

"Hello professor" Albus said, grinning and sitting down at the front most table. "I was actually here to talk about Quidditch."

"I was waiting for you to show up about that" his professor answered him, taking a seat behind his own desk. "Have you decided when to host tryouts?"

"This weekend" Albus said straightly. "I want to get an early start this year-"

"It will have to be Sunday, I'm afraid" Professor Malfoy cut him off. "Other captains wanted an early start, it seems. Professor Handit has informed me that the tryouts for Hufflepuff will be on Saturday morning, and Professor Longbottom has told me that the pitch is booked for Gryffindor that afternoon."

"Sunday morning, then?" Albus suggested.

"I will be sure to notify the other heads" Professor Malfoy responded curtly, nodding his head.

There was a small, uncomfortable silence after this, and Albus, not wanting to exacerbate it, rose to leave immediately. He was stopped when the professor spoke aloud, however.

"Albus" he said crisply, and Albus sat back down at once. He watched as Scorpius' father leaned in somewhat, as though he was going to whisper. "How am I doing so far?" he uttered lowly.

Albus smiled, having not expected such a genuine question. "Brilliant, professor" he said.

Professor Malfoy smiled, leaning back in his chair, his tone returning to what it had been. "You know, Albus," he started, "Scorpius always insisted that you were the best potion maker in the school, and I- regretfully, I can say now- always told him that he was most likely exaggerating your talents. That Laceration Solution that you concocted on Monday...was immaculate. I'm very impressed, Albus, very impressed."

Albus smiled, blushing somewhat. "Thanks, professor" he said.

Professor Malfoy gave him quick smile. "Enjoy the rest of your day" he said, and Albus again stood to leave. This time, however, it was he who reignited the conversation.

"But real quick" he started. "Erm- about that WAR member outside your classroom...I- I don't want to-"

"It's quite alright, Albus" Professor Malfoy cut him off, giving him a knowing look. "I am aware."

"Okay" Albus said, nodding, and feeling somewhat stupid. "Well...I'm off then..."

Professor Malfoy gave him a wry smile as he exited. As Albus stepped into the labyrinth, however, he noticed that it was absent of any guards.

Scorpius looked unusually tired when Albus next saw him, so he didn't bother rousing him up by telling him that he'd seen someone practically spying on his father. What he did inform him of, however, was that Quidditch practices were finally scheduled, and indeed, by using the bulletin board, he'd let the rest of the house know as well. The question was though, whether or not it would matter.

"You reckon anybody shows this time?" Albus asked his two friends as they left the Great Hall on Thursday, preparing to separate after lunch.

"People showed last time" Scorpius said.

"Yeah but half of them left after they found out I was dating Mirra" Albus recollected bitterly. "How much support do you think I'll get considering my dad's an alleged murderer?"

"People won't care" Morrison said lazily. "For a lot of the idiots here, the Mirra thing is worse."

Albus doubted this very much, but didn't comment. He instead waved his hand unenthusiastically, headed towards the doors to the grounds while they went up the stairs. He had Herbology next, which, considering how alone he was-and that he'd never exactly been an expert botanist-was his least liked class of the year, despite his good terms with the professor. He had a

bit of extra motivation for getting through today's class, however. He had arranged to meet Mirra in the library afterwards, and considering how little he saw his girlfriend nowadays, it felt like a reward of sorts.

He entered Greenhouse number four today, and along with the rest in his class, found his curiosity piqued at this. Greenhouse number four was the most dangerous, after all.

"Come in, come in, careful not to touch anything!" Neville said to them all as they organized themselves into two vertical lines. The plant that they were studying today looked vaguely familiar to Albus—he actually recalled it as being relatively benign. It was the Honking Daffodil that they'd covered years ago.

The rest of the class was peering with interest as well, apparently unsure as to why they weren't permitted to touch the peaceful plants.

"Who knows what it is we're studying today?" Neville asked excitedly, and Albus realized that there were thick goggles over his eyes.

"The Honking Daffodil" someone piped up from the back.

"Not quite!" Neville said, pointing at the back. "Anyone else? No—"

Milton Parish raised his hand. "The Wailing Daffodil?"

"Correct!" Neville said, beaming. "Take ten points to Ravenclaw! And now watch..."

They all stared as their professor, who had his own pleasant looking flower in front of him, lowered his hand carefully, eventually rubbing at a meticulously designated point on the stem. The flower gave a horrifying cry that made many recoil, Albus included, but it then shriveled itself up as though sleeping.

"Indistinguishable from its sister plant the Honking Daffodil in appearance, there are only two ways to differentiate between the two. The first, as I'm sure you've all deduced, is that one honks and the other wails. Can anyone name me the other differing characteristic of the Wailing version, however?"

Milton Parish's hand shot up once more. "It's exponentially more dangerous" he said simply.

"Correct! Ten more points!"

The class glanced around nervously while Neville continued speaking.

"The Wailing Daffodil is highly poisonous, and indeed, its toxins are frequently used to strengthen already potent poisons when making potions. Furthermore, it can be harmful to the skin as well, as direct contact can lead to moderate to sometimes even severe burning and itching. Which is why today we will be wearing our...? Say it with me class!"

"Dragon hide gloves" they all chorused.

"And?"

"Safety goggles" they all added blandly.

"Excellent! Now, sort yourselves into groups of three or four, and I will explain how to calm the Wailing Daffodil so that we can extract its juices, which, contrary to its defense mechanism toxins, are actually quite useful when making potions that involve blood flow, especially in the brain..."

They all grouped together at once, Albus, of course, being left in the dust. Milton Parish and Winona Soreeno, however, strode towards him carefully, apparently unable to find partners themselves, despite the fact that they were both Prefects.

"Hi" Albus said, and they both gave him weak, cautious smiles. He groaned inwardly. It seemed as though everyone who didn't know what actually happened with his father either hated him or was afraid of him. Considering he had to partner with these two, and would thus need to communicate with them, he wasn't sure if he preferred their obvious fear.

As it turned out, however, Albus caught a lucky break in that both of his partners ended up being spectacularly adept at what they were doing. Neville gave them twenty minutes of instruction on how to gently massage the stems of the violent flora to relax them without having them spray a lethal looking golden liquid. Once in this state, they could be examined and pinched lightly for the clear fluid that was meant to be collected.

Despite the fact that his two accomplices spoke a combined five words to him as they got to work, Albus found himself at ease with what he was doing. He was given the very simple job of holding the Daffodil steady once it relaxed, allowing his two partners to carefully drain it. So long as he didn't hurt the flower in anyway, he was quite safe.

He felt a powerful bump behind him, pushing him forward while one of his hands was holding the Daffodil steady. It gave a powerful wail, slipping from in between his fingers as he lurched forward. The next thing that he felt was a terrible pain in his arm. In his hunched over state, the golden spray had hit him in the arm, just an inch above where he would have been protected by the gloves. He uttered a ferocious expletive which, thankfully, was concealed due to the wailing throughout the greenhouse. Only those closest heard him, and they returned to their work immediately.

"Y-you okay?" Milton Parish asked.

"Fine" Albus lied, seizing his arm and backing up a bit to look at it safely; it was already a bright red, and was stinging painfully. What had pushed him forward?

"Sorry Potter" said a tall boy with short blonde hair who he barely recognized as being from Hufflepuff. "You were in the way of the watering pot" he added, pointing to the brown pot in his hand.

Albus glared at him menacingly, furious. Why would anyone possibly require a watering pot for this task? The boy walked away with a smirk, Albus irate at knowing full well of his intent.

"That's Elton Connor" Winona Soreeno said shakily.

"And who is Elton Connor?" Albus said through gritted teeth, still clutching at his arm.

They both backed away though, apparently unwilling to engage him further in conversation.

Albus knew that he could go to Neville and explain, but he didn't want to. He simply stood still for the remainder of the lesson, forcing his two pusillanimous partners to now do all of the work by themselves. He kept throwing vicious looks over to Elton Connor's group however, which he saw was now also occupied by a Gryffindor who he frequently saw parading around in Eckley and Hornsbrook's party.

They wrapped up the lesson soon enough, with Neville reminding them all of a homework assignment due next lesson as they left. Albus broke away from everyone at once, fuming. He had known going into this year that he'd be met with adversity due to the circumstances surrounding his father's infamous imprisonment, but he had not expected it to turn physical, *especially* not from random students who he'd never even spoken to before. He trudged back up to the castle angrily, thoughts sifting through his head.

Go back there and return the favor, said a rattling voice in his head.

"No" he said aloud, but he then stopped dead in his tracks. Had he literally just spoken to himself?

Choosing not to think anymore on it, Albus entered the castle, walked passed a group of fourth year Ravenclaws who were eyeing him with contempt, and started up the stairs to the library. It was with a tremendous sigh of relief that he entered and saw Mirra immediately, partially obscured by a bookshelf and sitting well in the back of the large room. Albus walked up to her and signaled his introduction by dropping his bag on the floor.

"Hey" he said when she looked up from her notebook.

"Hey! How was- what happened to your arm!"

"I fell" Albus said stupidly, taking a seat across from her, somewhat amused by the look on her face.

"You fell?" she asked sarcastically.

"No" he admitted. "Had an accident in Herbology. Well, not really an accident. Some joker pushed me into something that didn't like being attacked."

"Why?" Mirra asked, taken aback.

"One guess" Albus muttered.

"Oh" Mirra said, giving him a frown. "Well did you tell Professor Longbottom? He should be given detention!"

"Can we just get to work?" Albus said, not wanting to elaborate on how he'd simply walked away from the whole situation.

Mirra gave an exasperated sigh, but dropped it. Albus removed his own books from his bag; he was going to finally get to work on that Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. Five minutes in to their study session, and Albus was regretting his abrasive attitude. He hated being in silence with his girlfriend. When she did finally speak, however, it was about a topic that he hadn't expected at all.

"So what are your plans for winter break?"

Albus raised his eyebrows up. "Winter break?" he asked. "You mean the one that's...in winter? I dunno, why?"

Mirra gave a small smile and tucked her hair behind her ear. She suddenly looked a tad bit nervous. "Well I was talking to my grandparents this summer...and we've kind of been exchanging owls a bit too. And I sort of asked if maybe you could spend a couple days with us this break? The only time I've gotten to see you outside of school was Morrison's sister's wedding and- well- you know how that went."

Albus nodded, his mouth curling into a smile. When he failed to answer right away, however, Mirra quickly did it for him.

"I mean, unless you don't want to!" she blurted out. "I just figured that your holiday would be a bit gloomy this year and all..."

"Couldn't you come stay with me?" Albus asked curiously, though it was strictly for informative purposes; he would actually prefer to be with her over the holidays. He wasn't too familiar with her grandparents and thought that it was about time that he made it so.

"I don't know if my folks would be up for that" she said. "And come to think of it...I don't know...don't you normally spend your holidays with Rose?"

Albus gave her an intrigued look. "I thought that you guys were working on things?" he asked, and this was certainly true. Every mention of Rose by Mirra thus far in the year had been about their small talks.

"We are!" Mirra said. "It's just...she's been a bit off recently. I don't want to say anything but..."

"But what?" Albus asked, unsure as to how Mirra could possibly bother confiding something about Rose.

"She's been *really* irritable lately, everyone in the dormitory thinks so" Mirra said. "And no one's saying it, but we all kind of know why."

"And why is that?"

"Apparently she's doing this long distance thing with Lance now" Mirra said bluntly.

"Yeah, and?" Albus said, let down somewhat. "I knew that."

"But he's stopped writing back."

Albus' face went stony. "You don't think-"

"No, no, it's not that!" Mirra said. "I mean, we're all sure that he's safe and everything, she'd of heard had something bad happened. But his letters have been getting more and more infrequent...and no one really has the heart to tell her that maybe he's not as big on long distance as she is..."

"And I'm guessing you can't tell her, huh?"

"What, and start another row?" Mirra asked rhetorically.

Albus sat there and pondered it. His feelings about Lance were mixed at best. Rose's boyfriend hadn't exactly been a bad guy-and indeed, there were some admirable qualities about him to speak of-but he was also extremely self-centered, and that particular characteristic propelled itself into some truly heinous acts. Indeed, his desire to have Rose and Mirra repair their relationship last year resulted in him ruining a few months of Scorpius' life. Based on his rather unscrupulous personality...he did seem the type to end something if he wasn't getting much out of it anymore.

And speaking of Scorpius...

"Hey," Albus started, "you wouldn't happen to know if this has anything to do with Scorpius would you? Because Morrison told me he's been a bit off too, and I'm starting to see how tired he is as well."

"No" Mirra said plainly. "If something's going on with Scorpius, it has nothing to do with Rose."

She said it with a forceful tone, which was rather unusual considering that his question had been quite the opposite. He had the feeling that she knew something that she was not letting on to, but her face was so stoic that he didn't press the point.

"Well anyway...yeah. Yes" he told her. "I would like to see you over the holidays. I'll have to talk to my mum about it, but I think it'll be okay."

Mirra beamed at him, and Albus smiled back. He cheerfully set to work on his Defence essay, suddenly more motivated to write. The silence that returned was a more pleasant one this time, and Albus found himself making considerable headway until he found himself distracted.

"Can you please go away?" someone was whining. They had an extremely innocent sound to their voice, as though they were quite young. In fact, Albus recognized it...

"What's up?" Mirra said, looking up at his expression.

"Is that my cousin?" he asked aloud to himself. He stood up and craned his head around a bookshelf.

Roxanne was sitting a few tables away, but she was not alone. There were no first years there accompanying her, but rather two older students; both of whom Albus recognized as being in Gryffindor-and one of whom had been in Herbology. One of them was sitting across from Roxanne, leering, the other standing beside her. They were laughing at something, and she was looking uncomfortable.

Albus felt anger boil up in the pit of his stomach. His reasons for being harassed were at least reasonable from an outside perspective, but this? What had his younger cousin ever done, apart from be associated with his family?

"What's going on?" Mirra asked once more, unable to see due to the bookshelf.

Albus stood still, watching with a sour look on his face. The pain of his arm, which had attenuated due to his conversation with Mirra, was returning now with a vengeance. Albus cringed from both his physical pain and what it was he was seeing. He felt the sudden urge to interfere, just as he had done with Dougie and Miles Dursley, but there was something about the nature of this particular incident that kept him from it; perhaps it was the futility of it.

Mirra finally stood up and walked over to him, now glancing at the same spot that he was.

"Albus, what are you- what are they doing?" she said, horrified. The one sitting across from Roxanne had just reached across the table and yanked up her notebook, and was now tossing it back and forth with his friend while she frantically waved her arms.

Albus felt Mirra straighten her posture to puff out her Prefect's badge, apparently with intentions of going over there, and he stepped forward himself. They both stopped however, when someone

else entered the fold from the side, their head held high and a Prefect badge of their own gleaming on their chest. Albus raised his eyebrows, his surprise momentarily distracting him from his anger. It was Eckley.

"What's going on here?" Albus heard him say to his two fellow Gryffindors-at least one of which was definitely on friendly terms with him.

"Just having some fun mate" that same friend said, tossing the notebook over to the other one; it was snatched out of mid-air by Eckley though.

"Well keep it up and you two can have fun together in detention. Leave here alone and get out of here, go on!"

They exchanged a look of confusion, but did as they were told, stalking off and muttering mutinously as they did so. Eckley handed Roxanne her notebook back silently, and then went away, returning to whatever it was he'd been doing before.

Mirra sat back down as though nothing had happened, but Albus remained frozen on the spot. It was extremely weird seeing Eckley in such heroic light...and he was a bit ashamed that he hadn't acted sooner.

"Al, you sitting back down?"

"Huh?" Albus said, distracted. His arm was still twinging. "Yeah..."

There were a few moments of silence following what occurred, in which Albus pondered on what he'd just seen.

"Does Roxanne get bullied a lot?" he asked out of nowhere. "I mean, from what you've seen?"

Mirra looked up from her work. "Not that much. It kind of gets spread around to others. Like-I guess you didn't hear-Lily was being harassed by some Ravenclaw in her year the other day."

"What?" Albus asked, startled that he hadn't heard this; though then again, he was usually seven floors away. "What happened?"

"It actually got a little testy" Mirra said. "But Charlie came along and smoothed it over. The guy hasn't started stuff again."

Albus looked down. "Charles Eckley, the big hero all of a sudden, huh?" he said, half-sarcastically.

Mirra glared at him, and Albus got the feeling that what she said next was going to sting slightly. It did.

"Charlie grew up, Albus. Maybe you should too."

Albus frowned. "Sorry" he said quickly. "Just- just not used to it, is all."

"It's fine" Mirra told him, lowering her head back to her work. "But it is really fortunate that Charlie is a prefect. He has real presence with a lot of people in the castle, and with James gone..." she trailed off.

"You think that James leaving is the reason so many bullies are popping up?" Albus asked incredulously, having never considered it before.

Mirra looked up once more. "Don't you?"

Albus didn't answer. He thought of what had happened to him today, and the accounts of what had happened to others in his family. These things really had been rare when James was in the castle, hexing anyone who stepped out of line. With him gone now...perhaps it was a good thing that Eckley was around. He felt a twinge of annoyance that had nothing to do with his arm.

He managed to finish the entirety of his essay while in the library, but soon after he walked Mirra back to her Common Room, and then down to his own. When he entered he saw that Morrison and Melonie were together in front of the fire, talking about something lowly. Scorpius was nowhere to be found though.

"Hey" he said to them both as he approached.

"Hello" Melonie said sweetly.

"How's it goin' mate?" Morrison asked. "Blimey, what happened to your arm!"

"Nothing, accident in Herbology" Albus lied; he didn't feel like admitting his cowardice to Morrison the same way that he had to Mirra. "Where's Scorpius?"

Morrison shrugged. "I dunno, haven't seen him, maybe he's already down at dinner. Want to head down now?"

Albus thought about it. He really wasn't that hungry, and the twinges of pain in his arm were constantly shifting from uncomfortable to extremely annoying. He thought of tucking his arm underneath a cool pillow...

"I think that I'm actually just going to lay down" he said. "Exhausted from Herbology...plus I just did that whole essay for Handit..."

"Ah okay" Morrison said. "Well have a nice nap then!"

"Mhm" Albus said, and he started up the stairs to his dormitory. He collapsed on his bed as soon as he entered, pleased that it was completely empty. Rolling over onto his side, he tried to shift his thoughts around and out of his head, though it was difficult; for some reason, he could not get the image of Eckley coming to Roxanne's rescue out of his mind...

He blinked stupidly as the scene swirled inside his head. The library had turned completely black, and the people in it had slowly begun vanishing. Soon, it was just him. He and himself.

The golden eyed Albus was standing directly across from him, unmoving. Albus was staring back determinedly, but he was too afraid to make the first move. Too afraid to take the initiative.

There was a blast of golden light from the side of themboth, and the third Albus-the one that had protected him once before-had emerged. It lunged at the evil one, trying to wrestle with it-

The first golden eyed Albus tossed it to the floor, easily overpowering it. It then walked over to the body on the floor, removing a wand from the inside of its robes and pointing down at the floor. There was a flash of green light, and Albus' protector was dead.

The real Albus had no idea what to do now. He was frozen in fear, his previous tenacity evaporated on the spot at what he had just witnessed. He slowly inched himself forward to get a glimpse of the corpse on the ground, and gave a gasp when he did so. It was not, as he'd previously assumed, his protector from before. This one was wearing scarlet and golden robes; Gryffindor colors.

Albus jolted himself awake, nearly falling out of his bed as he did so. The darkness was all gone, replaced by the shapes and colors of his dormitory. Startled and sweating, he jumped from his bed and proceeded down to dinner.

Friday proved to be the highlight of the week for Albus, as he both handed in what he thought was a reasonably well done essay to Professor Handit, as well as created an excellent Hiccuping Solution in potions with Mirra as his partner. Saturday ended up being mostly a recuperation day; after much nagging from Mirra, Albus went to the Hospital Wing to have his arm looked at, where Madam Clearwater's renegade assistant, Lester, applied ointment on him that did the trick almost immediately (Albus still left without saying thank-you, however). The rest of the day was about getting ahead of homework assignments and ensuring that everyone in Slytherin house knew that tryouts were for the next day.

Albus awoke bright and early on Sunday morning, eager to get on his broom, but nervous about the potential lack of interest in the team. Scorpius rose at around the same time, and after having a small breakfast together in the nearly empty Great Hall, the two of them headed outside to become re-acquainted with flying.

"Blimey it's been a while since I've been in the air" Scorpius said, floating higher and higher on his broom and looking overjoyed. "Barely practiced at all this summer, for some reason..."

"Same" Albus admitted, gripping his Lightning's Edge and streaking upwards. They flew around in circles for a few minutes, getting a feel for the pitch and grinning the entire time. Though rusty

at first, soon they were flipping upside down recklessly at top speed, eager to bring out the equipment.

A couple of people shuffled onto the field within the hour, two of them, Albus noticed, being from the team last year. They were Tiffani Garret and Barnabus Curder, who, Albus realized with a loud groan, was accompanied by his moody friend. Albus reluctantly flew down to meet them all, waving over at the stands as he did so, for Morrison and Melonie were spectating.

"We're going to get out all of the stuff now" Albus told them. "And then we'll wait for the rest to show up before we start sorting into groups and-"

"We're all that's coming" Barnabus shot out, and Albus raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"What are you on about?"

"No one else is going to come" Barnabus' friend Lucas said.

"He didn't ask you!" Scorpius snapped. "And what about Yin and Barry?"

"And Garthe!" Albus added, struggling to remember exactly who comprised of his team.

"Well they might be along" Barnabus said, shrugging, and a few people around him murmured. "But I mean new people..."

"Well then we'll just have to wait and see" Albus said darkly, making a mental note that if Barnabus Curder wasn't immaculate during his tryout, he was off the team based on attitude alone.

He and Scorpius went and fetched all of the equipment, then waited for new arrivals. Contrary to what had been suggested, new faces did arrive; just not many. They came in twos and threes over the next half of an hour, and only after a gap of twenty minutes or so with no one showing up did Albus finally stand and do a head count. There was even less people than last year. And what was more, someone from last year's team was missing.

"Where's Yin?" Albus asked, craning his neck. "Huh? Anyone seen?"

Barry Bryant stepped forward. "He doesn't want to play this year" he said, looking somewhat nervous at being the bearer of bad news. "He- he wants to focus on his classes this y-"

"Yeah okay we get it, whatever" Scorpius said, disgusted. He then leaned into his captain. "At least only one of them chickened out."

"It doesn't matter" Albus said lowly. "I want to revamp the team anyway."

He stepped forward and began speaking louder. "Okay, we're going to sort into two different groups now, one for Chasers, and one for Beaters-"

"What about Keepers?" someone yelled from the back.

"Scorpius is Keeper" Albus said simply, astonished that someone could even ask such a question. Scorpius looked surprised as well.

"I can tryout mate-"

"Don't be ridiculous" he muttered back, but the person who had called out stepped forward.

"He doesn't have to try out?"

"No, he doesn't."

"Why?" the boy asked, and Albus saw that he was only a third year. "Because he's your mate, or because his daddy is a professor?"

Scorpius made to speak, but Albus went first.

"No, because he's flat-out dominant on the field" he said through gnashed teeth, thinking of some of Scorpius' highlight performances. "And because quite frankly, it's a waste of time to even consider other people. Don't worry though, you had no chance anyway."

"And why's that?"

"Because you cop an attitude with people who are vastly superior to you at flying!" Albus growled. "Now get out of here!" he added, pointing to the stands.

A few people made noises of embarrassment towards the third year, who stalked off looking crushed, to say the least. Albus didn't care, however. Perhaps it was the recent string of nonsense that had happened to him as of late-what with Herbology and what he saw in the library-but he was in no mood to coddle some thirteen year oldpunkwho didn't like his methods.

Two others joined him in leaving the field, obviously both also having intended to tryout for Keeper. Despite only three leaving the pitch, however, the group looked noticeably smaller now. Albus turned to Scorpius and spoke to him lowly.

"Blimey, I knew I wasn't liked, but this is outrageous. I even made *Quidditch* unpopular. What other sport do these guys have, eh?"

Scorpius shrugged, then pointed back at the crowd to remind him of the daunting task ahead.

"Okay, right" Albus said, snapping out of it. "Now I'm assuming that if any of you lot aren't serious, then you'd of joined that group there, so let's get down to serious business! Two groups now..."

They did as they were told, and Albus eventually released the balls and got them started. He did Chasers first, where, as he'd expected, his offense was trounced by Scorpius, who grinned wildly the entire time. Unable to really judge them all on scoring, he instead watched for actual flying capabilities, including speed and maneuvering. His three Chasers from last year ended up being the best though, which reminded Albus both of how small the selection was this year, as well as how much they'd improved since their tryouts a year ago; even Barnabus Curder showed that he could stay on the team.

Unwilling to announce it separately, Albus told his prospect Chasers to sit and watch the Beaters while he deliberated-though of course, he did no such thing. There were less people trying out for Beater than for Chaser, which was a shame, as that was the only spot on the team that was actually vacant.

Scorpius sat out for this one, and it was Albus instead who took to the sky, ducking and weaving at the Bludgers hit at him. He noticed that there was a very visceral attitude to this portion of the day, however, as the Bludgers being hit at him were done with the aggression and velocity of an actual game. On one end, this helped him get a better idea of who he wanted on his team. On the other...it unnerved him slightly.

Barry Bryant ended up making the team once more, as he ended up being among the best flyers out there, even if he hadn't hit the Bludgers as hard as the others. The remaining spot was more difficult to choose. Though Albus did not want to admit it, the only performance worth noting had belonged to Lucas Strossen-Barnabus Curder's annoying friend.

"What do we do?" Albus asked Scorpius as soon as he'd touched down on the pitch, waving the Beaters off after telling them that he was going to decide.

"Well Bryant's in" Scorpius said. "That much is clear."

"And who's on your mind for the second Beater?" Albus asked hesitantly.

"Honestly? We can play with one" Scorpius told him with a shrug, and Albus knew that he too had noticed Strossen's reasonable ability.

Albus sighed. "We need a second Beater."

"Morrison?" Scorpius suggested.

Albus peered over into the stands. He didn't fancy asking Morrison to play as nothing more than a necessity-he was sure it would hurt his feelings, and besides, Morrison hadn't seemed too interested in Quidditch as of late. He'd been fine with just watching last year, after all.

"We'll put this Strossen kid on, and if he falls through, I'll ask Morrison as a favor" Albus said.

Scorpius frowned, but nodded.

Albus turned and walked back to the crowd of people.

"Okay, your attention please..."

It didn't go well. That the rest of the team was re-joining had most of those who were new barking about what a rubbish captain he was, with many of them storming off simultaneously. Worse, however, was the smug look on Lucas Strossen's face as he high-fived Barnabus, making Albus regret his decision almost instantly. As the pitch cleared out, he neared the curly haired fifth year and spoke to him privately.

"One word out of line," he said, and Lucas gave him his full attention, "and you're off this team. Got it?"

He stared back blankly, nodding his head slightly to indicate that he understood. He still had a cocky look to him however, and Albus privately hoped that he had reason for Morrison to be used relatively soon.

Five minutes later, with the pitch entirely cleared, Albus and Scorpius made their way over to the stands, where both Morrison and Melonie were sitting.

"You didn't seriously let that Lucas kid on the team, did you?" Morrison asked indignantly, Melonie's head on his shoulder.

"He did" Scorpius grunted, shaking his head.

"I had to" Albus said, supporting his face on his hands. "With the way things have been...he was my best option."

There was a brief silence before Morrison spoke up.

"Man, if that prat is your best option, then we're in for a rough year."

Albus nodded, though in his head, he tried deciphering what Morrison had said. Was he referring to the Slytherin Quidditch team, or to the year in general? Either way, he reflected sadly as he stared into the empty pitch, he was probably right.

Chapter 9: The Protector's Club

September slid into October with fierce winds and an unexpected increase in workload. They were being re-introduced to nonverbal magic in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and were thus expected to use it in almost all of their classes as well. Apart from some steely looks, there were no more incidents in Herbology, and Albus continued to excel at Potions, with he and Scorpius-one due to natural talent and the other due to vigorous studying-proving themselves to be the top students in their year.

Albus was somewhat fond of always being busy, as it kept his mind off of the issues relating to the intense dislike that the school as a whole had for him. With his mind off of his lack of popularity and focused on other things, he began noticing something strange.

"Where were you last night?" Albus asked Scorpius as they both sat down at the breakfast table together.

Scorpius looked up, grey circles visible underneath his eyes. He poured syrup on his waffles lazily as he spoke. "Patrolling. Same as every night mate."

"Well for how long?" Albus asked. "Me and Morrison were up until about two and didn't see you-"

"I got in at about a quarter passed" Scorpius said, frowning. "I'm covering more ground, I reckon that the new fifth year Prefects are slacking off a bit. You can even ask Mel" he said, indicating her.

Melonie nodded slightly; she couldn't be more demonstrative, as Morrison was napping on her shoulder, his cleared plate sitting in front of him. "I went to bed around one...but yeah, Scorpius kind of needed to stay behind. No one's ever in the Astronomy tower!" she said irritably.

Albus nodded in acknowledgement, but still gave his friend a shifty look. Nearly every night now he was out patrolling until the sun was almost up, and Albus was beginning to think that there was more to it; in fact, if he didn't know any better, he'd think that Scorpius was over-studying to keep his grades up, now that his father was around.

He instinctively looked up at Professor Malfoy, who was having a polite conversation with Hagrid. By the time that Albus had turned back, however, there was a rustling of wings above, and soon enough, envelopes were dropping all around them.

The *Daily Prophet* almost never dropped anymore. Instead it was the *WAR Weekly* that showered the students, and this particular Tuesday was no different. Predictably, one landed directly in front of Scorpius, and he tore into it at once despite his apparent fatigue.

"Blimey!" he exclaimed after a single glance, waking Morrison up and causing him to give Melonie a slight head butt.

"Ouch!" she shot out.

"Sorry princess" Morrison said, rubbing at his eyes and looking around. "Whassagoionon?"

Scorpius was not the only one who had exclaimed. People at all four tables were speaking in strong whispers, and Albus was sure that the reason was in Scorpius' hands.

"What happened?" Albus asked at once.

"Assassination attempt on Waddlesworth" Scorpius said plainly.

He held up the front page, where there was indeed a headline suggesting it.

Assassin Fails in Attempt at Waddlesworth's Life; Now on the Run

The moving picture underneath showed Waddlesworth standing proudly, a group of four or five imposing Renegades surrounding him; one of which Albus recognized as the Hammer-Waddlesworth's main muscle.

"Who are those blokes?" Albus asked, curious as to why they were standing in such an official manner; they appeared to be in what looked like a pre-meditated pose.

"Waddlesworth's personal guards" Scorpius said simply. "They follow him everywhere now, basically. Not sure if they have an actual name or anything-"

"What a *wimp*" Morrison said, finally registering what was going on and shaking his head.

This piece of information didn't surprise Albus in the slightest however; Waddlesworth had never shown himself to be more than a mediocre wizard, hence why he was almost always seen in the company of the Hammer. What intrigued Albus much more was the bulk of the article.

"So wait, what happened?" Albus asked. "Read it."

"Not really much here" Scorpius said, scanning the paper. "Which is weird...there's usually so much detail. But anyway, it basically just says that a masked attacker reached him somewhere near his home and went in for the kill, was successfully defended by these guys here, and then the guy fled. Waddlesworth was moved somewhere safe, and they're looking for the guy now."

"Or girl" Morrison added, but both Albus and Scorpius gave him a dark look.

"What? Just saying..."

"Did they get any looks at the assassin at all?" Albus asked.

"Doesn't seem like it, I mean, he was wearing a mask..."

"Probably a Dark Alliance member" Melonie said thoughtfully.

"That's what it says here" Scorpius said, holding the article up and pointing to an official quote from Waddlesworth.

This didn't sit right with Albus, though. He took the paper and read the quote quickly.

"This assassination attempt has done nothing to deter me from making due on my promises to the Wizarding World" says Waddlesworth, who spoke to us briefly hours after the incident occurred. "If anything, it has only served to remind those who needed it how vile what we oppose is. There is no doubt in mind my that this attack was ordered by Sebastian Darvy, who understands how imminent his defeat is. 'Deaths Right Hand' has realized that he cannot get a grasp on me, and in the ultimate act of cowardice, attempted to have me killed from a distance. I will not be returning the favor in this regard however; if I am elected as Minister of Magic, I hope to defeat Sebastian Darvy head on, to remind him of the powers of both justice and unity!"

Albus stared down at the quote, deep in thought.

"What's baking mate?" Morrison asked him.

"Darvy definitely didn't do this" Albus announced, and a first year a few seats away flinched slightly at the name, which he ignored.

"How'd you come to that conclusion?" Melonie asked.

"Because it's not like him. Darvy wants a war; that's why he's building an army, isn't it? No, he wouldn't want Waddlesworth gone, not like this. He'll wait until the Minister position is filled."

"Well if it wasn't Darvy's men, then who was it?" Scorpius asked. "Maybe he was sent by someone else running for Minister?"

"Is there someone else running for Minister?" Morrison piped up. "I haven't even head any other names."

"That's only because Waddlesworth's face is everywhere" Scorpius said sharply. "There are other candidates-"

"I don't think it was someone Ministry related either" Albus said, halting their conversation. As far as the world knew, Waddlesworth was the best thing for it. It had to be someone outside of both the Dark Alliance or the Ministry...and yet, it was highly unlikely that someone from inside WAR had rebelled as well. A face was swimming in his head though; a disgusting face, one that was horribly scarred all on one side...

"Are you thinking the same thing as me?" Scorpius asked, and Albus knew that he was.

"No" Albus said lowly, discarding the thought from his head. "It wasn't him. If it was, it wouldn't have been an 'attempt' now, would it?"

They dropped the conversation here, however, as the bell rang to signal the start of the day. Albus and Scorpius headed for Charms, while Morrison headed back upstairs for one of his many breaks (most likely to be used for a solid nap.) As they walked to the second floor, however, Albus noticed that they were among the few who had actually dropped the topic from breakfast.

"How close d'you reckon it was-"

"Blimey, I wonder what'll happen when they catch him? Maybe he can lead them back to Death's Hand-"

Albus rolled his eyes as they lined up outside of Flitwick's classroom, but found himself distracted by something in the distance of the corridor. Two of the Renegades assigned for their protection were standing facing one another, deep in a hushed conversation. As the class began to file in, Albus could have sworn that he saw them both chuckle at a private joke. How strange...shouldn't they be wearing grim expressions at what had nearly happened?

Albus received a break from the Waddlesworth talk during the lesson, as Professor Flitwick had their utmost attention with what he was teaching; it was a completely new charm today. Their tiny teacher was teaching them the Heavyweight charm, the opposite of the Featherweight charm that they'd learned years prior. Rather than decreasing the weight of an object, this charm was designed to increase the weight of things-with varied effects. Professor Flitwick warned them to be cautious though. Any lapse in concentration and a designated item could end up much heavier than intended.

"Now remember," Professor Flitwick was telling them from the front of the room, "you'll want to make the object *lighter* than intended at first, in your head, before increasing the weight. It's best to gradually build up to it, for both safety and practical reasons. Get a feel for your feathers now!"

The class as a whole picked up the feathers from off of their desks, trying to get a good sense at how much muscle was needed to lift them. This proved to be much more difficult than Albus had expected. Weighing next to nothing, it was hard to get a good measure of what he wanted it to feel like.

"Now place your feathers down, concentrate on how much you want it to weigh-let's say about as much as a textbook- and say the incantation. *Peis Progressius!* Remember to keep you wand steady as you aim it now!"

Albus did as he was told, concentrating fiercely on what a textbook felt like in his hands. To be exact, he imagined his *Advanced Potion Making* copy, as it was what he was most used to.

"*Peis Progressius!*"

The class chorused it along with him, and almost immediately, a sound like clapping thunder reverberated throughout the room. A girl from Ravenclaw had evidently over-done it-her feather had fallen right through the now collapsed desk, leaving a crack on the ground.

"I'm sorry!" she cried.

"Quite alright dear" Professor Fliwick said, flicking his wand lazily. In an impressive display of spell work, the desk repaired itself, the feather vanished for a moment and appeared on top of it once more, apparently at its usual weight, and the floor mended itself as well.

"But remember to think *light* at first!" he added. "See here how Mr. Parish has done it?"

Milton Parish was tossing his feather back and forth in his hands as though it were the weight of a Quaffle. Albus went to pick up his own feather and saw that he'd went just a tad bit too far-it was closer to the weight of a brick than anything else. To his left, Scorpius was holding his feather as comfortably as Milton was.

The entire class period was dedicated to this one particular spell, which proved to be much more frustrating than it had seemed at first. Most people seemed to be along the same lines; they could alter the feather's weight easily, but pin-pointing it was rather difficult. Albus found himself unenthusiastic about learning the spell anyway; he couldn't imagine a time when it would be used outside of playing a practical joke on a muggle.

Class ended quickly, and soon enough he and Scorpius were going their separate ways so that he and Morrison could meet up with Mirra for Care for Magical Creatures. They'd moved passed studying the Demiguise last week, and yesterday had started working with Kneazles. Like the Demiguise, they ended up being among the tamer creatures in the history of the class, though Kneazles were admittedly clever and difficult to get close to if they were moody at the time.

Due to Morrison's slacking, they ended up being a bit tardy, meaning the class had already been instructed to try and feed the Kneazles. Albus noticed that there was a lot of low conversing going on, unusual for Hagrid's class. As their professor walked among them back and forth and giving instruction, those not close to the giant were having private discussions. Albus caught words like "assassin" and knew what was going on at once.

"You guys are late" Mirra said as they approached. Her Kneazle was not eating. Instead, the orange cat-like creature was on its back, moving around as she rubbed its belly.

"Yeah, just woke up" Morrison said groggily.

"What's the talk at your table?" Albus asked, crouching down next to her and reaching for the Kneazle. It hissed, but calmed down when Mirra scratched it behind the ears.

"What do you mean?" Mirra asked curiously.

"I mean at breakfast. I'm guessing you've got some *WAR Weekly* subscribers over there..."

"Oh right" she said casually. "Meh, there's a big fuss about it now, but it'll all blow over by tomorrow-nothing actually *happened*, anyway. Isn't that right, Mr. Sneezes!" she added, turning back to the Kneazle and rubbing faster.

Unusually, however, Mirra proved to be ultimately wrong here. For the remainder of the day and even into the weekend, the assassination attempt ended up being the main point of conversation around the castle. Albus and his friends seemed to be the only few who weren't very interested in it, mostly because they were among those who didn't love Waddlesworth, Only Scorpius was really following what was going on with Wands and Redemption, and so for informative purposes only.

What's more, however, Albus privately thought that he himself was alone in his actual thoughts on the matter. Having mulled over it somewhat for the last few days, Albus had come to the conclusion that he was nearly ambivalent on the matter. Waddlesworth's life was not very important to him, and knowing what he knew about the intentions of the WAR leader...a part of him had been someone let down by Waddlesworth's survival. He cringed at the thought of this; that he preferred the death of one individual to the potential deaths of many. Hadn't WAR once applied this same logic to killing him, back when Ares had, for some reason, wanted him? What did that mean about Albus' own thought process?

Thankfully, the assassination topic finally did die down on Monday, when a new announcement was made that completely caught the students off guard.

"Those who have been forced to make the difficult decision have agreed" Headmistress McGonagall announced to them all at breakfast. "Hogsmeade visits will indeed take place this year. In addition to the protection granted throughout the village last year, we will now also have the very great benefit of having our protectors here to aid us as escorts" she added, waving her hand towards the portion of the hall where the WAR members were all standing.

She continued explaining the details, but Albus, stunned, turned to his friends at once.

"She can't be serious" he said. "With what's going? How many people do you think will actually go?"

"Probably a lot more than you think" Morrison said, scooping up scrambled eggs into his mouth. "People really feel protected with these blokes around, and besides, what are the odds of Hogsmeade being attacked twice?"

Albus sat back and pondered the same thing. His father had said over the summer that Darvy was unlikely to attack, both because it would show his reluctance to attack Hogwarts, as well as because he was too busy trying to create an army anyway. But those in charge of the school most

likely didn't know these details, leading Albus to believe that there was some very poor management going on.

"It's also to stimulate the economy" Melonie added from next to Morrison. "Just like last year. Waddlesworth put out a lot of gold to fix these shops up, didn't he? Business probably still isn't back to usual yet..."

"She's right" Scorpius spoke up. "Doesn't matter if the world is in the midst of being destroyed; people still need gold. We've got bigger things to worry about than Hogsmeade visits though, mate" he added, turning to Albus.

"What's that?"

"We've got a Quidditch team to train."

Albus had all but postponed the first Quidditch practice of the season, mostly because he was busy with his classes, and partially because he was somewhat frightened of the results. He kept putting it off to his teammates, who seemed unusually eager to get back on the Pitch for official practices. With the announcement of the Hogsmeade visit, however-the first of which almost always took place around the same time as the annual opener between Gryffindor and Slytherin-he was forced to spread along the message that practice was to take place on that Sunday.

"It might not be so bad" Scorpius told him as they walked to the Pitch together on Sunday morning, eyes winced together due to the intense light. "I mean, they all got steadily better last year, and maybe once we kind of get them back into a routine..."

Albus gave his friend a blank expression, sympathizing with his reasons for optimism, but not entirely convinced himself. On some level, he also acknowledged that Scorpius' desire to do well this year may have been stronger than his own, even though he was the captain and it was thus technically "his" team. The reason for this, he was sure, was the added pressure on his friend now. This would be the first time that his father had ever witnessed him play; Albus was positive that Scorpius would beat himself up much more than usual if his father ended up witnessing anything less than greatness this season.

Barnabus Curder and Lucas Strossen were the first to arrive, both of them looking haughty, but at least ready to get down to business. Albus silently addressed them both by indicating the chest next to him that contained all of the equipment. Barnabus Curder scooped up the Quaffle at once and proceeded to mount his broom, Scorpius doing the same with his and streaking upwards to the goal posts. A few minutes later and the rest of the team had arrived, all of them taking off in an unorganized fashion to warm-up on their own. After a few minutes of surveying them, Albus joined them in the air to issue directions.

"We're going to start light" he said, once he was hovering high in the air and had their undivided attention. "Simple teamwork-the foundation for how Quidditch is played. I want to see some passing drills from the Chasers; remember, you're not trying to score on Scorpius, you're just trying to confuse him. Beaters, I want you taking the defensive here. Protect your Chasers from harm, and when I give the say-so, start aiming at them. Start now."

They all immediately went into their proper positions, though Lucas Strossen did so almost half-heartily; it seemed as though he still wanted to practice on his own for a bit. Albus played viewer for this portion of the practice, watching and preparing to criticize once it was all said and done. As Scorpius was getting little work due to the instructions to mostly pass, Albus hovered near him.

"How do they look?" he asked.

"A little rusty" his friend responded. "But Tiffani looks like she got better over the summer. And man, that Strossen kid is really destroying those things" he added, jerking his head towards Lucas, who had indeed taken a monster swing at the nearest Bludger and knocked it half way across the field. "Too bad he's a prat..."

Albus gave a light smile, then looked over to where the Bludger had gone. Something caught his interest however. He was used to a few dedicated Quidditch enthusiasts showing up to watch their practices, but what was very odd was the house colors of one. From a distance, he could see a girl sitting in the yellow and black of Hufflepuff.

"What's going on?" Albus asked his friend seriously, pointing over at her.

Scorpius took a long and hard look before finally giving an answer. "I know her" he said simply. "That's Anastasia Anifur; she's a Prefect. We have some classes together too."

Albus kept his bemused expression. "Well...what's she doing here?" he asked quickly. "If she's spying then I have to-"

"She's not spying mate!" Scorpius snapped, and Albus was taken aback by how abrasive he sounded. "I invited her here...she's not big on Quidditch and doesn't really know it like that, so I told her she could watch me practice just to get a feel for what it's about. Calm down..."

Albus had no immediate answer for this, but the momentary distraction caused a problem for Scorpius. With his attention diverted from the practice, the Quaffle had soared right on by him.

"Take that!" Barnabus Curder announced loudly, swirling around in a victory lap as Lucas Strossen came to meet him in the air, Beater's bat still in hand.

"Nice one!" he complimented his friend, and they did an obnoxious handshake that made Albus stifle a laugh.

"Congratulations" Scorpius hollered to Barnabus dryly. "You successfully scored on someone who wasn't looking at the time. You sir, are a prodigy."

"Well maybe that'll teach you to keep your eyes focused on the game!" Strossen belted in defence of his friend, and then they both flew off.

"Can't stand that kid..." Scorpius said lowly, shaking his head.

Albus nodded in agreement, but practice was not halted simply because Scorpius was irritated. Albus instead switched things up, joining the fray himself and directing the Beaters to simultaneously protect he and the Chasers. To make this an effective practice, however, he had to play the very dangerous game of pretending to be inept. He was purposefully flying near the Bludgers, getting in their line of fire simply for the sake of giving his Beaters a realistic situation to guard him in.

As he did so, he took notes on the other players' performances as well. Tiffani Garret had improved over the summer, but her fellow Chaser Garth Moone had made a very poor change in his play style. Albus noticed that he tended to hold the Quaffle out as he flew for a quicker release, but at the same time, this made it an easy target to be stolen by an opposing Chaser. Calling a halt to the practice momentarily, Albus took him aside and attempted to show him what was proper.

"You want to cradle it" he said. "Protect it with your body-make the other team need to reach in if they want a shot at swiping it off of you."

It felt a little weird to be directing someone in a position that he was not particularly adept at, but his mother had played Chaser professionally, and he knew enough about it to know what was correct. They resumed practice immediately after this, with Albus now instructing them to work on turning quickly.

"This isn't going so bad" Albus said, flying towards Scorpius, who was not participating in this particular exercise, as he faced the same direction all game.

"Huh? Oh yeah" he said, and his eyes flickered away from the stands. Albus gave him a thoughtful look, but his attention returned to the rest of the pitch when he noticed that Garthe, most likely subconsciously, was again carrying the Quaffle incorrectly as he practiced stopping abruptly and turning the other way.

"Hold on" Albus groaned, and he slowly started on his way over to him. While still a ways off, however, he noticed that Garthe was approached by another teammate-and it wasn't even a Chaser.

"Here, like this" Lucas Strossen was saying, grabbing at the Quaffle.

"Get off me!" Garthe said, pulling it back with a brave expression on his face; Strossen was bigger than him, after all.

"Just let me show you, you let Potter-"

He gave a tremendous tug at the red ball, which was now firmly wrapped around by Garthe's arms. In his resistance he was pulled forward-

"Stop!" Albus bellowed, but he was too late. Lucas Strossen did indeed seize the Quaffle, but only because Garthe had fallen off of his broom. Strossen was left hanging in the air, mouth open wide in surprise at what happened, completely immobile as others in both the air and the stands shrieked.

Albus zoomed forward and downwards, watching as Garthe flailed in the air. He instinctively spiraled to gain more speed, knowing full well what little chance there was that he'd get there in time-

He did. Sort of. In a display of skill that he couldn't ever remember showing before, nor cared about now, he managed to wrap his arms around Garthe as they were only feet from the ground. Catching a person was nothing like catching a Snitch though. Garthe weighed him down immediately, his body still half hanging, and upside down at that, due to the position he'd been in when he was caught. Albus felt them both tumble off of his broom, a cracking noise and a yell from Garthe signaling that he was at least alive.

Albus could only lay there on the grass next to him, panting heavily and clutching at a hurt rib. Scorpius zoomed down quickly, standing over them both with concern on his face.

"Okay!" he yelled back up to the others fiercely. "Practice is over!"

"So what do we do?" Albus asked both of his friends in the Common Room later.

"By the sound of it, you should have Doofus Strossen thrown in Azkaban for attempted murder" Morrison said acidly.

The three of them all looked over towards the fire, where Strossen and Barnabus Curder were having a serious conversation in whispers. For the first time that Albus could recall, there was no signs of arrogance on Strossen's face. On the contrary, he looked both shaken and worried.

"We've got to kick him off the team" Scorpius spoke up. "He's hazardous!"

"It was an accident" Albus said briskly, and then, at the look on both of their faces, he added to it. "I don't like him either okay!"

Scorpius snorted and crossed his arms.

"Look, be practical" Albus told him. "We get rid of Strossen, and that's *two* spots that we have fill."

All three of them grimaced. After having taken Garthe to the Hospital Wing, he'd learned about the extent of the damage. He'd broken his arm, and because he'd balled up his fist as well, three of his fingers. Madam Clearwater and Lester both assured them all that he would be alright, but also suggested that he at least sit out the first game of the year. Mending bones magically, Madam Clearwater said, would take away from his pain and discomfort, but would still leave his arm tender for a while.

This was the main topic of the night, and one that they exhausted, what with Melonie studying with Denise and the three of them having alone time to talk sports uninterrupted. In the end, the three of them (Morrison had a say on principle alone, despite not actually being a part of the team) ended up deciding that Strossen would stay on the team, if only because scratching him would set them back even further. They also agreed, however, that one more incident would result in Morrison picking up the Beater's bat.

They still needed a new Chaser though, and it was thus with a heavy heart that Albus retreated to the Common Room on Tuesday, instructed by Scorpius to pin the notice that he'd made to the bulletin board, offering tryouts to anyone who was interested in playing reserve Chaser. As he was quick to return from his classes, he found the Common Room nearly empty, a pleasant sight considering that he couldn't deal with nasty expressions along with everything else bothering him. What he saw on the bulletin board, however, distracted him from this thought entirely.

Pinning the notice in the corner, he saw a much larger, fancier sheet of paper pinned. Right away he identified its nature. At the top of it was the famed wand-sword emblem of WAR.

The Protector's Club

Do you have loved ones to worry about in these dangerous times? Are you concerned with the apparent lack of excess instruction in defending yourself-and others-against the Dark Arts? Are YOU prepared for an attack at any moment?

The Protector's Club is a club designed to help students take additional measures in defending themselves from the very real threats outside of the castle walls. The members of Wands and Redemption are here to provide you with instruction on what it takes to be a protector; someone who stands in the way of tyranny for the sake of others, and does it to spectacular results!

Students of fourth year and up are permitted to join us in the Great Hall on Wednesday night, at approximately eight o'clock, if interested in joining the club and learning the magical skills necessary to be able to defend oneself and others expertly!

Albus stared at the sheet of paper, transfixed. A club for students...ran by Renegades? Students were shuffling themselves into the Common Room now, and as soon as they'd done so, Albus made a grab for Morrison and Scorpius.

"Look at this!" he hissed.

They both read it without asking any questions, wearing different expressions entirely as they did so. Morrison looked lax and uncaring, while Scorpius appeared to have caught on more.

"That's pretty suspicious" he said. "Aren't they supposed to be here playing guardian to us? So why have us do it ourselves?"

"It's just a club" Morrison said simply. "Nothing ever happens in clubs, within two sessions they'll be discussing their favorite romance novels."

And with that, he merged back into the crowd to find Melonie. Standing near the bulletin board was attracting a considerable amount of attention, and Albus and Scorpius were forced to move out of the way and into a corner to continue their discussion. Already he could hear people talking about the Protector's Club, many of them in voices of powerful enthusiasm.

"Do you reckon this is in every house?" Albus asked.

"Probably" Scorpius said. "Wouldn't make sense to have them just call out Slytherins, especially with our alleged reputations, right?"

"If it's this big here I wonder what's going on in the other Common Rooms" Albus said, more to himself than Scorpius.

He would not see Mirra until later in the week, unless of course he found a way to tell her to meet him in the library tomorrow, before dinner and the first session of the Club.

"Do you think that you could pass along a message to Mirra for me when you see her during patrols?" Albus asked Scorpius tensely.

Scorpius agreed to do so, and though he came back rather late, he told Albus that his library meeting with Mirra was set. The Great Hall was a buzz early the next morning, providing Albus with enough evidence to suggest that the entire school did indeed see the same bulletin post. He breezed his way through his morning Defence Against the Dark Arts class, and then again in the afternoon's Herbology, where his lack of attention caused him to suffer a slight laceration from a Crunching Cabbage.

Concealing the injury to not divert Mirra's attention this time, he met her in the library after classes looking winded.

"Fun day?" she said, her sheet of black hair all but covering her face as she stared straight down at her Potions book.

"Something like that" he said, tossing his bag aside and sitting down quickly.

She raised her eyes to him again, a more suspicious expression on her face.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked, something like a sardonic smile playing on her face.

Albus immediately cut to it. "Have you heard of this 'Protector's Club' thing?" he asked.

Mirra sighed and reclined back, looking somewhat disheartened. "I thought we were going to do some actual work" she said. "I still have no clue what I'm doing on that Potions essay-"

Albus pulled his bag over from the floor, rummaging through it at once.

"The one on Galpalott's third law?" he asked, sliding it over to her. "Here, just copy real quick-"

"Al!" she hissed, reclining back even further as if the sheet of parchment was toxic. "I'm not going to *copy*."

"Then skim" he said, somewhat agitated. He never got what issue people had with copying work. They were still learning as they copied, weren't they?

Mirra gave him a glare and didn't touch the paper. Still, she spoke up on the topic at hand.

"Yeah, I've heard of it" she said. "Kind of hard not to, the bulletins are up everywhere and everyone was on about it at breakfast..."

"Seems dodgy, right?" he asked.

Mirra gave an expression of bewilderment. "Not *really*. A little much, maybe, but that's it-"

"It's a club created by Renegades!" Albus practically shouted. "You know that they're going to be up to no good in there! I have half a mind to go to McGonagall!"

Mirra gave a warming look, as though he was making a bigger deal out of it than necessary. "Al, they're hosting this club in the *Great Hall*. And almost right after dinner, at that? Don't you think that the Headmistress knows about it? And she'll probably be there too...I know what it is you have against WAR, I don't like them either, but they can't just take over the school in a few weeks, Al."

Albus strongly doubted this last part, though admittedly, the idea of the Headmistress being alerted to the matter did soothe him somewhat. Either way, he still had more pressing questions.

"Are you going?" he asked nervously.

"No" she said at once, and Albus felt his heart lift. "I've got too much work to do and it seems a little unnecessary anyway. I think it's really just designed for those younger students who are worried and want to be sped up a bit in Defence Against the Dark Arts. I personally think that it's a little offensive to Professor Handit, but that's a different matter entirely."

"Do you know anyone who is going?" Albus asked.

"Rose definitely isn't" she said matter-of-factly. "Charlie isn't either...Donny, *maybe*, he didn't give an answer. Those were the only people I was with when we spoke about it like that..."

"I see" Albus said, a scenario playing through his head. Mirra could alleviate his feelings on the matter, but she could not eradicate them. He wanted someone to be there to give him the scoop; to fill him in on exactly what was happening at this little get together...

"Why don't you just go?" Mirra said from across the table, as though she'd read his mind.

"Me?" Albus asked incredulously. "I don't want to go to that thing, I have no intention-"

"You want to find out what's going on, right?" Mirra asked. "That's why you want me to find a way to get information back to you? Just go yourself."

Albus gave a small smile, unaware that she'd be able to see through him so easily. He supposed that's what being in a relationship for so long did though; it essentially made you an open book to your partner.

"I don't want to be seen at that though" Albus admitted dismissively. "With the reputation my family's got now? I'm better off staying far away. First thing that they'll do is probably talk about 'what to do when a Potter attacks'."

"Then don't be seen" Mirra said coyly, and Albus, who raised his eyebrows for a fraction of a second, quickly reclined back in his own chair.

His Invisibility Cloak. He could use it, and probably very effectively too...

"Wait a minute" Albus said, folding his hands over as though he were giving an interview. "Are you-little miss Prefect-giving me permission to *break the rules*?"

"No" Mirra said bluntly. "I'm acknowledging that if you did, I couldn't possibly stop you. I couldn't even see you."

Albus smiled. "You really are perfect, you know that, right?" he said, standing up and going over to her to kiss her on the cheek before he left. He went to snatch the essayback up, but his hand was slapped away.

"Leave it" she said darkly.

Albus divulged his plan to Morrison and Scorpius at dinner, but by the time that they'd retreated to the Common Room, both of them had voiced their opposition to it. Scorpius, like Mirra, was much more interested in getting caught up on homework, and Morrison easily declared that the two of them wouldn't fit under the Invisibility Cloak anyway.

"But you wouldn't have to!" Albus pointed out. "It's just me that gets the negative attention!"

"I'm guilty through association, mate" Morrison told him pointedly. "Everyone knows me as Albus Potter's attractive, charming, and funny friend" he added, shaking his head as though he were cursed. Scorpius gave him a patronizing look.

"Don't fret!" Morrison said quickly. "You're the smart one!"

Albus was eventually forced to make amends with the fact that it would be a solo mission, and so, with the minutes tinkering down to eight o' clock, he retreated to his dormitory to rifle through his trunk. He located the Cloak at once, letting the sleek, silver cloth flow through his hands majestically. This Cloak had once been his father's. This made him squirm a little bit. For a wild moment, he wondered if it would still work, given his father's location, before realizing that from a magical standpoint, it didn't really matter where his father was.

He felt even stranger looking into his trunk before closing it, where a faint blue glow could be seen. Without even reaching in he identified it as Fairhart's silver ring-not that it had been intended for himself, of course. No, the history of this ring he still hadn't *quite* put together, though he was at least aware that the name engraved on it-Sam-belonged to a woman, not a man, as he'd originally thought.

A thought blew up in his head. He had made a promise to himself that he would return this ring to his former professor, should he ever be identified as alive. Now, even with that confirmation, he was not sure what he'd do. No, if he ever came across Sancticus Fairhart again...this ring would be the last thing on his mind.

He headed downstairs under the Cloak, pleasantly surprised to see that not too many people had left the Common Room. He supposed that this was rooted in the house itself, however. Slytherins would be the least likely to attend a club meeting held by members of WAR. A powerful sense of irony resonated with him here. Many of his housemates probably had some sort of connection to someone who had been on the losing side of the last war. This same connection was keeping them away from WAR-and ultimately, in Albus' opinion at least, keeping them safer.

He waited for someone to enter before sliding himself through the blank stretch of wall, and in no time he was just outside the doors of the Great Hall, which were slightly opened to allow entrance. He stepped through and made a reluctant noise of interest.

The four tables now lined the walls, leaving a tremendous amount of space that Albus had never noticed before. There was about as many students in there as he expected, all of them standing in groups and chatting idly. As he'd expected, Gryffindor was by far the most represented house, though Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff weren't far behind at all. There were scattered Slytherins, but they were mostly younger, as were, Albus noticed, the majority of the hall as a whole. Perhaps Mirra and Scorpius were not alone in considering the club a waste of proper studying time. This cheered him up a bit.

Still, he did see a few familiar faces from his own year. Charles Eckley did not appear to be in attendance, as Mirra had said, but Donovan Hornsbrook was. There was something of a hardened look to his face that took Albus aback momentarily. Then, he noticed that Hornsbrook was accompanied by two other Gryffindors-the same two that had been harassing Roxanne that day in the library.

He looked around for signs of adults; either the Headmistress, or at least a professor or two, but was stunned to find all of them absent from the gathering. The only adults there were the black robed WAR members.

Albus stayed still, though he knew that there was no reason for this, as it was unlikely he'd be bumped into anyway. He simply waited for things to get organized, eventually jumping slightly when the massive doors to the Great Hall were slammed behind him, creating a powerful silence throughout the group.

There were six Renegades there, fewer than Albus had expected, but still a foreboding bunch. He recognized one of them as the elderly looking one who had been waiting outside of Scorpius' father's office that one day. The one who was standing straight and leading the pack had oily black, short hair tied back into the tiniest of ponytails, and a smudge shaped mustache of an identical color. His beady eyes sifted over the hall, and Albus felt a chill go up his spine. Something was definitely not right about this club.

"Line up, all of you" the man with the oily hair said briskly; his voice was smooth and curt.

They all did so, looks of intrigue and excitement on some faces, confusion and intimidation on others. Albus remained where he was, rooted on the spot, completely invisible. The man began walking back and forth as though a general addressing his troops. Albus gave a silent sneer; he'd seen Waddlesworth do this before.

"This is the Protector's Club" he said. "But you all know that, that's why you're here. My name is Larson, and I will be instructing you all."

Many of those in the line stood up a little straighter from the way that he was addressing them. For a moment they exchanged glances with one another, but their attention was returned to Larson immediately once he started speaking again.

"We've been assigned here to protect you" Larson said. "And we will, because that's what Wands and Redemption does; we protect the people. But more importantly, we help the people protect themselves. You're all at the age where you understand full well what goes on outside these walls. And whether it's this year, or next year, or the year after that, you may very well be entering a world that isn't going to be barricaded by magical walls, and surrounded by peers" he said, holding up his hands to indicate the castle itself. "No, when you leave here," he continued, "you're on your own."

Complete silence. Albus could see Hornsbrook smiling widely at what he was hearing. He'd undoubtedly heard this stuff before...his father was a member of WAR after all. He felt right at home here.

"Let's get one thing straight" Larson went on. "Your headmistress has allowed us this space to proceed with this club of ours, but she is not here. You are on your own here, and with our instruction, you can ultimately succeed in becoming a better wizard or witch, and thus, you can become more of an asset to those around you."

There was determination on the faces of those in the line now, and the rapid rate in which it had happened was somewhat unnerving. Everyone was suddenly very keen on becoming this super-powered wizard capable of defending their families that Larson was boasting about.

"Hornsbrook" Larson said sharply, and Donovan Hornsbrook stepped forward, looking confident and, to some degree, nervous.

Larson surveyed the rest of the line, walking back and forth slowly. "You there" he said after a moment.

A fourth year Hufflepuff girl emerged from the line, her large eyes looking perplexed underneath her large, circular spectacles. Larson positioned her so that she was directly across from Hornsbrook, who was about a foot or so taller than her. Albus tensed up slightly. Surely they weren't going to...?

"What's your name?" Larson asked her fiercely, and she winced as though his question had pierced her.

"Tilda" she said.

Larson turned away from her and back to the straight line. "The best defence is a good offense" he said aloud. "Once you've been attacked successfully, you've already lost. You must be prepared at all times, and you must be able to lash out an attack; you must apply pressure. Whether someone targets you first or not, you *must* be on the attack. At my say-so, I want you both to fire the most lethal spells that you can think of at one another. Do not even think of defending until your attack is through; your first priority is to eliminate quickly and efficiently."

Albus stared, appalled. Most lethal spell that they could think of? Hornsbrook was a sixth year...he would know some pretty dangerous spells. Spells designed for defence, of course, but this wasn't the case here. If Hornsbrook followed orders, he'd be assaulting someone.

"One" Larson started calling out harshly, and Tilda jumped, reaching into her robes for her wand; Hornsbrook had already withdrawn his.

"Two-"

Albus braced himself, in disbelief at what he was witnessing. Some of those in the straight line had their heads turned.

"Attack!"

There was only one blast of light, a stream of cerulean that issued from, predictably, Hornsbrook's wand. His opponent, not quick enough and told not to defend, had given a yelp and been knocked to the floor.

Larson patted Hornsbrook on the back. Tilda stood up, glasses broken, lip bleeding slightly and cowering as well. Many of those in the rest of the congregation were wearing looks of discomfort. Others looked forcibly stoic. When Tilda was not addressed, she stepped back in line.

"First spell, immediate victory" Larson said, giving Hornsbrook a slight push to return him to the line as well, where he smirked proudly as his two friends gave him approving high fives.

"In real life, there are no volunteers" Larson said, scratching at his neck. "You're either targeted or you're not, and the protection of you and your loved ones must be a combination of preparation and improvisation. If anyone would like to volunteer now, however, step forward."

Albus watched as a seventh year Ravenclaw stepped forward.

"Name?" Larson asked.

"Leonard" the student replied, holding up his head to reveal a prominent chin.

"Be on your guard Leonard" Larson said, and he moved himself directly across from him, removing his wand.

"Count us down Rick" Larson said, and another of the WAR members stepped forward. Leonard gave an alarmed look.

"Wait, I'm facing you-"

"One" the WAR member known as Rick announced loudly.

Leonard plunged his own hands into his robes, scrambling frantically for his wand as well. Albus couldn't help but feel torn between who to root for; the student who had counted on bullying a younger one, or the WAR member making him pay for his volunteerism. He was sort of hoping that they'd knock each other out.

"Two-"

Larson moved forward before the count could be completed. Shouting something indiscernible, a fiery orange spell collided with the Ravenclaw, sending him to the floor at once, where he slid a few feet, groaning. There were a few gasps from those watching.

"If you noticed that I attacked prematurely," Larson stated, "then surely you noticed my victory. There is no countdown in an actual fight. Proper wizard's duels are relics of the past, you need to be prepared to initiate attack at the fastest available moment."

Albus cringed as these words, not understanding the psychology behind it. These *weren't* real attacks. They were designed for practice, weren't they? Then what good was attacking before practice could even commence? This entire first meeting was a travesty, and it made his blood boil.

"Take him away" Larson said coldly, and two of the WAR members, one of whom was the elderly one that Albus identified, scooped Leonard up and made to carry him out of the Hall. "Have Lester take care of him" Larson added as an afterthought.

Albus watched as the boy was removed from the Hall, the doors again closing with a thunderous sound.

"Any other volunteers?" Larson sneered aloud, and no one moved.

Take this Cloak off of us. Let's see where his cheap tactics get him against true power...

Albus scratched at the back of his neck as though he was trying to rid himself of the dark voice that had just sounded in his head. A strong wave of nostalgia overtook him, but before he could analyze what had just occurred, Larson had begun speaking again.

"For those of you curious" he said, pacing once more, "that was the Blasting Charm that you saw. Not as widely destructive as its neighbor, the Blasting Curse, this spell is more concentrated; designed for single targets. In most cases...it will cause powerful physical damage. We'll be learning that right now..."

The rest of the "club" meeting seemed to be dedicated to Larson showing powerful defensive spells in an extremely offensive light. These demonstrations were meant to be followed closely, as the students were all guaranteed that they were effective spells, and were thus told to use them in later practice sessions. Albus didn't move for quite some time, instead watching from a

distance as the group of students listened with rapt attention, some of them-for some reason-playing with their hands as though eager to get started on attacking their housemates.

"We have time for one more contest" Larson announced suddenly. "Let's have two volunteers up here now..."

The first to step forward was a Slytherin fourth year that Albus vaguely recognized. They'd never spoken, but Albus knew him to be among the more tamer in the house. He had bushy eyebrows and pale, blotchy skin. The person who removed himself from the line to face him Albus recognized very well, however. In fact, it made him gasp.

It was Hugo. Tuft of red hair and a look of mingled confidence and insecurity on his face, he stepped forward across from the Slytherin in the same year, wand already at his side.

Albus mouthed wordlessly, dangerously close to removing his Cloak and running forward, snatching Hugo up and yelling at the entire group. But then he realized that Hugo had come here of his own accord. And even now...he was volunteering.

But still, it was Hugo. Hugo wouldn't hurt a fly. Albus calmed himself momentarily, sure that his younger cousin would back out. He then started to panic; what if the other student didn't?

"One-"

The word had barely been uttered before Hugo lunged forward with a growl, uncharacteristically roaring the word "*Reducto!*"

The boy in Albus' house flew backwards from the jinx, completely unprepared, while a group near the end of the line applauded. Larson looked down at Hugo with an approving grin.

"What's your name?"

"Hugo Weasley" Hugo replied with dignity, a smile stretched across his face. His opponent was laying gasping on the floor, unattended to.

"Weasley eh?" Larson repeated, but he merely continued to smile. "Well done" he said, and Hugo walked back into the line.

Albus felt sweat pouring down his face. In some ways, watching Hugo act so coldly had been worse than if he'd seen him get hurt. When had this drastic transformation started? Since when was Hugo so obsessed with protection, that he needed this kind of tutelage?

"Dismissed, all of you" Larson announced. "For those of you persistent enough to want to hone your skills...same time, next Monday."

They all shuffled out, Albus turning to the side to avoid collision, his legs feeling like jelly at what he'd just seen. Hugo walked directly by his older cousin, unaware of his presence, and

Albus saw him high-fiving fourth year companions as he did so, wearing, just as Hornsbrook had when receiving congratulations from his mates, a proud expression on his face.

Chapter 10: Secrets On The Second Floor

"Okay, I changed my mind" Morrison said aloud as they headed back to the Common Room after classes on Thursday. "That club is bad news."

Albus hadn't gotten around to explaining what exactly it was that he'd seen at the first official Protector's Club meeting until the next day, when he was able to lowly explore all of the intricacies with his friends in front of the fire. Melonie too was listening in, her expression turning somewhat sour at what she was hearing as well. Scorpius kept a thoughtful look on his face as Albus went over the specifics; the lack of safety and the open display of malice his most talked about subjects.

"I don't even know what I was thinking as I left" Albus told them with a shudder. "I just keep thinking of Hugo...you should have seen the look on his face, it wasn't right!"

"This club will get reported in no time" Melonie said warmly. "It won't be long before someone gets seriously hurt and informs the headmistress on what's really going on."

"Doubtful" Scorpius said, speaking up for the first time, and they all looked at him. "From what Al says, this Larson bloke and his fellow WAR members are acting under a pretty powerful image. They're telling people that this kind of instruction is necessary; and that anyone who isn't for it is both weak and unwilling to be a protector. Older students will stay out of pride, and the younger ones out of fear."

"But once it escalates and someone gets badly hurt-"

"Anything can be shown as an accident, with enough cooperation" Scorpius said darkly, and Albus nodded with agreement.

It was not that he liked what his friend was saying, it was that he knew it all to be true. He identified the psychology behind the Protector's Club immediately, what was difficult was finding a solution to it one was going to stand up and say what was really happening, either because they were too afraid or because they really didn't see it from a proper perspective. But Albus had seen enough.

"I'm going to go to McGonagall" he said suddenly, the crackling of the fire highlighting his words. "I don't know why the teachers weren't there in the first place, but someone has to kick back to her about what's going on in the Great Hall after dinner. She'll be able to put an end to all of this" he added with confidence, and both Morrison and Melonie nodded. Scorpius, however, still looked somewhat unsure.

Though seeing McGonagall was ultimately more important in the long run, it would have to wait for the right moment. Albus knew that the next club meeting wasn't until Tuesday, meaning that he had until then to bring it to the Headmistress' attention. His weekend was occupied however

by the daunting task of finding a new Chaser to replace Garthe. He had received a few responses to his bulletin, though sadly, they were all from people who had already failed to make the team in the first place, meaning that he would literally end up picking the least-worst option that he had.

To make matters even worse, Albus learned that he'd be without his co-captain while deciding on who the new recruit would be. Scorpius would be busy studying the entire time.

"Come on mate, the team comes first" Albus said to his friend darkly in the Common Room, but all that Scorpius could do was grant him an apologetic smile.

"Sorry mate" he said. "But it's just not logical. I don't even need to be there anyway; anyone trying out has already tried out before, and they all didn't make the cut. Me being there won't help to judge them any further. You've just got to watch them fly and pick one you like. Me...I've got to catch up on some stuff" he added, sliding a History of Magic textbook over to himself.

It was thus all by his lonesome that Albus headed down to the pitch on what could have been a very pleasant Saturday morning with Mirra, meeting his four hopefuls there. Barnabus Curder and Tiffani Garrett, who he'd also asked to be there to help him decide, were waiting with the four of them, who, Albus realized when he got closer, were all second years.

He hung his head slightly but picked it back up once he got ready to greet them. Trying not to be deterred by their youth, he spoke to them all in a falsely chipper voice.

"So," he started, clapping his hands together, "I want to thank you all for coming out here today. It was a real close tryout last time, and I'm pleased to see you guys returning; you all nearly made it before" he lied, and indeed, they seemed to see right through this. They all exchanged glances of disbelief anyway, which wasn't helped by Barnabus, who gave a short chortle.

"Now we need a new Chaser," Albus went on, "and the most important thing for that aspect of the offense is how you all work together. You'll notice that there's no Keeper for you to try and score on during this go-around. That's because I'll be primarily looking at your passing; are you quick, and are you effective. Now let's get flying, all of you."

Albus surveyed it all from ground level, watching as the six of them all flew around passing the Quaffle along. Tiffani and Barnabus acted as catalysts more than anything; it was their job to put the ball in play and see how well it got back to them. None of the potential Chasers were really succeeding in this regard, but Albus did notice that one of them—a redheaded boy whose name he'd already forgotten—seemed to be able to fly faster than the others, which had to count for something.

Not entirely focused on what was going on, he allowed his eyes to slide over to the stands, which he thought for sure would be barren. He was wrong, though. Most unusually, Morrison was sitting there by himself, stretched out as though he was falling asleep.

"Okay you guys keep at it" Albus hollered up to them all. "I'm going to go have a word with the person who helps me decide stuff" he made up poorly on the spot.

He jogged over to the stands, at which point Morrison sat up straight.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Bored" he said. "Thought I'd come watch you be bored too."

Albus frowned. "I guess Scorpius is no fun with his nose in a book, huh?"

Morrison gave him a look of confusion. "What are you talking about? I can't even find Scorpius..."

Albus scratched at the back of his head, positive that he was missing something here.

"He isn't in the Common Room studying?" he asked.

Morrison shook his head. "Unless I missed him, which is pretty unlikely, to be honest..."

"Hmm" Albus made a noise of interest curtly. "Let me finish up here and then we'll find him."

He jogged back to the center of the pitch, calling to a halt at once. They all steadily lowered themselves down to the ground, looking thoroughly exhausted, and Albus noticed that Tiffani Garrett had a cut above her left eye, probably from a misthrown Quaffle.

"Well it was a good tryout" Albus said. "But obviously, we're only looking for one replacement, and the best person for the team is-very narrowly, of course-you there" he said, pointing at his decision. "Uhhh..."

"Roger" the red haired boy said.

"I knew your name!" Albus lied. "It's just your surname I'm having trouble with at the moment..."

"Winkly" Roger said.

"Well welcome aboard!" Albus said with false enthusiasm, though out of the corner of his eye he noticed that not everyone else was going to play along.

"Just get better at aiming" Tiffani said sharply to Roger, wincing slightly.

Scorpius turned up in the Common Room later, but, after much insistence from Morrison about his absence, ended up admitting that he'd retreated to the Room of Requirement to study

due to noise. Morrison seemed pleased with the answer, but Albus found it somewhat suspicious. Why hadn't he just told them where he'd been in the first place?

Either way, there was no point in probing for further details, and with the replacement Chaser picked out, Albus was given the time necessary to do what he was much more eager to do: speak to the Headmistress. And so, on Sunday, just an hour or so before dinner, he exited the Common Room and began the walk all the way up to the seventh floor.

The corridors, as he was now used to, were filled with WAR members. Albus felt somewhat uneasy walking passed them all while they minded their own business, oblivious to the fact that he was currently on his way to report them. Larson, the "leader" so to speak of the Protector's Club, was rarely actually seen in the halls however; Albus could only guess from this fact that he was stationed out in the grounds for most of the day. He did recognize others from the club in the halls however, and it was with these individuals that he attempted to act his most inconspicuous. Indeed, his irregularly slow walking accidentally caught the attention of one of them just around the corner of the stone gargoyles.

"Something wrong with your leg?" the WAR member standing guard said, and Albus recalled him as being one of the two who had carried away the Ravenclaw boy just a few days ago.

"Huh?" Albus said, freezing up.

"You're walking slow" the man said, removing himself from the wall and surveying Albus with his dark brown eyes. His hair hung in front of his face somewhat, which only added to his intimidation.

"Oh" Albus said, thinking. "Erm...my leg's asleep. Had a bit of a nap today."

The man looked at him with a blank face. "Where are you headed to now?"

"The headmistress' office" Albus blurted out immediately. For a single foolish moment, he'd expected this response to be a good one; he had thought that, perhaps, this revelation of importance would force the WAR guard to back off. He realized not a moment later though that what he'd done instead was divulge the first half of what he intended on doing.

"The headmistress' office?" the man said, and he leaned forward a bit more, looking half curious and half menacing. "What business do you have there?"

"I- erm- "

"I sent him there" came a voice, and Albus looked up.

From around the corner, Professor Malfoy had emerged, a look on his pale face that was virtually impossible to decipher. He eyed both Albus and the WAR member with the same expression of calmness as he approached.

"You sent him?" the WAR guard said.

"Indeed I did" Scorpius' father lied. "Mr. Potter has the tendency to fall asleep in my class, and I instructed him to meet me for a meeting today with the headmistress, as it was her only time available. I see now though that I was foolish to ask him to do such a thing on his own, as the boy is so easily distracted" he added, turning to Albus and leering with something that resembled contempt.

Albus stared back, nervous. He knew, of course, that this was a ruse; he had never once fallen asleep in class, and more than that, he had most certainly not been instructed by his professor to do anything; his appearance here appeared to be highly coincidental. But at the same time, there was such a genuine feeling of loathing to the look thrown his way that Albus was left with only two possible answers. Either Scorpius' father actually did dislike him, or, like Scorpius himself, he was *ridiculous* at lying with a straight face.

"I see" the WAR guard said, and he pressed himself back up against the wall, looking only semi-convinced, but still unable to do or say anything else.

"Come along now, Mr. Potter" Professor Malfoy said, jerking his head to the side quickly, and Albus followed after him at once. As soon as they'd reached the stone gargoyles, they stopped.

"Professor-" Albus started, not knowing where to begin, but he was silenced by Professor Malfoy holding his hand up.

"Albus, whatever business you have with the headmistress is yours" he said, his tone low. " But I advise you to keep that business to yourself. This 'security' that we have likes to pry."

Albus nodded, understanding that nothing else was to be discussed. Only just now, however, did he realize that he needed a bit more help. He didn't know the password to see McGonagall.

"Erm- also- "

"Pomona" Professor Malfoy said quickly, and he turned on his heel and walked right by him without another word, going the other way so as not to be seen by the same WAR member.

Albus grinned and turned to face the gargoyles, listening to Professor Malfoy's steps as they grew steadily quieter.

"Pomona" he said, and the gargoyles slid away at once, revealing a spiral staircase that Albus was more than familiar with by now. Within a minute, he had revolved upwards and towards the large door that led directly into the office. Albus gave it a loud knock, and at once he heard a response.

"Enter" said the wispy but strict voice of Headmistress McGonagall.

Albus pushed the door open and found himself in the Head's office yet hadn't changed at all since the last time he'd been here-at the end of the previous year. The portraits that all usually feigned sleep were not doing so on this occasion, possibly because they didn't imagine anything of interest being brought ' entrance, after all, was impromptu to them.

There were two portraits that Albus almost always noticed right away, and he did the same thing again here. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore was wide awake and smiling warmly, a twinkle in one of his blue eyes that Albus had learned to associate with both wisdom and intrigue. The portrait of Severus Snape, however, was empty. Albus was frequently greeted with this blank stretch of canvas, and he still, to this day, was unaware as what other portrait Severus Snape could enter; he'd never seen him anywhere else in the castle.

"Mr. Potter" said McGonagall from behind her desk, tilting her head upwards in amusement. "This is a surprise. How may I help you today?"

"Hello" Albus said, somewhat shakily. The last time he'd spoken face to face with the Headmistress, there had been a very grim atmosphere in the room. Indeed, he'd even been attacked by Mirra and Morrison only moments prior.

She looked very calm now though, if not somewhat stressed. Her white hair was pulled back into a loose bun, her thin mouth just barely visible on her face, and she peered at him with the tips of her fingers together.

"Erm- can- can I sit?" Albus asked nervously, unsure as to why he wasn't getting straight to the point. Perhaps he simply didn't know where to start.

McGonagall gave the slightest of nods, and Albus sat down across from her. Straightening himself up somewhat, he proceeded to give it a go.

"I- uh- wanted- wanted to talk to you about- about something" he said, realizing how strange he sounded, but unable to do anything about it. The headmistress did not acknowledge this portion of the conversation, she simply allowed her tired eyes to rest on his face, as though pressing him to continue.

"Erm- right. It kind of- it kind of involves the school-"

"Mr. Potter, let me stop you right there" she cut him off, and Albus hung his head, muttering under his breath about how pathetic he was. "I have long since learned to associate your family's name with misdeeds and broken rules. I can assure you, there is *nothing* that you could have done that could surprise me, not with your ancestry-"

"No it's not about me!" Albus blurted out, holding out his hands and waving them with no restraint. "I didn't do anything wrong this time, honest! This is about- it's about- have you heard of the Protector's Club?" he desperately asked.

Headmistress McGonagall gave him a stony expression, and suddenly, Albus could hear false snoring all throughout the room.

"Yes, I know what the Protector's Club is" she said, her voice quivering only slightly. "As an official club of Hogwarts, its official formation required my you are interested in joining the club, then you should know that it requires nothing other than attendance-"

"No, you've got me all wrong" Albus said darkly. "Professor, I think that you need to disband that club as soon as possible."

There was a silence between them, in which only the false sounds of sleep were heard throughout the room. McGonagall avoided his eyes for the duration of it, eventually speaking into her desk.

"The situation is delicate, Mr. Potter."

"People are getting hurt!" Albus said quickly, and he knew, just from this one sentence, that the headmistress was probably very aware of the activities that occurred during club meetings. "I went to one, I saw it with my own eyes-students ending up in the Hospital Wing-a whole bunch of-"

"I understand" she said, her voice a hoarse whisper that sent a shiver up his spine. "But what *you* must understand, Mr. Potter, is that I am putting the safety of the students as my number one priority."

Albus stared at her, mouth agape. "But- but they're getting hurt! You don't understand, I saw it-"

"You must think steps ahead" she said. "I was rather hoping that I would not be forced to explain it-it is a depressing situation-but I see how adamant you are. If I attempt to protect these students from their 'protectors', Mr. Potter, I will ultimately end up endangering them more than any Renegadeclubever could."

This combination of words made no sense to him. He refrained from speaking, eager to see how putting a stop to the entire situation could actually worsen it.

"You must remember," McGonagall started, "Warren Waddlesworth is running for Minister of Magic, and he will almost certainly win. This means that even now he is the face of the Ministry of Magic, as well as the leader of Wands and Redemption. For the first time in years, due to this connection, the public are trusting the Ministry. This powerful pull means that anything that WAR opposes, the people oppose.

"Now there are many reasons why Waddlesworth would want his personal servants here at the school, the least of which is that it allows him to feed information to the youth, to be sent back to their parents, whose support he requires- and whose support he is most certainly getting. Think of the ways that shutting down this club can be twisted. Can you imagine what the headlines will read in the next edition of the *WAR Weekly*, after the Protector's Club has been disbanded? The

impression will be given off that the students were not permitted to learn extra-curricular self-defence. Hogwarts would go from 'safe haven' to 'poor institution' overnight. And parents, poor, misguided parents, would withdraw their children from the school, determined to find a place where they can receive a proper education. If this club stays around, Mr. Potter, my students *might* get hurt. If I take it away, many of them will go home, away from the protection of the castle, where they *definitely* will. I can not take that risk."

"But what if you mentioned what was really happening!" Albus yelled. "You could tell the actual truth! That this club is doing more damage than anything else!"

"I wish it could be that simple Albus, but my word is nothing next to the words of Wands and Redemption. Any reported injuries-except those of an *extremely* serious nature-can be written off as accidents, and besides that, there is nothing mandatory about this club. Students can easily be held accountable for what occurs within the Great Hall unsupervised, WAR will not be. Anecdotal evidence only goes so far, I'm afraid. Wands and Redemption is very much in control of this situation. I fear that if I attempt to speak out...matters will only slip further downwards."

Her voice cracked as she said this last sentence, and only now did Albus understand how harrowing this must be for her. The students at this school were her responsibility, but no matter what she did-even if she did nothing-they were in some sort of danger.

"Then I'll tell people" Albus said defiantly. "What's the worst that can happen from me finally speaking the truth for once, eh? Parents that don't like what I'm saying won't get a negative view of the school, and the ones who do listen-"

"I understand where you're coming from" she said, a wry smile twisting on her face at his determination. "But the exiguity of your actions notwithstanding, there is a serious threat of your intended actions hindering a much bigger plan."

Albus turned his head somewhat, unsure as to what she was referencing here. When he went several long seconds without confirming, she leaned in and spoke.

"You cannot add to your unpopularity now, Mr. Potter. And I don't mean with your fellow students, either. If there is *any* chance of your father being released from Azkaban, you can not be openly anti-Renegade, and by extension, anti-Ministry."

Albus sighed. For all of her intelligence, it seemed as though Headmistress McGonagall had not yet accepted what Albus had already been forced to. That no matter what they did, his father's release was a long way off-it at all.

He sat there uncomfortably, his mood irritated, though of course, he was not going to say what he was thinking.

"So I guess we're done here then?" he muttered into the ground, thoroughly deterred at the lack of results. Looking up, he saw the Headmistress nod, exhaling deeply as she did so.

Albus stood up suddenly, aware that he acting somewhat childish, but not really caring all that much. Without a second glance towards the portraits on the wall, he headed towards the door and prepared to exit.

"Mr. Potter" McGonagall spoke up, and he turned around half way to face her. She had a look on her face that showed exactly what he was feeling.

"In any situation, there is a choice that is right, and there is one that is easy. Please believe me when I tell you that there is *nothing* easy about this one."

"So...she's just going to ignore it?" said a befuddled Mirra the next day during Care for Magical Creatures.

"That's the gist of it" Albus said with a sigh.

They'd proceeded passed their review of Kneazles and were now, for today only, surveying a Unicorn. They'd actually went over Unicorns before-Albus recalled doing so in either his fourth or fifth year-but this particular occasion was one reserved only for older students. Trotter, one of Hagrid's favorite majestic creatures in the forest, was sick.

"Aren't we kind of...exploiting his sickness?" Morrison asked hesitantly as they all gathered around the beautiful creature, its snow colored coat grayed somewhat due to its deteriorated health.

"Now now," Hagrid started, "he'll get the treatmen' he needs, won' he? I'm not lettin' you lot do nothin' but watch. I already gave him some medicine and summat. Now, who knows what ter feed 'em?"

"Leaves and stuff?" Morrison asked, as though the question had been aimed at him.

"Congratulations Morrison, yeh jus' killed 'em" Hagrid said, shaking his head. "He needs *berries*. Plenty of juices to keep 'em hydrated. Watch now-"

It was certainly an interesting lesson, and one that demanded their complete attention at that, but sadly, Albus was too focused on the hushed conversation he was having with Mirra in the back of the crowd.

"The way she was talking" he told her sullenly. "She sounded so defeated..."

"It must be stressful" Mirra admitted. "But still...WAR's already taken over the Ministry. We're just going to let them have the school too?"

Albus sighed, then turned his attention back to Hagrid for a moment, who was stroking Trotter's nose as he lapped up berry juice from the professor's massive hands.

"I really don't know what to do" Albus admitted after a moment, turning back to his girlfriend.

"Do you want me to talk to Charlie?" Mirra asked, and Albus groaned.

"What would that accomplish-"

"He has a lot of pull with some of the younger students!" Mirra hissed, eyeing Hagrid for a second to make sure that she hadn't spoken too loud. "Maybe this club can't be taken away outright, but we can still get people out of it!"

Though he greatly appreciated Mirra's enthusiasm on the matter, he knew that they were grasping at straws if they asked someone to talk to the younger students. Besides, Eckley probably wouldn't go for it anyway; he was best friends with Hornsbrook after all. Or at least, he thought that they were. He hadn't seen them around each other much this year...

There was one club member in particular that Albus was focused on, however. He did not want Hugo getting hurt or doing the hurting anymore, and with the next club meeting coming up, he was pressed for time. He thought of approaching his cousin directly, but Hugo had not been too fond of him for the last year or so, at least not enough to take him seriously. Then he considered going to Lily...but he didn't want to draw her attention to the club period, lest she end up coaxed into it herself. Stretched for options on people close to Hugo, he turned to Mirra with a frown on his face.

"Do you think that I should mention this whole Hugo thing to Rose?" he asked her, and Mirra tilted her head back and forth as though she was deeply thinking about it.

"Well she's been a bit rocky recently" she admitted. "I'm still staying away from her mostly, unless she approaches me. But this is serious...maybe you should wait."

"Wait?" Albus asked, and Morrison had returned to their group now, for Hagrid had just retreated to his cabin to get more medicine.

"Wait for what?" Morrison asked, looking back and forth between them.

"To talk to Rose about Hugo" Mirra told him pointedly.

"Ahh" Morrison said. "Well why wait?" he asked.

"Because it's only been one meeting" Mirra said clearly. "Al, are you going to the next one?"

Albus thought about it. He was most certainly not looking forward to it...but at the same time, he wanted to know what was going on.

"Yeah" he said. "Under the Cloak again."

"Then go through one more meeting" Mirra said strictly. "And if you see things get even further out of hand...then talk to Rose."

To measure just how difficult it would be to approach his cousin about such a sensitive topic, Albus monitored her in the afternoon's Potions class. Professor Malfoy made no indication of having seen Albus on the seventh floor the previous day, and immediately had them paired into groups to begin work on their Itching solutions. Teamed up with Mirra, Albus kept throwing hasty glances to the back of the room.

"Al, you know I can't do this by myself!" Mirra hissed, and Albus, who was too slow on the uptake, turned just in time to see Scorpius reach over from his own grouping with Morrison to lower the flame underneath the cauldron; it had been dangerously close to overflowing.

"Sorry" Albus said, returning his attention to their work at once.

Rose was sitting in the back of the class, partnered with-of all people-Donovan Hornsbrook. They appeared to be working silently alongside one another, but this still served to show that she was on good terms with what Albus could only assume was a very prominent member of the Protector's Club. He got somewhat queasy at the thought of approaching her to talk with Hornsbrook in the vicinity, and made a mental note to catch her on her own should such a thing be necessary.

Tuesday morning came with considerable buzz. Albus had initially been afraid that all of the talk in the Common Room was going to be about the night's upcoming club meeting, but had been pleasantly surprised when he'd heard what was really going on from Morrison.

"Apparition lessons" he said, grinning wildly and pointing towards the bulletin board. Sure enough, there was a highly official looking notice there; though it was still smaller than the most recent Protector's Club notification.

"Really?" Albus asked, completely unprepared for this news.

Scorpius, who was standing just a few feet away and looking at some of the other notices, approached when he heard their discussion.

"It is very strange" he said, sounding amused. "My father told me that it would be this year, but it happened later on when he was our age. The first lesson available is set for just before Halloween..."

"It'll be part of security" came another sudden voice, one that made Albus jump. Dante Haug had just entered their conversation. Albus stared at him while he spoke; very rarely did anyone enter a conversation in which he was involved anymore, unless it was his Quidditch team.

"Security?" Morrison asked. "How do you you figure that?"

"They want us all Apparating as early as possible, in case of emergencies" Dante said, but then he immediately walked back over to Bartleby Bing, who was on his way out for breakfast.

"You reckon that's true?" Morrison asked them both.

Albus shrugged, but Scorpius gave him an answer.

"It's the only thing that makes sense, isn't it?"

Albus ended up skipping breakfast in favor of catching up on homework, which he was somewhat behind in due to his increased interest in the activities of the Renegades within the castle. Melonie, who had done fairly well in her Herbology O.W.L- though she didn't end up taking the class-sat next to him instead of her boyfriend to help him get through a grueling essay on why magically induced photosynthesis was not as effective as the real thing. Scorpius was working on his own essay for a different class, leaving Morrison to spend the duration of breakfast time attempting to eat by levitating his food into his mouth; the end result being a glass of milk accidentally getting knocked over and spilling down his front.

The usual flutter of owls came midway through breakfast, but with nothing of interest to be read, Albus and Scorpius got up to leave for Charms a bit early. Melonie too had a class, leaving Morrison alone at the table.

"What are you up to now, mate?" Albus asked his friend.

"First he's going to go clean up his shirt" Melonie answered for her boyfriend, who hadn't even bothered opening his mouth. "And then he's going to go to the library and study for once, like he promised me he would" she added seriously.

"Sir, yes sir!" Morrison said sarcastically, giving a loose, false salute.

Albus and Scorpius chuckled as they walked away, mixing themselves with a group of Hufflepuffs as they did so.

"Hopefully we're done with that Heavyweight Charm" Albus said, shaking his head; he still hadn't gotten the hang of the spell completely, though admittedly, his results were never far from perfect. "I'm getting pretty sick of going to pick something up and hearing my arms crack a bi- Scorpius?"

He turned around wildly, but his friend was no longer walking next to him. Spinning around in a full circle, the only people that he could see were the gaggle of Huffelpuffs, who were mostly girls anyway. Confused, he acknowledged the possibility that perhaps his friend had already entered Flitwick's classroom. Upon entering himself, however, he saw that this was not the case. Scorpius was nowhere to be found.

He hesitated slightly before taking his seat, where sure enough, a small silver thimble had been placed. It seemed as though they would once again be altering the weight of objects. Professor Flitwick was at his desk organizing some papers before the start of class, leaving Albus a few moments to look around the room once more. Two minutes later, and Scorpius had entered.

"Where were you?" Albus asked him as he sat down beside him.

"Huh?" Scorpius said. "What do you mean?"

"I was- we were walking together and you just vanished. Where'd you run off to?"

"Nowhere" he replied, looking rather nonplussed. "I just bent down to tie my shoe, and you kept going without me. Don't sweat it" he added, straightening himself up in his chair.

"Are you- your shoe- you're lying to me!" Albus said, flabbergasted at what he was hearing.

"What?" Scorpius said, giving a hiccup of a laugh at the accusation. "Lying? Why would I-"

"I don't know, but you are!"

"Settle down boys!" came a squeak from Professor Flitwick. Looking around, Albus saw that more students had entered and that class was ready to begin. "You've got some charms to perform, and *concentration* is quite necessary to do so!"

Albus dropped the subject abruptly, but Scorpius' blatant dishonesty plagued his thoughts for the entire lesson. He dwelled on it all throughout lunch as well, knowing for sure that his friend would maintain his secrecy regardless of whatever Albus threw at him. By the time that they'd all retreated to the Common Room, however, he had bigger things on his mind.

"You sure you want to go to another one of these?" Morrison asked him seriously, the two of them sitting together in their dormitory. "Last time got you riled up a bit didn't it?"

"It's not like I want to" Albus admitted. "But I just feel like I need to. I guess you're still not up for tagging along?"

"I don't think I shrunk since last week, mate" Morrison said grimly, referencing that his lack of attendance last week had been due to the fact that he was unable to fit under the Cloak. "Maybe Scorpius though-"

"No, forget that" Albus said darkly. "Something's been up with him recently-he's always dodging me and all."

"Yeah, I noticed that too..."

They eventually went down to dinner, where Scorpius made light conversation with them both, apparently having already forgotten the ordeal from earlier on their way to Charms. Once dinner

was over it was the three of them that headed back to the Common Room though; two of them for the night, and Albus only until eight o' clock. With only ten minutes to go until that time, he adorned himself in his silvery Invisibility Cloak once more, had Morrison open the stone entrance for him, and left for the Great Hall.

He arrived in the gigantic room right on time, the large doors wide open during his arrival, though he appeared to be late compared to most. The four house tables were already lining the walls, and the students had already organized themselves horizontally, signifying that they'd all instinctively known their proper place during their early arrival. They were all wearing expressions of fierce determination- they looked almost was the same group of WAR members from before who were in the Hall as well, with the most animate of them, of course, the oily Larson.

He began pacing back and forth in front of the line of club members, and the giant doors closed automatically to signal the start of the second ever meeting. Albus noticed at once that the room was again void of any teachers, including the headmistress. Frowning at this, though not exactly surprised, he gave his full attention to Larson, albeit invisible and from the back of the room, rather than with the rest of the students.

Larson said nothing as he walked by them all slowly, staring at each of them as though sizing them up. And then, without warning, he turned on his heel with his wand aimed. There was a ferocious blast of blue, and for a moment, Albus grew worried that the hex was meant for him; though it ended up going nowhere close to his vicinity, instead hitting, most strangely, another WAR member square in the face.

The WAR member-a young looking one with curly blonde hair-fell to the ground screaming, his yells nearly inaudible amidst the gasping of the students. Larson walked up to him nonchalantly, and Albus noted that the other WAR members were all watching with expressions that indicated that they'd previously known about what had just happened. Larson stopped just a foot away from the comrade who was howling in pain and clutching his face, and then pointed his wand down again.

"*Stupefy!*" he barked, and the stream of crimson light ended the man's movement and cries abruptly.

Larson turned away at once, his expression haughty. He walked back towards the line of teenagers, who were now looking much more tense than they'd been. Behind him, a WAR member approached the body of his friend on the ground and waved his wand. The man began stirring at once.

"Incapacitation" Larson said smoothly, pacing back and forth once more, oblivious to the fact that the WAR member he'd just jinxed was struggling to get back to his feet. "Your opponent is

not truly defeated until they are utterly incapable of retaliation. In most cases, you'll find that a stunner is substituted by something far more lethal" he said coldly.

Albus felt his knees go weak. Larson was referring to the Killing curse, and this method was not entirely unfamiliar to him; he'd seen Fairhart do this before-permanently end the threat of his enemies while they were on the ground, unable to defend.

With a jolt, he realized that Fairhart had probably been taught this method by WAR. Considering his age and departure from WAR years ago, however, it was unlikely that Larson had been his teacher. But it was not entirely impossible that Fairhart hadn't been the one to introduce this to people who had one day passed it down to the man in front of him...

"Today will be mostly theoretical" Larson said aloud, and no one made any vocal objections toward this statement. "You have already learned how to capitalize on a situation in a duel. You must now learn the after affects; the skills and tendencies that will signify your evolution from a capable duelist to a fully fledged protector."

And so it was. Albus breathed a sigh of relief knowing that no one would be getting hurt this time, as the students were all trained by demonstration rather than hands-on practice. After giving a lengthy explanation on how to defeat your opponent once they were already down (which Albus had assumed would have been somewhat self-explanatory anyway) Larson progressed into more actual dueling mechanics, which weren't as bad as some of the other things. He taught them weak points on enemies; that aiming at legs were both unpredictable and harder to deflect, as proven by the way that he mercilessly jinxed a fellow WAR member. He followed this up by teaching them how to draw their wands quickly in case of an ambush; how to have it positioned in their robes, and how to instinctively whip it back in preparation for an offensive movement upon being drawn. He also imparted on them the wisdom of being aware of their environment, and to use it to catch an opponent off guard.

Albus watched from a distance as it all went on, cringing inwardly as he did so. To some degree, he did agree with it. He had been in life-or-death situations with wizards before, and had certainly done these things to survive. But it was the visceral way in which it was being taught; the dark undercurrent to it all, that perturbed him. Ostensibly, it was self-defence. But the way they were being taught...it seemed as though they were more likely to always fire the first spell.

His stomach stopped doing flip-flops with ten minutes left, expecting one more thing to be taught before the dispersion of the congregation. He was met with a nasty surprise though.

"We have time for one contest" Larson said smoothly, and the entire line of students traded glances, looking somewhat eager. "You, and you" he said, jerking his head in two different parts of the line, making good on the promise that there would no longer be any such thing as a willing participant.

Albus' heart sank as he was the two people that emerged; he had immediately caught sight of red hair.

Hugo was standing looking relaxed, his opponent being a boy that Albus recognized from the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. He was unsure as to the boy's age, but he could tell right from the height advantage and thick shoulders that he was older than Hugo.

Again? was all that Albus could think. Hugo had just participated last time hadn't he? Why not give someone else a chance to get wounded?

Hugo and the Hufflepuff boy stared into one another's eyes with determination, standing about twelve feet apart from another. They both appeared to be waiting for a countdown from Larson, but he didn't seem prepared to give one. On the contrary, he was looking back and forth between them as though confused.

"Well?" he asked pointedly.

Getting the message immediately, they plunged their hands into their robes and removed their wands, Albus' heart missing a beat as it happened.

"*Reducto!*" Hugo cried first, but his opponent had ducked down and slashed his own wand through the air, a blue streak of light slashing the Weasley across the legs.

Hugo gave a cry of pain and fell down in a crumpled heap, and for a single, foolish second, Albus made to step forward and reveal himself, before realizing how meaningless it would be. The battle was already over.

Or so he thought.

"Well?" Larson said again, giving the Hufflepuff boy an intense glare.

The Hufflepuff boy shook his head quickly to remove his bangs from his eyes, then pointed his wand down at Hugo. "*St- Stupefy!*" he uttered.

The red light stopped the already minimal movement from Hugo at once, Albus closing his eyes a second too late.

The line of students was looking nothing short of stunned now, and Hornsbrook in particular seemed somewhat disturbed. He discarded the expression quickly however, apparently realizing that the four years that he'd know Hugo were meaningless .

The rest of the WAR members monitoring the meeting-some of whom wore marks of their own due to Larson using them as examples-began patting the Hufflepuff boy on the back. Larson, however, crouched down and revived Hugo.

"W-what-" Albus heard his cousin mutter as he came to his senses, and then he immediately gripped his leg in pain.

"Next time," Larson started, "aim low. You got the first attack in, but it's for nothing if they duck. Learn from this while you still can" he added, and he gave him, highly uncharacteristically in Albus' opinion, an approving clap on the back.

"Someone take him to the Hospital Wing, hand him over to Lester" Larson called out to the line of students, and one of Hugo's friends from last time immediately stepped forward to escort him out. He was limping.

"It's time to leave" Larson announced to them all, and the doors to the Great Hall opened. "A bulletin will be put up for the date of the next club meeting."

They all filed away in an orderly fashion, drastically different than how they would when exiting a class. Albus walked ten paces ahead of everyone else, leaving them all in the dust as he propelled himself out of the Great Hall.

He was an assortment of feelings at this point. Irrate yet distraught, relieved that Hugo would be okay but agitated with his cousin's stupidity. Storming through the halls of Hogwarts and down into the dungeons, he cared little for how much noise he was making, even momentarily forgetting that he couldn't be seen.

He said the password and entered the Common Room amidst surprised faces from those inside, all of them examining the blank stretch of wall to see why it had opened. Storming upstairs, he discarded his cloak and saw that Morrison was already laying down.

"Oy!" he said, startled as Albus appeared in front of him. "Don't scare me like that mate I though you we- oh" he stopped abruptly at the look on his friend's face. "Went bad I take it?"

"I have to talk to Rose as soon as possible" Albus said, stuffing the Cloak back in his trunk furiously.

"What happened?" Morrison said, sitting up and now looking worried.

"Hugo got knocked unconscious" Albus said shortly. "And then got a pat on the back about how he'd do better 'next time'. Next time my arse..."

Morrison sat in silence as Albus fumed, even pulling off his bed hangings to blow off steam, which Morrison promptly started a rant that bordered heavily on how he most certainly wasn't going to enjoy bringing up the topic to Rose, and was just considering asking Scorpius to pass a message along to Mirra to give to her during a Prefect meeting when something else came to his attention.

"Where *is* Scorpius?" he asked aloud, though Morrison was the only one in the room.

"Patrolling" Morrison replied.

"This early?"

Morrison shrugged. "Mel's doin' it too. Increased hours and all, probably cause half of WAR was busy teaching kids how to blow stuff up. Which reminds me," he continued, yawning, "I've been wanting to blow myself up all day hitting the books and I'm about to head to bed...are you going to be up?"

Albus stared at him. "Yeah mate, I think I'll be up for a bit" he said, letting the sarcasm drip into every word.

"Okay well if you see Mel, can you tell her that I studied today?" Morrison asked, not catching on.

"Yeah sure" Albus breathed out.

"Alright, good night mate..."

"Night" Albus said as his friend pulled the covers over himself.

With Morrison tucked away Albus retreated down to the Common Room, where he sat alone by the fire, patiently waiting for his friend to return. He knew that he looked odd sitting there idly, but he really didn't care at this point. His mood was so bad that for the first time ever, he actually returned the dirty looks he was receiving.

He knew that he could use the spare time to study or do homework, but for some reason, he simply stayed in his seat, tapping his hands onto his lap anxiously. One by one everyone else in the Common Room went up to bed, Bartleby and Dante giving him light waves as they did so, until finally, he was alone in the dimly lit Common Room. His restlessness had almost hit its peak when, at around half past midnight, the door finally opened.

Melonie emerged, but Scorpius didn't.

"Hey" she said, her expression tired. "What are you doing up-"

"Where's Scorpius?" Albus demanded rudely, and Melonie gave him an affronted look.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I- sorry" Albus apologized earnestly. "I just really need to speak to him."

She eyed him for a moment before deciding that he was okay to speak to.

"He's just finishing up some rounds now I think" she told him. "He told me to go on ahead. I take it you went to the club meeting?" she asked, and Albus nodded. "Ah...well try and get some sleep" she said warmly, and she went to walk by him.

Albus nodded again, but Melonie continued to speak.

"You didn't happen to see Morri-"

"He went to bed early. Studied all day" Albus told her, and she smiled.

"Thanks. G' night Al!"

"Night..." he said, unfocused as she went up the stairs to the girl's dormitory.

He sat back down in his seat by the fire, hands folded and hunched over. Any minute he could talk to Scorpius and get this night over with...

The clock-watching began once it hit one in the morning, at which point Albus was forced to stare at the Common Room wall with absurdity. Doing rounds? Surely, he'd checked the entirety of the castle thrice already? Had he perhaps gone for a swim too, and investigated the black lake for illicit activity?

In a sudden burst of inspiration, he stood up on the spot and crept up the stairs. Within thirty seconds he was rummaging through his trunk again.

Dante Haug made a noise as though he was going to wake up, but ultimately stayed asleep. Albus left the dormitory with the Marauder's Map clutched tightly in his hands.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good" he whispered through gritted teeth, tapping the Map sharply with his wand as he stood motionless in the Common Room.

Lines began forming at once, most of them with little interference due to the few people out this late at night. He caught the headmistress sitting still in her office; saw Professor Malfoy pacing in his own. Mirra was stationary, most likely asleep, as she at least had finished her Prefect duties in a reasonable amount of time. Hugo was in his dormitory too...so he was alright, then.

Albus found Scorpius Malfoy hiding in plain sight however. His friend was on the second floor, and most unusually, he was stationary. Eyes widening, Albus realized that this was far from weird compared to what else he was seeing.

Scorpius was not alone. Next to him was a tiny bubble that had, in miniscule letters inside, *Anastasia Anifur*.

"You've got to be kidding me" Albus said out loud.

The two bubbles then touched for a moment, indicating bodily contact.

"You've *got* to be kidding me!"

The two of them then went their separate ways though, Scorpius heading for a staircase that would lead directly to the dungeons. It appeared as though his night was finally over. Albus realized that had he went for the Map but a minute later, he'd have seen nothing at all.

He didn't even bother putting the Map away as he stayed in the same upright position, rather letting it dangle loosely from his hand after wiping it. He waited for Scorpius' entrance, and wasn't disappointed a few moments later.

"Blimey, you still up mate?" Scorpius said, his face blank. "How was the club meeting?"

Albus addressed neither question. "Late night patrolling eh?"

Scorpius shrugged. "Some nights are worse than others. I reckon you saw Mel then? She looked tired, didn't she?"

Albus said nothing. Scorpius gave a yawn and then went to walk by him, but Albus stopped him with a short statement.

"Are you serious, mate?"

Scorpius took a step back, looking curious. "What?"

"Are you serious?" Albus reiterated, and then, when Scorpius showed no signs of letting up his relentless facade, he added, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Scorpius asked darkly, but he then lowered his eyes and saw the Map clutched in Albus' hands. "Damn..." he added, admitting defeat immediately.

"Bang to rights, mate" Albus said.

"What, have you been spying on me?" Scorpius said, voice somewhat raised now-but not quite argumentative.

"Have you been hiding a girlfriend?" Albus asked, and Scorpius exhaled deeply, looking like he'd give anything to just go to bed. An hour or so ago and Albus would have felt the same, but now there was too much adrenaline pumping through him. When Scorpius didn't speak, he continued.

"I mean- why- why wouldn't you just tell us?"

"I don't know" Scorpius said, throwing up his hands.

"How- how long has this- I don't even- who *is she*?" he finished his broken sentence powerfully.

"I mean, I don't even *know her*. I didn't even know that you did-"

"We started talking last year" Scorpius said. "Just a bit. Both got made Prefects, some light chatter. Wouldn't even really call us friends like that. But we owed a bit over the summer...about O.W.L results and such, and this year it just...I dunno. Came naturally. I mean, I have classes with her that you guys aren't in anymore!" he added defensively. "So I talk to her a lot more..."

Albus nodded his head, acknowledging that it made sense. But still...

"How long has it been...?"

"Couple weeks" Scorpius said with a shrug.

"Weeks!" Albus said, shocked. "Mate, school just started last month! I mean, how'd you even keep it a secret that lon-"

But he stopped there. Surely, the other Prefects would know, or at least have suspicions. And that included...

"Mirra knows?" he asked, and Scorpius flushed. "And Melo- you got me and Morrison's girlfriends to *lie to us*?"

"Hey I didn't ask anyone to lie!" Scorpius said, catching the accusation in his tone. "But they asked if they could repeat what they knew and I- I- well I respectfully declined" he added lacklusterly.

"Unbelievable" Albus said.

"What are you mad at Mirra now?" Scorpius asked.

"No" Albus said truthfully. "A little *flabbergasted*, to be honest, but certainly not mad. It's just- I- I don't even know" he said, throwing up his hands. "I still don't get it. So you've got a girlfriend now and yesterday I had no idea you even lik- what ever happened to Rose?" he cut himself off suddenly.

"Rose isn't meant to be" Scorpius said, rolling his eyes. "What, you'd rather I still be chasing after her?"

"I didn't say that!" Albus said, pointing. It was now him that felt accused. "Don't go putting words in my mouth-"

"I wasn't putting words in your mouth I was just asking a legitimate question-"

"You were putting words in my mouth!" Albus said all in one breath, and Scorpius acquiesced. "And I mean, okay, you've been snogging for a few weeks, that's fine" he continued. "But why hide it? That's what I don't get..."

"I dunno!" Scorpius said yet again.

"I mean seriously, what happened to telling each other everything? Instead you're running around at night, acting dodgy, outright lying-"

"What does it matter?" Scorpius argued.

"Because it would save me and Morrison some trouble!" Albus blurted out. "Wondering what it is you're up to...and I even needed your help tonight but you were nowhere to be found-"

"So that's what this is about" Scorpius said indignantly. "I wasn't here to aid Mr. Potter the second he snapped his fingers, so he runs off and grabs his Map-"

"Hugo was put in the Hospital Wing tonight you git" Albus said roughly, and Scorpius froze on the spot. "I needed to know if you could pass along a message to Mirra to Rose for me, in case I can't do it, so yeah I was kind of counting on you a bit tonight."

Scorpius said nothing, but Albus still had an unanswered question.

"I'm still lost mate" he asked. "Why keep it a secret? What is *so* bad about me and Morrison knowing? Did you think we wouldn't like her? I don't even know her! She doesn't even know me-"

But then it hit him. Like a ton of bricks falling on his head, answers were pounded into his mind forcefully. Scorpius' mouth thinned.

"She's one of them" Albus declared, intentionally void of detail.

"She's a Hufflepuff, yeah-"

"No, she's one of *them*" Albus stressed. "She reckons my dad is the worst thing since Dragonpox, right? Picked yourself a winner, did you-"

"Hey watch it!" Scorpius said defensively, and he certainly sounded argumentative now.

"It didn't matter if Morrison knew, outside of you were afraid he'd tell me" Albus said. "What were you going to keep this up all year? That you were dating someone who thinks that my dad is a murderer?"

"Mate almost everyone thinks that!" Scorpius said, holding out his hands. "Look, Mirra's been in your life since what, first year? Of course she knows everything that goes on. Melonie slid in last year but you two were already okay, so she fits into the Potter conspiracy nicely. Anastasia- she- she doesn't *hate* you or anything mate, she just doesn't know you! What's that, her fault?"

"So I guess you have a ruddy good time talking about me and my dad behind my back then, eh?" Albus asked, shaking somewhat now.

"I would never do that" Scorpius said strictly, and the way that he stressed every syllable, Albus had to admit, it was convincing. "*Never*. She's got nothing against you mate, but you know as well as I do there's not many groups of people around here who call you a friend, and I just don't think that you'd mix with her lot."

"Oh but you do?"

"She's really smart, okay?" Scorpius said at once. "So I can hang with her friends a bit and study with them yeah, but it's only her I'm close with. And I'm good enough mates with you that they know not to say anything around me, okay?"

Albus stared at him, not even knowing how to answer that.

"Look I need this mate" Scorpius lashed out abruptly. "Especially this year. I'm up to my head in schoolwork, and I've got my dad here this year, which doesn't make things any easier-he doesn't even know yet-she relaxes me, okay? But I swear- you know I'd exit out of it if she was one of those people throwing you hateful looks. Now I can't speak for her entire house, but she's got no problems with you mate. She just doesn't know you...and neither her or her friends are really all that eager to so I figured there was no point."

Albus said nothing. He was still hurt from being lied to; it just felt weird, having Scorpius use his brilliance in deceit against him. But what was he going to do, ask his friend to end his first ever relationship on his account? Anastasia Anifur hadn't been the one to burn his arm, or knock Hugo unconscious tonight. He thought of what would happen if Mirra wasn't on good terms with Scorpius...it was a bit different, considering how long he and Mirra were together, but nonetheless, it was a difficult position to put himself in...

"I'm heading to bed" Scorpius said bleakly. "If you still want to talk to tomorrow...then just let me know, but we got class in a few hours..."

And he made to walk by him. Albus was dangerously close to letting him trot upstairs without another word, but was it really worth it? Morrison and Scorpius were his best friends. That was the bottom line.

"Hey" Albus said, turning, and Scorpius looked down from the stairs. "How was your first snog?"

Scorpius smiled widely. "Bloody brilliant. I'll fill you in tomorrow, I reckon I have to go wake Morrison up now, tell him the whole thing before you do. 'Night"

"'Night" Albus said, turning back around and listening as Scorpius went up to the dormitory.

A powerful memory hit him as he stood there in silence. Three years ago, he remembered, he and Scorpius had discussed his chances of dating Mirra even though she was in Gryffindor. Scorpius

had outright rejected the possibility of anything inter-house, saying it was impossible. So much had changed since then...

"What a night" Albus muttered to himself, folding up the Map neatly. And without another word, he headed upstairs as well.

Chapter 11: The Jealous Bug

Breakfast the next morning was an interesting affair, as it involved-for the first time ever-commentary about Scorpius being in a relationship. Albus had been there for most of Scorpius' hushed explanation to witness Morrison's jaw hang open the previous night, culminating in him asking if it was a dream and falling back asleep immediately after. With all three of them well rested, however, it was easy for the questions to begin.

"How could you hide something like this from me?" Morrison asked, not Scorpius, but Melonie.

"It wasn't my business" Melonie said testily, smiling. Albus figured that Mirra's excuse would be along similar lines, and smiled himself.

"And even so, it wasn't a big deal" Scorpius said with a smirk, though he flushed. Albus knew his friend well enough to know that with the secret over, Scorpius was now going to enjoy basking in the attention.

"Well you know what this all means though, right?" Morrison asked the group of them seriously.

"What's that?" Albus asked.

"All three of us have girlfriends now" he said plainly, nodding his head to both Albus and Scorpius. "Our friendship is officially dead. To six good years!" he announced, raising his glass of orange juice.

They all laughed, with Albus and Scorpius following suit.

"I propose we bury it in a field of golden tulips" Scorpius said with a wink, and the three of them grinned at the reference.

"I don't get it" Melonie said, looking between them all.

"Inside joke" Morrison told her.

"So when do we get to meet her?" Albus asked, feeling somewhat girlish as he did so, though admittedly, there was more to meeting Scorpius' new girlfriend than just wanting to make acquaintances.

Scorpius refilled his glass of juice before answering. "Whenever you want" he said bluntly. "Do me a favor though, would you?" he asked, and both Morrison and Albus looked up.

"What's that mate?" Albus asked him.

"Give me your *honest* opinion of her."

By the time that they reached Friday, Albus wasn't sure if he even had a full opinion to give. Anastasia Anifur was as mixed a bag as could be, as far as he was concerned. After meeting her on Wednesday and hanging around her a bit on Thursday, he found himself struggling to put into words his impression.

She was not as easy on the eyes as Mirra, nor did she carry the friendly warmth usually emitted by Melonie. She was sometimes unusually quiet, others rather talkative, sometimes to the point of irritation. She had a thin, wiry frame that made her a bit taller than Albus was used to in a girl; he didn't even notice it until he saw her stand next to Scorpius, where she was but an inch or two shorter than him. Her long, straight blonde hair was only a shade deeper than her boyfriend's, and there was always an unusual expression of confidence on her face as well; an air of superiority that made Albus wonder if it was a result of spending time with Scorpius, or what had made him attracted to her in the first place.

Still, there was nothing particularly *bad* to say about her either; she was not unattractive, nor did she come across as anything negative, apart from slightly haughty. Albus was also thankful that she didn't seem to be abrasive toward him in any way, and there was a feeling of authenticity to it that made Albus believe that Scorpius had not asked her to do so. Of course, this may have simply been reluctance to bad mouth him to his face, but considering that other people didn't mind, it was appreciated.

Though he found it hard to assign a score so-to-speak, the rest of the school seemed to have no problem voicing their opinions. The very day after Albus had learned of the relationship, the entire school ended up learning of it as well, making him realize just how vehement Scorpius had been about hiding it from him; he'd even convinced Anastasia not to tell anyone. Most people, surprisingly, seemed to think that the relationship was a good one. Albus had thought for sure that his friendship with Scorpius—as well as the fact that Scorpius was a Slytherin—would be a hindrance in this regard, but he'd forgotten one variable; Draco Malfoy was the most popular Potions master therein years, and this meant that his son was automatically seen in a better light.

If there was one thing that Albus didn't understand, however, it was the way in which Scorpius and Anastasia functioned. In the small amount of time that he'd been around them both, he noticed that they were prone to having long, fast paced talks about classwork, all in an identical voice of enthusiasm. He supposed that their mutual love for knowledge and obsession with perfect grades may have been another indication as to how they'd found one another. But what Albus also noticed was their general lack of public displays of affection.

He had expected Scorpius to revel in the fact that could gleefully show that he was in a relationship in the corridors, no longer having to worry that it would reach back to his friends, but his behavior with his girlfriend served as a powerful reminder to how easily Albus had been kept out of the loop before. He only saw them kiss once—a light one—and things like holding hands and hugging appeared to be nonexistent if it wasn't in private. They frequently just said "good-

bye" when separating to go to different classes, leaving nothing to show that they were anything passed friends at all.

This unnerved Albus slightly. If Mirra ever left without giving him a kiss, or *some* sort of indication that everything was okay, he would instantly assume she was mad at him. Perhaps all relationships were a bit different.

"Well we're not all the way comfortable with flaunting it" Scorpius told him when this question was asked on Friday afternoon, as they all settled into their seats in the Potions room. "That'll take a bit of time. But anyway, I'm ready for your analysis" he said coolly.

Albus again had no answer for him, but Mirra, who was next to him, leaned over to voice her opinion.

"I think she's great Scorpius" she said, smiling. "And she seems *really* smart too."

"All us Prefects are!" Scorpius said, leaning forward as well. Albus watched as Scorpius and Mirra's hands met for a high five in front of his face, his expression blank at the obvious insult.

Before they could continue any further, however, the class was silenced by the entrance of their professor. Professor Malfoy swept himself into the room in an icy manner, not making eye contact with any of them until he had himself settled.

"I have some old work to hand back" he said immediately. "Mr. Vincent, if you would-"

Morrison was handed an assortment of papers, with the instructions to pass them around. Albus received his essay first-the one that he'd done on Galpalott's laws, and saw an "O" inscribed on the top.

Morrison maneuvered his way around the entire classroom while their professor began writing on the board with his gave a squeal that made Albus jump when her paper was handed back to her.

"What's up?" Albus murmured, eyeing it.

A spiky "A" was scribbled at the top; an average grade. There was a small note written there as well.

Plagiarism is not tolerated at Hogwarts. You've been warned.

Mirra threw him a dark look, and Albus couldn't help but flush. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to give her his essay after all.

Professor Malfoy's voice brought them back to reality.

"Catataserum can be an extremely difficult Potion to make by merely following the steps in your book. I have here additional tips on the board to help you. Ingredients are in the cupboard. If you have any *intelligent* questions," he stressed the word carefully, "feel free to ask them."

They set to work immediately, with a flustered Mirra going to the cupboards to retrieve everything while Albus prepared the cauldron. From next to him, Scorpius asked a question that threw him off guard.

"How's your Rose situation going?" he said lowly.

Albus raised his eyebrows. For the last two years, it would have been he who had asked such a thing to Scorpius. Albus knew the true intention of the question though.

He had not yet had the chance to speak to Rose about Hugo and the Protector's Club, mostly because of how different their schedules were. Though he knew the importance of it, he was also not exactly pressed for time; the next meeting had not even been dated yet.

Still, he wanted to get it done, and he voiced this to his friend with a question of his own.

"I'm thinking I'll try and corner her this weekend" he muttered back. "But I don't even know where she usually is. You don't see her often, do you? When going to different classes?"

"Not really" Scorpius replied. "On my way to History of Magic I sometimes see her, but that's about it. Last time I caught a glance of her, she looked a bit moodier than usual though."

"Maybe she already knows about Hugo then" Albus said hopefully, thinking that maybe it would make it easier to bring the topic up. Instinctively, he turned around slightly to look at one of the back tables, where Rose was sitting.

She was sitting next to Donovan Hornsbrook once again, making it unlikely that she's all that against the club. She did however, Albus noticed, look like she had a lot on her mind; and a lot of bad at that. She was simply staring down while Hornsbrook did the majority of the work. And then, as though she recognized that she was being watched, she looked up at him.

Her face took him aback. The look that she threw his way was one of the most sinister that he'd ever seen on anyone period, let alone his cousin. Though well aware of her innate atrabilious nature, he couldn't register what in the world could have provoked such a glare.

He spun back around once more as Mirra sat down next to him, ready to get started. She made a fuss over dumping the ingredients in, doing so loudly as if to show the professor that she could indeed do things herself.

Albus half turned his head around, hoping to get a glimpse of his cousin once more. To his immense surprise, she was still wearing the same expression, only now, it looked more like it was directed to his right than to him. Was she eyeing Scorpius like that?

"Al, what am I doing here?" Mirra whispered through pursed lips, stirring their concoction slowly and watching as it bubbled.

"Huh? Oh right sorry-"

Albus took the reigns, not even bothering to use the tips on the board as he worked his way through the Potion. He allowed Mirra to do the more average tasks of chopping and scooping, while he handled the actual liquid itself.

He had to restrain himself from looking behind him again, and it wasn't until they'd all been instructed to hand in their potions that he voiced what he saw to anyone.

"Angry?" Mirra inquired loosely as they exited the classroom.

"Furious" Albus told her, stopping for a moment to let the others catch up.

"Blimey that potion's tricky" Scorpius commented. "What's going on?" he added, after seeing the look on Albus and Mirra's faces.

"Just having a little chat about Rose" Albus said quietly, in case Rose was walking with her friends ahead and could be in listening distance.

"Yeah she seems a bit shirty, doesn't she?" Morrison said from out of the blue, holding hands with Melonie.

"Say what?" Albus asked.

"Practically snatched her essay out of my hand when I was giving it back" Morrison answered with a shrug.

"Did you see what she got on it?" Mirra asked him.

"I think it was an okay grade. I think it was an 'A'" he added thoughtfully.

"That's probably just it then" Mirra said. "She's a perfectionist of sorts; probably just mad at her grade."

"Yeah...yeah maybe" Albus said. Perhaps it did make sense a bit. After all, it was Scorpius' dad who graded her, so it was only natural that she'd throw Scorpius an irritated look. But her expression had been more than one of simple angst though. Could it have been over something so trivial?

He wouldn't get the chance to find out until at least Sunday, however. Sick of the whining from his teammates, he agreed to schedule another practice for Saturday morning. He really didn't want to-he even had some homework to catch up on-but having already let word reach, he was forced to go down to the Quidditch pitch on the beautiful Saturday morning, Scorpius alongside

him. The rest of the team joined them soon after, some of them yawning and complaining about the earliness, which did not improve Albus' mood; hadn't they begged for this?

"Alright, we've got a new player here," Albus said loudly, indicating Roger Winkly, "and that means that we've got more than one priority today. We're sharpening our skills, yes, but we also need to get used to the new dynamic. So first and foremost, I want all of us in the air. Chasers, I want you to give Scorpius a real warm-up. Beaters, you're protecting this time" he told them all.

They all obliged immediately, streaking off into the sky as Albus handled the equipment, apart from releasing the Snitch, as his job today was to monitor them.

He kept a particularly strong eye on Lucas Strossen for the first few minutes, making sure that he didn't accidentally kill the newcomer Roger by trying to impose his vast Quidditch knowledge upon him. Apart from this, however, he made a habit of watching how his Chasers worked with each other, looking for a lot of passing in particular.

"You can do it sweetie!"

The screech reverberated around the entire pitch it seemed, forcing Albus to look down and into the stands for the source. Dressed in black and yellow, Anastasia Anifur was waving towards Scorpius.

Slightly perturbed that Scorpius had invited her once more, but trying his best not to focus on the flailing of her arms, Albus returned his attention back to his team. Strossen and Barry were working the Bludgers well, knocking them back and forth so as to always have them occupied while his Chasers went on the offense.

Tiffani Garret gave a strong pass to Baranabus Curder, who in a flashy and unnecessary move, passed it quickly behind his back to Roger, who aimed for the left hoop-

It streaked right by Scorpius, who blushed immediately at his performance. Barnabus Curder patted Roger Winkly on the shoulder, but Albus could only stare in disbelief. There was no excuse that time. Scorpius had just been flat-out beat.

"Good try!" Anastasia hollered up to him.

Albus looked down at her, seeing her in the loud and obnoxious attitude that she wore half of the time, the other half more reserved. Her strong support here was a little bewildering, however. She rarely ever kissed or hugged her boyfriend in public. So why was she playing super-girlfriend now?

Practice continued, with Strossen and Barry still holding up their end of the bargain with the Bludgers. The trio of Chasers, meanwhile, utilized more quick ball movement, ultimately resulting in Tiffani Garret just barely squeezing the Quaffle by Scorpius.

Albus narrowed his eyes. Despite their scoring, he couldn't bring himself to be pleased. Scorpius just seemed out of sorts. This happened twice more in a row, each time accompanied by an encouraging yell from Anastasia below.

"Time-out!" Albus called. "Take a breather you lot" he said to everyone except for his star Keeper.

Floating towards him, he made sure to keep his voice low and tame, as his friend looked close to exploding. His face was scarlet, his teeth bared.

"What's going on with you mate? Everything okay?" Albus asked calmly.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm good" Scorpius said, trying to straighten his face. "Just a bit rusty, you know? Need to get loose a bit..."

Thoroughly unconvinced, Albus lowered his voice even further. "Is she distracting you?" he asked, giving the tiniest of nods down to ground level.

"What? No!" Scorpius said with a shaky laugh, as though it was the most absurd idea fathomable. "I just need to get loose!" he added again, and he began moving his arms in a circular motion, as if that would effect his performance at all.

It didn't though, and an hour later Albus was forced to call for the end of practice to both an elated set of Chasers and an extremely disgruntled Keeper and best friend. Anastasia Anifur, who was waiting for Scorpius to finish the whole time so that she could walk off the pitch with him, addressed him quietly as soon as he had left the air, and the two of them walked off together.

Albus scowled somewhat at this, but then caught wasn't Scorpius' fault that he froze up with his girlfriend watching. Hopefully, though, with her face hidden amongst hundreds of others during the actual game, this wouldn't be a problem.

Albus allotted the next day to be the day in which he approached Rose, knowing full well that he wouldn't have time during the week, and also that if the next Protector's Club meeting was scheduled for soon, he'd have no other way to coax Hugo out of it. He hadn't seen his younger cousin in the halls as of late, though then again, this could easily be attributed to the fact that he was always in a group now. His best bet was definitely to speak to Rose.

Sunday morning came with interesting news, however. Not only was there a special addition of the *WAR Weekly* recapping all of the information trickled so far, but there was also an announcement made; the dates for Hogsmeade and for the first Quidditch game of the season were set.

"Ah we've got plenty of time to practice" Scorpius said nonchalantly, swirling his spoon around in his cereal. Their debut against Gryffindor was set for the fifth of November, with the Hogsmeade visit to be a week later.

Albus gave him a grin, not voicing what he was actually thinking-that Scorpius had about a month to get over his stage fright when Anastasia was brought up something interesting, though.

"It's going to be a busy week or so then, isn't it? What with Apparition lessons just a little before it all..."

This was certainly true, and the placement of the Hogsmeade visit ahead of these lessons seemed to help confirm an earlier theory; that the older students were to have some understanding of how to Apparate in case of an emergency. Though of course, Albus agreed with his father that there probably wouldn't be one.

"What's on everyone's agenda today?" asked Melonie, finishing her own breakfast and pushing the bowl away.

"I'm meeting Anastasia" Scorpius said, a hint of a smirk on his face.

"I'm going to try and track down Rose, maybe give Mirra a visit too" Albus commented.

Morrison gave a yawn. "Guess that means we're spending the day together then, Mel!"

"I can hardly wait" she said, the dark humor noted in her voice. She excused herself to go to the bathroom, at which point Morrison leaned in to his two friends.

"Want to hear something outrageous?" he asked them both.

They both raised their eyebrows, nonverbally signaling for him to inform.

"Out of the four female Prefects, we're dating three of them. Ha! How'd that happen?"

Albus and Scorpius both chortled, but then quickly pushed their own plates away afterward. Albus bade Scorpius a farewell, as he would be meeting Anastasia around the entrance to the Hufflepuff Common Room, then retreated to his own. He still had the plan of catching Rose on her own, despite the looks sent his way during Potions. To make sure that this happened, he turned, of course, to the Marauder's Map.

Sitting up in his dormitory alone, he activated the Map and scanned it for his cousin. She was not in the Gryffindor Common Room, though Hugo was, surrounded by a few others from his year. He traced his eyes along the halls, eventually settling on the library. Rose was there. Interestingly enough, however, she was sitting at a table with Mirra for company.

Albus recoiled somewhat, folding up the Map and working things out in his head. He knew that their friendship had been rekindled somewhat-even if it hadn't yet returned to what it had once

been-but it still seemed unlikely that the two of them would be sitting together with no one else for company.

Whatever the reason, however, this worked in his favor greatly. If Rose and Mirra were back on good terms, then having her there when he talked could be greatly beneficial to his cause. What's more, Mirra's presence meant that he actually had a good excuse for being around his cousin, who he had slowly but surely drifted apart from every year since his first.

He exited the Common Room and began the trek up to the seventh floor, using a passage on the fifth floor to dodge around a group of older Ravenclaws. Sometimes, he reasoned, it was best not even to risk confrontation. He entered the library minutes later, but his face fell when he neared the table where Mirra was.

She was sitting alone.

"Hey" she said, looking up. "What are you doing here?"

"Where's Rose?" he asked at once. "And hi" he added.

Mirra turned her head slightly to indicate she was confused as to how he'd known that Rose was there, but must have deduced that the Map was used on her own, as she didn't ask any questions.

"She just left" she said. "She'll be back in a few minutes though. I was actually about to head out myself..."

Albus frowned. Her presence was key. He didn't say this though, instead taking a seat down at the table.

"What were you two talking about?" he asked.

Mirra sighed. "Girl stuff" she said plainly.

"Anything interesting?"

"No" Mirra replied, her face straight. "I didn't mention the Hugo thing; that one's entirely up to you."

Albus gave a grim nod. Before he could say anything, however, his girlfriend changed the topic.

"Are you free tonight?" she asked.

"Same as every night" Albus said with a wry smile. "Unless I end up in the Hospital Wing from chatting with Rose..."

Mirra gave a low, short laugh. "Well I was actually thinking that we could head to the Room" she said lowly, and Albus smiled.

They had been using the Room of Requirement as a private place for dates since last year, but with the struggles of keeping up with their N.E.W.T classes, hadn't yet had the opportunity this year. Albus tilted himself back in his chair before giving her a playful answer.

"I dunno. I was thinking of maybe just catching up on some Charms homework tonight actually..."

"Okay" Mirra said calmly. "Maybe some other time then" she added.

"No wait!" Albus blurted out, nearly falling out of his chair as he attempted to reposition himself. "I was just kidding-"

Mirra gave him a wide smile, then began packing up her things. "Good, then I'll see you at around eight. But anyway, your real reason for being here just arrived."

Albus turned, and sure enough, Rose was walking towards them both. An uncomfortable shiver went up his spine as he noticed her face. Her eyes appeared red and blotchy. Only just now did Albus realize that he was not entirely sure where it was she'd went; had she been crying in the bathroom?

"I'm leaving" Mirra said to her, standing up.

"Now?" Rose asked her, and the upset look on her face intensified.

"Yeah, now" she answered. "Hang around for a second though, Al wants to talk to you I think-"

Albus gave his cousin a weak smile as she turned to look at him, her demeanor making him regret his timing immediately. Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to speak to her about such a sensitive issue after Mirra had just finished commiserating with her.

Mirra waved to them both, and then left without looking back. Rose occupied her seat, staring at him blankly as though waiting for him to address why exactly he was there.

"Hey" he said, and at that very moment, he began going over in his head everything that he wanted to say in order.

"Hey" Rose replied, tossing her red hair out of her face. "Why'd you want to talk?"

"Uhhh..."

He thought back to how he'd mentioned it all to the Headmistress, realizing that he definitely didn't want to end up blurting it out. At that very moment, however, he gained a bit of confidence. What did he have to be nervous about? He hadn't done anything wrong...he was merely trying to help. It was Hugo who would most likely end up getting in trouble.

"We need to talk about your brother" he told her crisply.

Rose widened her watery eyes, this probably having been the last thing that she expected to hear.

"What about him?" she asked.

"You know this Protector's Club thing, right?" he asked, though of course, he already knew the answer. "Did you know that your brother's in it?"

"Yes."

Her answer was quick and thoughtless. Albus scratched at the back of his neck, having expected that to go somewhat differently. Why was she so aloof about the matter?

"You- have you heard anything about what goes on in there?" he asked.

She gave a shrug. "I haven't checked it out myself, I'm too busy. But apparently they just learn extra defence."

"It's not just extra defence!" Albus shot out, and he realized that now was the time to gain momentum. "Rosiethey- they're dueling each other! I was in there the other day and Hugo got knocked on his arse-"

"Yeah I heard" she said with a frown.

He allowed his mouth to hang wide open, speechless.

"Wha- ho- you-"

Realizing that he was stammering like an idiot, he closed his mouth and shook his head. This apparently wasn't the reaction that Rose was looking for either.

"What?" she said, looking a tad bit irritated. "What's your point?"

"They're *Renegades*, Rose!" he lashed out.

Albus watched as she gave a sigh. "I know" she said, a little stubbornly. "And I don't like that either..."

"You don't?" he asked her. "Then why don't you care-"

"Of course I care, Albus!" she blurted out. "But to be honest, as much as I don't like WAR, I can't blame Hugo for checking it out. I can see why it appeals to him. He wants to be a better wizard; he wants to know how to defend himself. No one else is going to protect him, you certainly won't."

Albus was right about to reply when he caught himself. What had she just said?

"What do you mean by that?" he asked her. "That 'I' won't protect him?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she responded coolly. "Hugo used to idolize you. He just thought that you were so great. And then he followed you into Hogsmeade, and nearly ended up dead."

"That was almost two years ago!" Albus hissed, astounded at the memory that she was bringing up. Sure, he knew that this event had altered Hugo's perspective on his older cousin, but really? It had been the catalyst to his interest in WAR?

"You're right, it was" Rose replied simply. "And things have only gotten worse since then. I get the feeling that Hugo wants to make the jump from hiding behind people to being the one to defend them. He's not staying in that club for any reason other than that he *wants* to be there. I don't like or dislike it. It's his decision, whether or not he wants to feel safe."

"But he's fourteen!" Albus said, and he then gave himself a mental note to lower his voice before he was kicked out of the library. "There's plenty of older, more experienced people here who can watch over him, without getting himself mixed up with Waddlesworth's lot! There's the teachers, the Prefects-

"Well the Prefects are usually too busy snogging to notice anything anyway!" Rose cut him off, and then, shockingly, she stood up and made to move by him. Her eyes were reddening again.

"What?" Albus blurted out, dumbfounded at her comment. "What does that even- how- do you even know what you just said-"

But it was too late; she'd already left the library.

Albus could only sit there, furious at how things had turned out. Rose's general attitude, though expected, had still made her miss the point. Hugo *was* in danger in that club. How could she not see it? He thought of her parents, his Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron. What would they say about all this? But it would be too risky to send a letter.

He stomped his way out of the library a second later, the librarian screeching at him as he went. He returned to the Common Room completely disheartened, reflecting that he was no longer even in the mood to go to the Room of Requirement with Mirra later; though of course, he still would.

Neither of his friends were there when he entered the Common Room, Scorpius still hanging out with his girlfriend and probably her canary clad friends as well, Morrison having probably taken Melonie for a stroll outside. He instead waited for them in the solace of his dormitory, where he was interrupted only briefly by Bartleby Bing entering to retrieve something from his trunk. Eventually, Morrison returned.

"What's up with you mate?" he asked, looking chipper. "How'd it go with Rose?"

"Terrible" Albus snapped, laying back spread eagle on his bed. "She actually sides with Hugo."

"Get out, really?" Morrison asked him, sitting down on his own bed. "Lame. How'd they turn out like that? Your uncle's so awesome..."

Albus ignored this comment, still dwelling on the issue at hand. WAR's interference at Hogwarts was doing more than sending good news back to parents; it was altering the opinions of the students as well. Rose may very well be indifferent to them, but still, she had been unable to voice a legitimate reason why Hugo's presence there was unacceptable. And Hugo himself...he almost seemed lost completely.

And then a thought occurred to him, one that truly unnerved him. He considered his two cousins out of their mind for their actions. Did they consider the same of him? Was he, cousin Albus, foolish for not looking passed the WAR insignia and realizing that this was indeed a great opportunity for young wizards and witches to learn advanced magic and techniques?

"Coming down to dinner mate?" Morrison asked.

Albus wasn't really in the mood to eat, but he also didn't want his stomach rumbling during his date with Mirra, and so, he accompanied his friend to dinner. Scorpius was already at the table, looking as though he too was in an extremely good mood.

"Hello" he said pleasantly, delicately cutting into his baked potato.

Albus grunted while Morrison gave him a more proper answer. Scorpius turned his head to Albus, however.

"I guess your talk with Rose didn't go well then?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk about it" he said gloomily. "But anyway I have a date with Mirra later..."

Dinner was a silent affair, the only thing of note being Melonie cutting Morrison's steak for him ("You can't just pick it up with your teeth, you look like an animal!"), and then they all went back to the Common Room, Albus only to retrieve his Cloak, which he would need once more to stay out of bounds late at night. He then left the Common Room, still ticked off somewhat, but at least eager to spend some alone time with his girlfriend.

Mirra was waiting for him on the seventh floor, right in front of the apparently plain wall that concealed one of Hogwart's greatest secrets. He flipped the Cloak off and gave her a kiss in greeting, but she seemed to know right away that his heart wasn't in it.

"What happened?" she asked. "Something go wrong with Rose?"

"Tell you later" he grunted, and then he closed his eyes and walked back and forth thrice, concentrating deeply on a romantic setting. The polished door had already appeared by the time that he'd blinked his lids open, and within seconds, they were inside of the majestic Room of Requirement.

As usual, it had not disappointed. It was dimly lit due to scattered candles, with a red carpet underneath their feet. Rather than being designed for the comfort of many, however, his imagination had been quite clear on the concept of privacy; there was a large window at the end of the room that faced out into the grounds, and a single, albeit large blanket, in front of it.

As though used to it, Mirra settled herself down at once. Then, unexpectedly, she reached into her robes and removed two goblets and a flask.

"Pumpkin juice?" she asked.

Albus sat down as well, giving her a quizzical look.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked.

"The flask I borrowed from someone, the pumpkin juice inside and the goblets I got from dinner" she explained shortly, filling her own goblet up.

"Isn't that kind of like stealing?" he asked cheekily, and she gave him a shifty grin.

"There's plenty of pumpkin juice to go around in this castle, Al. And I'll put the goblets back. I just thought that it would be nice..."

"It is" he smiled, and he nodded his head towards the goblet, indicating that it should be filled. He noticed something peculiar however; she still had her Prefect badge on.

"Are you supposed to be on duty?" he asked.

"Yeah, but Charlie's covering for me" Mirra answered him, her voice absentminded.

"And he doesn't mind that? Does he know where you are?"

"Well he doesn't know I'm *here*" Mirra stressed. "But he knows I'm with *you*. He said it's no problem though, sometimes he joins up with two Ravenclaw Prefects so it's no big deal..."

Albus sat still. Charles Eckley was turning out to be a startling surprise as of late. Playing the part of Prefect well, and now being genuinely nice for the mere sake of doing so. For a wild moment, he considered some form of ulterior motive, but he mentally smacked himself a second later; perhaps, as Mirra had said before, he'd simply grown up, as people tended to do. With a squirming feeling in his gut, however, he thought of Donovan Hornsbrook, including his devout interest in the Protector's Club. What made him act so differently than his friend? Was having a father who supported WAR *that* pivotal to it all?

"What's on your mind?" Mirra's voice came out of the blue.

"Huh? Oh, nothing" he said quickly, and then, realizing that this answer would not suffice, he asked an irrelevant, but still somewhat meaningful question.

"Am I a better kisser than Charlie?" he blurted out stupidly, sure that he'd covered himself, but now somewhat regretting what he'd asked. He had wondered such a thing in passing before though...

Mirra blushed. "You're a more *passionate* kisser" she told him.

"That's a 'no'..." he said, eyes narrowed, and she laughed, then laced her arm through his.

"Seems like the jealous bug is going around" she muttered into him.

Albus instinctively looked around as though to swat something, then stopped when he processed her sentence.

"What? Jealous bug?"

Though he couldn't see her face, he knew that she was smiling.

"You. You're jealous for no reason. I haven't kissed Charlie in three years, so what does it matter?"

"It doesn't" he said defiantly, but then something else about what she'd said registered with him.

"Wait, what do you mean 'going around'?"

Mirra made a huffing noise. "Don't pretend like you don't know" she said.

"Okay then, I won't. I *really* don't know" he told her, his face blank. She looked up, apparently at a loss for words.

"Oh come on" she scoffed. "I could tell by the look on your face that it went bad with Rose. And she wasn't at dinner..."

Albus could've sworn that a question mark had appeared above his head.

"What? Rose? What's Rose jealous of?"

Mirra's jaw dropped. "Of *Anastasia*, you dunderhead!"

"Anifur!" Albus all but shouted.

"No, the other Anastasia" Mirra said sarcastically.

"Why?" he asked. "I mean she's smart...but she's not *that* smart-"

Mirra slapped her palm to her face with such ferocity that he was sure the top of her head would turn red. Even with his confusion, he couldn't help but laugh somewhat at how accurately she'd adopted the gesture so often used by he and Scorpius.

Scorpius.

"Are you serious!" he blurted out, and she looked at him expectantly. "Over Scorpius!"

Mirra beamed at him. "I thought I was going to have to draw it for you for a second there...of course over Scorpius!"

"But why?" he asked, this time positive that she couldn't be upset with him for not knowing. "She doesn't even like him, we found that out last year-"

"She *didn't* like him" Mirra cut him off. "Now, she's leaning much more on the other side of the fence."

Albus laughed. He hadn't been expecting this at all, but then again, hadn't Rose given him a very obvious clue when they'd spoken? Something about Prefects snogging?

"You're going to have explain that one" he said, voice shaking slightly.

"Rose and Lance are all but over. He doesn't want long distance, and if one person isn't in, and is already miles away, there's not much that the other person can do. On the other side, the *only* other person who paid attention to her last year-and a lot of attention, at that-starts dating someone. And it doesn't help that he's popular now too, what with his dad being so well liked and all. Plus he's a Prefect, and with his grades he'll probably end up ruling the world or something one day. Now that he's unavailable, he's something of a catch. And Rose *could have had him*, but passed. Her back-up is gone."

"But he wasn't even a back-up!" Albus argued, removing his arms from their entanglement with hers to make a gesture of astonishment. "She didn't even like him!"

"But he was *still* her back-up. He liked her."

"That's awful!" Albus said, aghast. He couldn't believe that he was even having this conversation.

"Oh Albus" she said testily, rolling her eyes. "You make it out like it's such a bad thing, lots of people do it, even if it is only in the back of their heads. You don't have a back-up plan for me?" she added, sounding almost rhetorical. "Even way in the back of your imagination?"

He stared at her with his jaw dropped down to the floor.

"No!" he yelled truthfully. "Never! I've been enamored with you since the first damn day of school!"

She blushed, her gray eyes suddenly unblinking. "You're sweet" she said quietly.

"Why, have you!" he asked, ignoring her comment due to the feeling that his head was going to explode.

"No!" she said, as though it was the most preposterous thing imaginable. "Of course not-"

"It's that pompous fool Eckley, isn't it? Stupid, renegade loving, piece of-"

"Albus stop" Mirra said warmly, and for some inexplicable reason, he found himself unable to continue. "You know how I feel about you, you know that there's no one else who means anything close to what you mean to me."

He felt his heart skip a beat; he'd missed hearing things like that. When he said nothing, however, she continued.

"But relationships aren't as important to Rose. Yeah, she likes being with someone, sure, but at this stage, she's more about *what* someone is, rather than *who*. And right now, Scorpius is a lost opportunity."

Albus could only sit there, mulling over everything in his head. Though content with Mirra's answers about their relationship, he couldn't help but ponder on the entire situation with Rose. This jealousy-which Albus thought was ridiculous anyway-was messing her up mentally a great amount it seemed. Strangely, however, he'd seen Scorpius equally as bad over her. And he *had* really liked her. Could she have actually developed genuine feelings for him?

Allbus and his girlfriend didn't really speak for the remainder of the date, instead simply cuddling up on the warm blanket and starting out into the sky. Kissing was scarce as well; for some reason, it seemed nugatory compared to the closeness of their bodies, with her head under his chin and his arms wrapped around her. He had never really stopped to consider just what it was he had with Mirra before, but seeing how awful the situation was with Rose, Scorpius, and-somehow-Anastasia Anifur, of all people, he came to appreciate that what he had was truly rare. This brought a smile to his face as he blinked himself in and out of comfortable stupors.

By the time that he realized how late the hour was, Mirra had already fallen asleep. Though he didn't want to shake her awake, he knew that he had to.

"What's up?" she said groggily, withdrawing her arms from his clasp and rubbing at her eyes, as though she hadn't been sleeping at all.

"I think that Charlie's done covering your shift by now" he said with a frown, staring out into the pitch black sky through the window.

The candles extinguished themselves as they exited, Mirra walking side by side with him as they exited out into the would walk her to her Common Room first, which wasn't far at all, and then put his Cloak back on and return to his own dormitory. Their walk back was silent but peaceful,

and only when they reached the Portrait of the Fat Lady who gave entrance to Gryffindors (who was snoozing in her frame) did Albus say anything.

"Was I a back-up to Charlie?" he asked, thinking back to those extremely painful months in third year when Mirra had dated him.

She gave him a light, sleepy smile. And then, a warm, swift kiss.

"Al, I broke-up with Charlie because every time I was with him, I was wishing I was with you instead. It just didn't seem fair to anybody."

He smiled as she stood on her tip-toes to give him a kiss on the forehead, and a minute later, they'd said goodnight, and she was back in her Common Room, a disgruntled Fat Lady trying to return to sleep.

He marched himself back to his own Common Room under the concealment of the Cloak, though it wasn't even necessary. He couldn't even spot a member of WAR in the corridors.

Some security, he smirked to himself.

A dilemma plagued his mind as he headed back down to the dungeons, however. The news that Rose had a thing for Scorpius was certainly surprising, but what could be more surprising would be his friend's reaction when he found out. Or more accurately, *if* he found it. Would Scorpius even want to know, now that he was seemingly over her? Should Albus even bother telling him?

It was strange how quickly his thought process had changed throughout the course of the one end, he knew that the most important issue was still WAR being in the castle; still his younger cousin's risk of severe injury every week or so. But all that he could really think about was how happy he was with Mirra, and how unusual the situation was with Rose. It seemed as though regardless of what happened outside the walls of Hogwarts, or even how it affected the inside, nothing could stop them from being teenagers.

As late as it was, Albus was still sure that Scorpius had not yet returned from "patrolling" when he entered the Common Room, and he was much too tired to wait anyway. Instead, he crawled into bed immediately upon his entrance into his dormitory, allowing his exhausted body to rest from the day full of ups and downs. He was drifting now, his tiredness overcoming him...and soon enough his heart was beating faster and faster, noises of struggle in his head-

"Mate! Al!"

He awoke with a start, apparently not a moment later than when he'd fallen asleep, and yet, it felt as though at least an hour had passed by. Sleep was strange like that.

"What?" Albus whispered into the darkness, and he then saw that it was Scorpius standing over him. He was fully dressed too; he'd just returned from doing rounds.

"You were strangling yourself in your sleep" he said darkly.

"Huh?" Albus asked, taken aback.

"Yeah, you had your hands up around your throat. You were either choking yourself or trying to pry someone else off... either way, that's dangerous mate. Sleep with your arms in your pillow case or something."

"Thanks" he muttered, rubbing at his eyes; he had a strong suspicion as to what had been going on in his dream, but he was not going to voice it. "G' night" he said simply, making to roll over, but Scorpius prodded him.

"What?" Albus shot out.

"That's not why I woke you. Come one, someone's here to see you..."

Albus rolled out of bed dumbfounded, Scorpius' comment making him question whether or not he was still dreaming. When he stood up and pulled his bed hangings away, he saw that Morrison was awake as well.

"Why'd you have to wake him up too?" he asked.

"I didn't *have to*," Scorpius whispered hoarsely, "but he's normally with us for these things, so I figured it was polite..."

He led them downstairs into the Common Room, where the crackling fire was still illuminating the scene. Albus jumped when he looked into it.

"*Aunt Hermione!*" he breathed.

Sure enough, there she was. Brown bushy hair and a thin smile on her face, Aunt Hermione was indeed staring at the three of them, her head firmly placed in the fire.

It was not this that seemed strange to Albus; both his father and Uncle Ron had done it before. It was instead the lateness of the hour and the knowledge that Aunt Hermione rarely broke the rules, as far as he knew.

"Hi Mrs. Weasley" mumbled a sleepy Morrison.

"Hello Morrison" she replied, then turned her attention to all three of them in general. "I'm sorry for keeping you all up, I know that it's late. I had half a mind to not Floo at all, but I figured that at least one of you might be up, and Scorpius came to the rescue there. What are you doing up?" she added to him. "A bit late to be patrolling as a Prefect..."

"Oh you know, just keeping the school safe and sound" he replied with a yawn, and Albus did his best to not laugh. He was slightly more awake now.

"I see" Aunt Hermione replied simply, but she turned her attention squarely on Albus. "I hope you don't mind Albus, I wanted to have a personal word with you."

"Should I go back to bed then?" asked Morrison, whose eyes were closed anyway, as though he was about to fall asleep standing up.

"You're both welcome to stay" Aunt Hermione replied, addressing both Morrison and Scorpius. "So long as you promise total discretion as to what's discussed."

"Of course" Scorpius said, nodding, and Morrison nodded too.

"Good" Aunt Hermione replied, unsmiling. "Well Albus, I want to ask you how the invasion at Hogwarts is going."

Her choice of words here took Albus slightly aback; he was fully awake now.

"Erm- you- you heard about all of that then?" he asked, surprised. He knew that WAR being at Hogwarts was widespread news, but the way that Aunt Hermione was speaking of it, it appeared as though she knew of all the subtleties of their presence.

"Oh yes. Mostly from things that I'll discuss later actually. I was hoping to inform you a bit of the going-ons of the outside world, but first I'd like to know the degree of control that Wands and Redemption has here."

He took a sharp breath before speaking. He explained briefly about the ubiquitous nature of WAR throughout the castle, including the first day, in which they'd barged in on Scorpius' father. He also mentioned the Headmistress' insistence at the start-of-term feast that they be treated as guardians and confidants, though he neglected to mention the Protector's Club. Doing so would probably end up with him mentioning Hugo, and he was not sure whether it was his place to tell Aunt Hermione what her son was up to. But then again, if he didn't, who would?

"Interesting" she said once Albus was finished.

"Why, did you expect that stuff?" Albus asked.

"I expected WAR to have more pull over the students, actually" she replied, and Albus exchanged a nervous look with both of his friends, who were staring at him now with the same expression; they were both curious as to why he hadn't mentioned the Protector's Club.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because our knowledge of Waddlesworth's movements in the muggle world suggests that he's trying to appeal directly to the youth, not just to their parents. We figured that he'd be making a similar move in the wizarding world, what with the election dated and all."

"The election has a date now?" Albus asked.

"Yes" Aunt Hermione responded. "For right after Christmas. I suppose that if he isn't directly presenting himself to younger wizards and witches though, it could just be confidence that he'll be victorious anyway. Which he will be" she added with a frown.

"Is this even really an election?" Morrison blurted out. "I mean, who is he running against? I haven't even heard anyone else's name-"

"Which is expected" Aunt Hermione said dryly. "He has two other competitors, as is the case in the Ministry of Magic, when an election is held after someone resigns. Usually, they're both from different branches of the Department of Magical Law-Enforcement, but in this case, it's neither; there's too poor a reputation there now" she said, and Albus knew that she was referring to the after-effect of his father's imprisonment.

"Instead," she continued, "Hubert Gough is from the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Thaddeus Moore worked his way up through magical of them have an actual chance anyway, of course. Their mere presence in the election is simply to make it legitimate."

Albus felt a wave of cold sweep over him. So many people had thus far mentioned how much of a sure thing it was that Waddlesworth would win, but hearing it detailed like this made him cringe.

"And the muggle one?" he asked, prepared for the worst.

"He'll most likely lose" Aunt Hermione answered, a hint of a smile on her face.

"No way!" Morrison said loudly, now fully awake himself.

"Why?" Scorpius asked.

"Waddlesworth is now trying to do something unprecedented in the muggle world" Aunt Hermione said clearly. "Their government functions differently than ours, and he knows it. His biggest selling point was the fact that he came out of nowhere, though of course, he must do this because he was never known there before. He planned on spinning it so that he was part of a group of individuals who were all going to support the people as a whole, and then tried going further and making it so that the election was dependent entirely on them. But this backfired greatly. They don't know him on that side of the world, and for all the promises that he makes, he can't even be considered a proper politician. You can't just announce that you're in the government, and suddenly be there. People don't know him, and that includes the muggle higher-ups."

"But my Uncle Durlsey and his wife love him" Albus argued, surprised.

"Indeed, and this is where we're getting our information from" Aunt Hermione said. "But your muggle relatives are not a realistic representation of the muggle world as a whole; far from it. They may have been impressed with his loose back story and the amount of money that

accompanied it, but not everyone is so easily swayed. Some people need credentials. Many wizards and witches think that muggles are unintelligent because they know nothing of magic, but this is not true. Though they lack our magical prowess, their ability to think remains largely intact. Waddlesworth underestimated the muggles; both the intellect of the people, and the way in which their government functions.

"One thing that we did notice, however, is that a considerable amount of time was spent around the schools. That's where Waddlesworth was trying to get the most accomplished, and though he may have admitted defeat in the muggle world by now, it still shows that he is not afraid to reach out to the youth. In this case, though, he's much better off because the children and teenagers in our world are very aware of what's going on out there."

Albus nodded. There was no getting around it; he'd have to tell her.

"Aunt Hermione," he started apprehensively, "there is more to what WAR is doing here. They've started a club or sorts-the Protector's Club, they're called-and its all about self-defence. Only, you know...they're Renegades. So it's more about attacking that anything."

Aunt Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Interesting" she said once more. "Go on."

He explained, once again as succinctly as possible, the Protector's Club. He told her all about the heavily implied connotations to real-life dueling, including harming your opponent when they were on the ground, and further stressed that the students were being directed to practice on one another, which elicited a look of pure shock from his aunt. And then, finally-

"And- and- and Hugo's in it" he added, and Scorpius gave a loud, nervous cough from next to him.

Aunt Hermione stared at him blankly, absorbing this information. After a moment, she finally spoke, her voice somehow normal.

"That is...very unfortunate" she said, looking down.

Albus, though having expected something more powerful, pressed on. "And Rose knows, and she seems okay with it."

Aunt Hermione nodded, but said nothing.

"Well?" Albus asked, his voice rising slightly.

"There's little that I can do, Albus" Aunt Hermione said, not a line on her face changing, and Albus, against his better judgment, pointed at her.

"They're your kids! They-"

"Stop it" she said strictly, and Albus fell silent at once. There was something about arguing with Aunt Hermione that was radically different than doing so with anyone else. Albus loved his aunt very much, and knew that she felt the same, but she did not coddle him like his father would, or try and add humor to it like Uncle Ron. Her answers were instead always quick, intelligent, and blunt.

"Stop it" she repeated. "Don't think for a single second that I want any harm to befall my children. But rather than waste time and energy attempting to do the impossible, I must instead turn my attention to what choices I do have. This club will not end due to the complaints of a single parent. It's connection to WAR makes it unbreakable; making any demands of Hogwarts tounsanctionit creates turbulence between the school and the parents who support Waddlesworth, and then everyone ends up in danger anyway."

Albus widened his eyes, impressed. Headmistress McGonagall had more or less said the same thing. The difference, however, was that Aunt Hermione had just learned of the club five minutes ago, and had already come to the same conclusion. He wondered if McGonagall had actually maybe informed her of the situation beforehand, but this seemed unlikely. McGonagall too was limited in what she could communicate due to being in the castle. WAR, after all, was everywhere.

"On a more personal note," Aunt Hermione continued, "Hugo is fourteen years old. Not young enough to be frightened, not old enough to be wiser. He is rebellious, interested in becoming a skilled wizard, and has been handed the tools to do so. Any attempt to deter him from this club will only increase his attraction to it. Though my daughter's lack of help on the matter is unfortunate, I can't possibly blame her. What is she supposed to say when Hugo asks why he isn't allowed to learn more powerful magic? No, I have faith that my son will come to see the truth soon enough, but he must do so on his own. As a parent, I understand that anything else will be an encumbrance to his growth."

Albus nodded, slightly guilty. Aunt Hermione did not rely on emotions like how his father did. She was instead tactical; strategic. She relied more on her knowledge of her son and his behavior than her own personal wishes for him. Still, however, he knew that she was worried. She was just more accepting of the circumstances.

"I would appreciate it, though, if you continued to keep an eye on him Albus" Aunt Hermione said. "Just in case" she added.

Albus nodded, as did Morrison and Scorpius next to him.

"Good" she replied. "And we can only hope-or believe, as I do-that he will leave before it's too late."

"Too late? Too late for what?" Albus asked, unsure as to what she meant specifically.

She raised her eyebrows, annoying him slightly. This was the second time in the last few hours that something had apparently went right over his head.

"They're called the *Protector's Club*, Albus" Aunt Hermione said. "Who do you think that they're protecting?"

"Erm- them- themselves?" he asked, but from next to him, Scorpius gasped as though he'd just now realized something.

"Waddlesworth!" he hissed, and both Albus and Morrison looked at him.

"Correct" Aunt Hermione answered. "Warren Waddlesworth has managed to effectively introduce the younger crowd to WAR. Soon enough, their numbers will grow exponentially."

"You're kidding!" Albus shot out, his skin clammy. "Why!"

"Waddlesworth is smart, Albus. He plans ahead sometimes. Though he will undoubtedly make the ludicrous move of engaging Darvy-or Death's Right Hand, as he's now known-head on, he will be prepared for if the battle extends. He needs stock. He can't have the same Renegades fighting for him if this war is still going on a few years from now. Though he plans on winning it quickly, he will be sure to keep a steady flow of new members. Many of these students will soon be of age. He is introducing them to the Renegade movement early, insisting it to be a necessity, and when they leave Hogwarts, they will already be poised to join Wands and Redemption."

Albus felt himself shake with fury. This entire time he'd been focusing on Darvy breeding an army...when Waddlesworth was breeding his own right here in the castle.

"That's evil!" he spat.

"It's really not" Aunt Hermione said with a frown. "Waddlesworth is not the first to consider the young as the idealistic warriors, he's simply the first to be so blatant with it. Even the Ministry of Magic, following the second war with Voldemort, permitted those who were barely of age to join them and learn how to fight dark wizards, because so many Aurors had been killed. Anyone seventeen or older could join and help eradicate the lingering threat of Voldemort's reign."

Albus already knew this. It was this thinking that allowed young wizards like Reginald Ares to join the Ministry without a proper education. But that was the Ministry needing help. This was different...

"The logic behind it, of course, is that it will happen anyway" she continued. "In the terrible scenario where this war with Darvy continues while these students are leaving school, they'll be thrust into a world where they can either hide or fight. Better they know how to fight, it seems. Though I can hardly agree with the method, few will argue with the practicality of it. Whatever you hear of him, Albus, Warren Waddlesworth *does* want to stop Darvy. The only thing is, he considers any and every idea to be justifiable, so long as it achieves the end result. Waddlesworth

is thinking along the same lines as most people who lived through the war with Voldemort; the only difference is that he's willing to do something about it, and smart enough to make it work. Or so it would seem. Again...he does sometimes underestimate, as I believe he is doing with Darvy here."

Albus had no reply to this, he was still shaking from this information.

"This brings me to the other intended message here" Aunt Hermione continued, and all three of them looked up; they'd all been lost in their own world.

"What's that?" Albus asked.

"Keep your eyes on the paper. The *WAR Weekly*, actually."

"Scorpius already had us doing that" Morrison said.

"Good" Aunt Hermione replied. "Though it probably hasn't been mentioned yet, there's an ominous feeling coursing through those aware of Darvy's intentions now. He's up and vanished."

"Vanished?" Albus asked, and she nodded.

"The *Daily Prophet* will write it off as him fleeing, to avoid a panic, but the *WAR Weekly* does print the truth, even if the writing itself is all meant to bolster up Waddlesworth. Darvy was going place to place, avoiding Britain, but he's nowhere to be found now, and he seems to be traveling light; usually, he takes a bunch of Dark Alliance members with him, which is how he's tracked so easily. But now it seems he only has a handful. Wherever he ends up, it seems he plans on residing there. I just wanted to give you three a heads up."

Albus nodded, understanding the meaning of this at once. Darvy's army, though not as close as Waddlesworth's, was still a major threat. And by the looks of things, he'd be getting ready to build it soon enough.

Unable to comment further on this, he returned his attention to Waddlesworth.

"Real quick," he started, "you mentioned that Waddlesworth wanted protection, as though, for he himself. Does that have anything to do with this assassination attempt? It was big not too long ago."

"Yes, I do believe that Waddlesworth wants an increase of WAR members to ensure his constant safety. Whether the failed attempt on his life rattled him, or whether he was going to take precautionary measures anyway, I don't know."

"Do you have any idea as to who it could have been?" Scorpius asked.

Though they could only see her face, she seemed to have shrugged.

"I've toyed with various possibilities, but nothing has any more evidence than anything else. I've even considered that the attempt was false; designed to increase his reputation, but even then I don't see the angle. He's popular enough already."

The three of them nodded, understanding that this was the last question to be asked.

"I apologize again for keeping you all up" Aunt Hermione said. "But I did think that this was important. You should all really head to bed now...I need to discuss a few things with my husband."

Her voice was stable, but Albus knew that she was referring to her difficulties with Hugo. Not wanting to mention it, he mentioned something else.

"Could you do me a favor, by the way?" he asked. "I plan on spending some of the winter holidays with my girlfriend...could you maybe pass the message along to my mum, just to let her know in advance?"

"I'll certainly do that" she said. "You three get some sleep now. And remember, keep your eyes on the paper."

They all nodded, said goodnight in unison, and then watched as she vanished in a whirl of flames. Albus knew that all three of them had things on their mind, but it was much too late now to discuss it. Instead they marched back upstairs quietly, in an orderly fashion, and each went to their respective beds, muttering hushed good-nights as they did so.

Albus curled into his bed more than ready to return to his slumber, not keen on analyzing everything that Aunt Hermione had said until he had a full night's sleep to work with. As he tucked his arms under his pillow cases, however, he thought back to what he'd been thinking earlier.

He'd been focusing on how, despite all that was going on in the world, he was still just a teenager. And now, of course, it was back to worrying about the world.

Chapter 12: Allies And Apparition

The bulk of October was spent catching up on work and trying to keep grades stable, with Albus slowly losing touch with his best friends in an attempt to obtain his desired marks. Apart from Potions, which he excelled at effortlessly, his classes were all intensifying in difficulty. Part of him suspected that the state of the outside world was responsible for this acceleration, but then again, he supposed that he should have expected this. As Scorpius was always pointing out, they *were* given free periods for a reason.

Not that Albus was using them as intended. He instead squeezed all of his homework into regular afternoon hours, with his free periods dedicated to keeping a close eye on the Marauder's Map, Hugo's little dot in particular.

There wasn't much else that he could do. Keen on keeping Aunt Hermione's promise that he would watch over him, he was also forced to admit almost at once that the majority of things were out of his control. Hugo was always surrounded by friends in the Gryffindor Common Room, or in class. There had still not been any announcement on the next Protector's Club meeting either, so he could hardly watch his younger cousin in an actual Renegade setting. Not that he was complaining, of course; the less of those meetings, the better.

The only other thing that he was looking out for didn't happen either.

"Nothing mate" Scorpius said at lunch one Wednesday, folding up the issue of *WAR Weekly* placidly.

"At all?" Albus asked.

"Well there were obviously articles, but none of the magnitude that your aunt suggested."

"And nothing here either" said Morrison, crumbling up a borrowed copy of the *Prophet*.

"Hey!" said the giver from a few seats down, a second year that Albus recognized from having attended the first Quidditch tryout.

"Oh sorry" Morrison said, unapologetically. He tossed the paper ball over nonchalantly and returned his attention to the conversation at hand.

"Then again, the lack of news could be just as bad" Scorpius commented, returning to his breakfast.

"How's that?" Albus asked tensely.

"Maybe it's all being hushed up?" he said, raising his hand to take a bite out of a muffin.

"Or maybe," Morrison started, reaching across the table and snatching the muffin from his hand, "the lack of news *really* does mean that nothing's happened. Honestly, you guys are so pessimistic."

Melonie nodded from next to him, unable to speak due to a full mouth. The bell rang at this very moment anyway though, and they pushed their plates away to get prepared for the second half of the day.

"Have fun in Herbology mate" Morrison said to Albus.

"I'll try" he replied. Herbology had been one of the classes in which he'd been really slacking recently, but he knew that he'd have to step his game up soon, and for more than just grades; as magical herbs were the primary components to many potions, his proficiency in the subject was a bit more necessary than in most others.

"Well I'll see you guys after class" Scorpius said, and the three of them split.

Albus was still rather uncomfortable in the greenhouses, mostly due to the fact that it was still the place in which he had the least support. Few people spoke to him, and ultimately, this meant that his best friend in the class was the professor, a truly embarrassing thing to admit. This friendship seemed close to shattering, however, when his Herbology professor foolishly assigned them groups, rather than letting them pick for themselves.

"We hit something of a snag last lesson" Neville said with a rueful smile, and Albus cringed. The plants that they were studying- carnivorous clumps of leaves known as Guttles-had ended up doing a bit of feasting on all of their fingers, somehow able to pierce their protective gloves. They were supposed to be heavily sedated, however, which meant that their volatile behavior could mostly be blamed on the negligence of the students.

"And I realized," Neville continued, "that the reason for our poor performance is that those of you who need a bit more help, sadly, aren't getting it. Those of you who are more- erm- *naturally adept*-are banding together somewhat, and as there's nothing wrong with making new friends, I was thinking that I could partner you all up today!"

In other words, Albus discerned at once, the stragglers-like himself-were going to end up being put into groups with the best in the class. He instinctively glanced down his row, settling his eyes on the two Ravenclaw Prefects, Milton and Winona. Even though no one in the class spoke to him, these two seemed to avoid it more so out of fear than general dislike, unlike everyone else. He privately hoped to be partnered with one of them, but, of course, this was squashed immediately.

"Okay, let's get Lionel, Elton, and Albus over here" Neville called out, and he beckoned the three of them over to a table where a ferocious looking Guttle was awaiting them.

Albus groaned; Elton Connor was the Hufflepuff boy who'd damaged his arm a month ago, and Lionel-whose name Albus had just learned now-was one of Hornsbrook's friends, who frequented the Protector's Club. What's more, he'd also been one of those who had bullied around Roxanne in the library that day.

Neither of them looked too pleased to have him at their table either, but thankfully, they said nothing as the rest of the groups were created. After a demonstration from Neville at how to sedate the Guttles (so that they could extract their fangs gently) the groups were instructed to follow suit.

Sedating the creatures-which looked like rotten potatoes with bunches of leaves surrounding them, along with well hidden fangs-was a two man job. One person had to pinch a certain part of the Guttle, while the other rubbed a spot just near the teeth. The third person-the one removing the teeth-then had to reach their hands in, yank, and pray that their two accomplices kept up their end of the bargain as well.

Predictably, the sedation went to Lionel and Elton, the dangerous tooth pulling portion unspeakably falling on Albus.

For the most part, he thought that he was doing rather well. His quick reflexes allowed him to pull away from the sharp, triangular teeth without even getting so much as his thick gloves skimmed, but the conversation between his two partners proved to be rather distracting. Not only was he constantly afraid that they would slack off from their duties (resulting in bleeding fingers) but the nature of the conversation itself was somewhat disturbing. They were taking turns laughing at people who Albus either didn't know or had only heard of, people from their own respective houses who apparently annoyed them. Only when the conversation turned to adolescent boasting about the opposite gender did Albus' ears perk up.

"...And Kyle, that Prefect in your year?" Lionel was saying, "I heard he snogged that seventh year, Rhonda, or whatever her name is-"

"I reckon that one's true" Elton said calmly, his fingers relaxing somewhat on the nerve of the Guttle, making it come dangerously close to snatching. "But it's not that surprising, I snogged her last year. Now speaking of Prefects-that girl from your year? She's something to look at, isn't she?"

Albus momentarily stopped paying attention to what he was doing. Mirra had just been mentioned.

Elton continued seamlessly. "And I reckon she looks a bit easy too, think I might have a go-"

"Hey!" Albus snapped, withdrawing his hand from the Guttle just in time. The noise from other groups masked it, however.

"What?" they both said, half innocently, the other half with something that resembled intimidation.

Rip...them...apart. I will give you the strength.

Albus felt his heartbeat quicken as he ignored the words that had entered his head.

"Watch what you're saying!" he barked out, not caring that there was two of them. "That's my girlfriend you're talking about!"

Elton shifted his mouth as though he was on the verge of smiling, and Lionel was right about to speak when Neville approached them from the side.

"Everything okay over here?" he asked, apparently clueless. "I heard some yelling."

Albus kept his mouth shut, still angry but unwilling to bring a teacher into his business.

"Sorry professor" Elton said quickly, a slight, fabricated quiver in his voice. "Albus almost got his finger bit and I panicked."

"Well then you'll want to be a bit more careful then" Neville said, turning to Albus, who knew that he couldn't hide how red his face was. His professor must have simply taken it as adrenaline, however, as he continued with the same voice, "in fact, why don't we switch a bit? Al, Elton, trade places."

They did as they were told, and as soon as Neville had moved along, a suspenseful silence took over. Albus simply stood still, stroking the Guttle automatically, seething. He wasn't sure whether or not that little charade had been planned or not-most of the school knew he was dating Mirra, after all-but that didn't make him any less angry. He even contemplated "accidentally" stopping his part in the sedation, and letting Elton Connor get his fingers chomped on, but ultimately decided against it. It really wasn't even worth it.

So he instead kept quiet, all the while, a new conversation emerging between his two partners. This one had nothing to do with girls, however, and seemed more of a second part to one from a while ago.

"So you thinking of finally coming tonight?" Lionel asked his Hufflepuff friend.

Elton waited until he'd pried a tooth free before answering. "I dunno" he responded. "I do have a lot of homework..."

"You gave the same excuse last time!" Lionel whined. "It's only about an hour long."

Albus froze on the spot. Were they discussing the Protector's Club? Remembering that he had a job to do just in time, he began stroking sloppily at the Guttle, still deeply interested in the conversation at hand.

"We'll see" Elton replied. And then, as an afterthought it seemed, he added, "Do you really think it makes that much of a difference?"

"Loads" Lionel replied, nodding his head. "Last week we even learned the Fracture Curse!"

Albus felt a swooping sensation in his stomach. They were definitely talking about the Protector's Club. And had Lionel just mentioned 'last week'? Club meetings were occurring without any bulletins being posted. Or, at least, with no bulletins being posted in the Slytherin Common Room.

The rest of class went by with Albus straining his ears for every detail, but the topic wasn't elaborated on much more after its initial introduction. He sped away from the greenhouse he was in without looking back, eager to share this newly acquired information-and indeed, the entirety of the eventful class period-with his best friends. Skidding into the Common Room, he saw a peculiar sight. Scorpius and Morrison were sitting near the fire together, studying and talking low. Since when was Morrison so into getting work done?

"What's going on?" Albus asked, and they both jumped, then relaxed when they saw him.

"Thought you were Melonie" Morrison mumbled. "Sit down..."

Morrison, as it turned out, wasn't studying at all, but was rather sitting near Scorpius' entire stack of work. Albus sat down, not allowing the story in his head to escape, but shelving it temporarily due to curiosity. "So, what's up?"

"Discussing Christmas presents" Scorpius said.

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Christmas isn't for months" he said.

"Yeah, but the Hogsmeade visit is in a few weeks, and we don't know how many we'll get" Morrison said. "So we're trying to make it count. We've all got girlfriends now, it's time we started acting like it. I blew off Christmas last year because I wasn't official with Mel at the time, but now, I've got a whole load of saved up gold to spend on useless, pretty things."

"Morrison reckons jewelry" Scorpius said, rolling his eyes slightly. "One of the new shops in Hogsmeade sells all kinds of it; place called 'Iridescence', apparently."

"Sounds like a good idea to me" Albus quipped. Now that he thought about it, there was the chance that he'd actually be spending Christmas day with Mirra at her home. He did want to be able to give her something special...

"But jewelry is so tacky!" Scorpius hissed. "I don't want to get Anastasia something that she's going to wear once and get sick of. And they don't need it anyway, they've already got boyfriends! Who are they showing off for?"

"They don't wear it to show off for *guys*, you git" Morrison argued. "They wear it to show off to other *girls*, it's how they make their friends feel bad about their looks-

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard-

"Okay stop" Albus said, holding out his hands to end the argument. "We'll deal with it as we get closer to the Hogsmeade visit; for all we know it'll get canceled anyway. I've got something to tell you guys-

Wanting to describe his Herbology period in chronological order, he recounted the portion about Elton Connor's comments toward Mirra first. Both Scorpius and Morrison gave identical looks of disgust at it.

"Isn't he from Hufflepuff?" Morrison asked. "Like he has a shot with *anyone*-"

"Please tell me you didn't do anything stupid" Scorpius said, his voice serious.

Albus knew what he meant at once; stupid meant starting a fight.

"I didn't" he admitted. "Told them off, but that was it."

"Good. You did the right thing."

Morrison made a huffing noise, causing Albus to turn to him. "What would you have done?" he asked, generally curious.

"Me? I'd of punched them both in the face. But Scorpius is right, you did do the best thing. I guess..."

Albus frowned somewhat at this. At the time, it had seemed like the responsible thing to do, letting it die off. But looking back now...those two prats had said something about someone that he cared about. And they had walked away from it with no consequences...

Unwilling to sort his confusion on the matter out now, he quickly jumped into the next part of his story. When he was done explaining all that he'd heard, both of his friends wore looks of interest.

"Well, there haven't been any announcements that I've heard" Scorpius said after a moment. "So you're right on that-either Slytherin is being neglected on invitations, or they're done taking new members, and only the current ones are receiving updates on what's going on."

"I bet it's the first one" Morrison said, looking as though he really had been racking his brain.

"They reckon all Slytherins end up as dark wizards, right? Joining Darvy's lot? They don't want any of us coming to meetings because they think that once we leave the school, we'll march ourselves over to paint the nails on 'Death's Right Hand'. They can't *say* that, of course, but it's what they're all thinking."

Albus nodded, understanding it all too well. Still, however, he felt somewhat disappointed with himself. There had been at least one meeting that he'd missed, and that meant that he hadn't been able to look out for Hugo. If he'd only kept his eyes on the Map at all times, then he would have been able to see the gathering in the Great Hall. Well he wasn't going to miss tonight's meeting...

"I'm checking it out tonight" Albus said. "Either of you up for it?" he asked, though he knew it was hopeless.

"Too tall mate, went over this before" Morrison said blandly.

"Too much work" Scorpius said, frowning and jerking his head towards the array of textbooks and parchment. Albus glanced at it all with astonishment, but then something caught his eye.

"Is that Astronomy work mate?" he asked, snatching at the piece of parchment and holding up a star chart drawn so accurately it could have only been made by Scorpius. "Since when do you take Astronomy?"

Scorpius snatched it back and blushed. "It's Anastasia's" he said stiffly. "We- sometimes- sometimes we get over stacked with classwork, and we help each other out a bit, that's all."

"How often does she do your work?" Morrison asked, a small, twisted smile appearing on his lips. Scorpius didn't give him an answer.

Albus backed away from the conversation, not wanting to interfere in something that had to do with Scorpius' relationship with Anastasia. It had been one thing when they'd been talking about Christmas presents, but this was more the thing that involved how someone's relationship operated; and he'd already decided not to get involved.

He had made the decision not to tell Scorpius anything that he learned from Mirra, and had done so weeks ago, when he'd first heard it. Rose's bad behavior seen in the halls was written off as simple stress by Scorpius, who didn't seem to care, and Albus didn't have the strength to tell him that it was actually created by his relationship with Anastasia. He refrained from divulging this partly because he didn't know how to explain it, and partly because he was unsure of how his friend would react. He knew this was hypocritical, of course; hadn't he complained to Scorpius about having had secrets kept from him? But either way, this feeling of guilt didn't inspire him to reveal anything.

He had, however, told Morrison about it all, and the smirk on his friend's lips told him that he was privately enjoying some sort of joke on his own-possibly bursting to tell Scorpius that he was doing homework for the wrong girl, and that his true love needed him now. Not wanting to take part in it, Albus retreated to his dormitory to make sure that his Cloak was ready for the night's excursion. He then met his friends in the Great Hall for a fast dinner, returned once more to the Common Room, and waited for the clock to strike eight.

"How do you even know it's going to be at the same time?" Melonie asked him, as the four of them sat huddled around together, Melonie and Scorpius both with books in front of them.

"There'd be no reason to change it, would there?" he replied, but then he felt a sinking feeling. They had certainly changed the way that word reached the members. Was it such a far off idea that they'd have altered the time of the club meetings to just after dinner?

"You know what, I'm actually going to head out now" Albus said quickly, and he stormed upstairs to retrieve his Cloak. Fastened around him securely, it was Morrison who opened the blank stretch of concrete for him.

He hurried along through the twisted underground corridors, legs hurting as he jumped up the stairs two at a time. When he finally skidded to a halt outside of the entrance to the Great Hall, he let a feeling of relief wash over him. There were definitely people present, but the meeting obviously hadn't started yet. No WAR members were visible, anyway, and the entirety of the Hall-which did already have the tables placed against the walls-was divided into a few groups of people chatting amiably. He could see Hugo in a group with his own friends, and not far from them was Hornsbrook's group, which included Albus' Herbology enemies; Elton Connor and Lionel.

Resisting the temptation to go attack them from under the safety of the Cloak, he instead meandered throughout the Hall, he too waiting patiently for the meeting to begin. He'd been paranoid, it seemed. For all of the negativity that he associated with the Protector's Club, they were still just a group of people, not exactly a secret organization that required tactical times to meet.

Walking around the Hall, he sifted in and out of other people's conversations. One conversation between a group of seventh year Ravenclaws caught his attention at once though.

"Bit strange isn't it?" said a pretty girl with her dark hair up. "I think I saw someone from Slytherin here in that first week, but since then it's just been three houses worth."

"Well what did you expect?" chimed in someone who Albus recognized; it was Leonard, the boy who was beaten by Larson in that same week. "They don't want to be here listening to how their friends and family will end up being taken down."

Albus felt his eyes narrow as the third person in the conversation, someone who Albus knew from the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, contributed.

"I'd have no problem letting Slytherins in, so long as it was only the ones who had already picked the right side. They can't all be bad in there."

Albus left the conversation hanging here, not wanting to deal with all of the incorrect stigmatization of Slytherin house that would soon emerge. Something had intrigued him slightly

though. From the way that they were talking, it seemed as if the Protector's Club was not as exclusive as he'd thought; Slytherins most certainly were welcomed in. Why then, was no one in his house hearing about it? Had someone taken the bulletins down, immediately after they'd been put up?

The closing of the giant doors snapped him out of his thoughts, and looking around wildly, he saw that more people had arrived, including the usual members of WAR. The meeting was ready to commence.

Albus took to his normal position, standing back in the corner of the Hall and watching as everyone else immediately lined up as though reporting for duty. The Renegades who inhabited the space now all joined themselves together in a sloppy shape, with Larson branching off to walk back and forth in front of the students with a plain face, everything from his gait to his ponytail somehow appearing aggressive.

"We learned some powerful magic last time" he said at once. "Now it's time that we learn to apply it. You're all here because you're interested in more than just watching over your own back; you're here because you have others on your mind. When I point at you, step forward."

Albus watched as he pointed to ten different people silently, who all stepped forward with expressionless faces. Albus grimaced in fear that Hugo would be selected, but he wasn't. He did know three among them though; Leonard from Ravenclaw, the girl he'd been talking to, and Donovan Hornsbrook.

"Divide yourselves up evenly now" Larson ordered, and after some uncoordinated side-switching, two separate groups of five stood alongside one another. Hornsbrook was in one group, the two Ravenclaws in the other. Larson began circling them slowly as he spoke.

"We have here two different teams. Teamwork is a necessity when stopping a legitimate threat. You must depend on your partners as well as yourself. Now, whichever of you feels like you're the most skilled from your respective team, step forward."

Hornsbrook stepped forward from his group cockily at once, and after some feet shuffling, a Huffelpuff seventh year that Albus didn't know stepped forward for her group.

"Hand over your wands" Larson said softly, and they both exchanged a glance of surprise. The straight line of students looked rattled with consternation as well.

"Now!" he said, louder.

They both did so at once. Larson tucked them away in his robes before continuing, his voice returned to normal.

"You two are to do nothing but dodge. It will be the effort of your respective teams that keeps you from harm. Teams," he said, turning to the eight remaining, "you have one goal and one goal

only. Successfully jinx the target from the opposite team. Plow through their guardians if you must. Go take sides now."

Hornsbrook went over to his group looking disheartened; the four individuals on his side formed a square around him. The Hufflepuff girl went to her side as well, where her four partners simply created a wall that blocked her from view entirely.

"Go!" Larson barked, as though unsure as to why he needed to even give a signal.

The other students all backed themselves up cautiously as a battle erupted in front of their eyes. Albus remained where he stood however, trying to follow the flashes of different color that he saw being traded back and forth. Hornsbrook's group looked sharper in terms of team play; two of them had taken it upon themselves to always be near him, creating shields with their wands, while the other two aimed for the Hufflepuff target.

On the other side though, things were more unorganized. All four of the Hufflepuff girl's protectors were on the offensive, teeth gritted as they tried to break through the defences only so many feet away. The target herself was spending a considerable amount of time ducking and dodging, until-

A blue spell hit her in the face, causing her to go right down with a shriek. Albus cringed as Larson called for a halt.

"Take her to the Hospital Wing" he said dismissively to two of his WAR companions, and they seized her and slowly walked her out of the hall; Albus thought that he saw a little bit of blood on her palms, from having clutched at her face. "Back in line, the rest of you."

The other nine stepped into the usual formation, and Larson surveyed them all as though he was going to give them a very important speech.

"Notice the mindset of the winning team. Interested in both sides of the field, defending and keeping pressure on the opponent. Their coordination was created quickly; largely improvised. This spontaneity is sometimes the difference in any group contest. Well done, winning team.

"Far more important than any wand or spell is the presence of an ally. You need to stick together to always be vigilant, and to always have help. But what is an ally? Is it someone on the same side?"

No one answered, but Albus thought that he had a very good idea where this was going...

"An ally isn't just your neighbor, or someone who doesn't mind supporting you behind closed doors. In the heat of battle, true colors show. Your allies are the ones who welcome an attack, for the chance to defend you. But how do you distinguish an ally from a regular friend? Any guesses?"

Again, no answer. Larson barely gave them any time to anyway though, he was already tapping at the insignia on his robes.

"Your allies don't just see you on the same side when no one is looking. They're proud to be there for you, to protect you, because they know that you feel the same for them. These people here," he said, his voice growing steadily more firm as he indicated the other WAR members to his right, "I would die for these people, just as they would for me. And we know it, and we're proud of it, and that's why we wear this symbol. Allies aren't afraid to show their unity."

Albus felt his body tremble. Larson was only giving them an example here, but it was actually a cleverly veiled way to hype up Wands and Redemption. These students wanted allies, and now, a sword-wand symbol would forever be etched into their memories. He knew that this entire lesson had catered to WAR as well. The way that one person from each group had been stranded without the ability to attack, dependent entirely on who was in front of them...had Albus kept his eyes out of focus, he would have only seen the blurry outline of two Warren Waddlesworth's, each with their personal guard in front of them. It was exactly as Aunt Hermione had said.

"I'll pick ten more, and we'll go again" Larson said suddenly.

Albus again shifted uncomfortably at the thought of Hugo being selected, but he wasn't this time either. This time, he didn't really recognize anyone picked outside of having seen them in the halls or at previous meetings. They were mostly in fifth year.

This battle took a bit longer, mostly because both sides were now using the correct form of attacking and defending. After about five minutes however, it was a fifth year boy from Gryffindor who ended up being carted off to the Hospital Wing-where the strategically placed Lester would fix him up-and then they were all dismissed.

Albus hauled himself out of there as soon as possible, glad that Hugo hadn't been involved but still shaking somewhat at what he'd seen. He caught sight of his cousin again on the way out the door, but couldn't hear anything that he was saying to one of his friends. He then proceeded down the lonely path of the dungeons, being the only Slytherin to return from the Great Hall. Scorpius had already started an early patrol (and most likely a clandestine date with Anastasia) and as Morrison and Melonie were cuddled up near the fire, he found himself heading straight to his dormitory.

Collapsing on his bed, he allowed his fatigue to sweep over him. He thought again of Larson's speech about allies, and with the scene fresh in his head, realized that not a single person had given a questionable look to it. Weeks ago, perhaps, there would have been some curiosity or general suspicion as to why WAR was brought up as a quintessential scenario of unity in the world, but now, with WAR's teaching firmly hammered into the heads of everyone in attendance, it was common place. That Wands and Redemption was synonymous with unity was, to the students who took part in the club meetings, nothing short of obvious...

And this probably wasn't the first time either. It was too well carried through to be a first attempt. Albus tried doing the numbers in his head, attempting to pinpoint how long ago exactly the Renegade movement had come to power, and how many people had probably been taught the same thing. Was this how Fairhart had been recruited by WAR? He was in an early bunch, certainly, but someone had to have introduced him to what it was to be a Renegade; to be part of a group. And in the memory that he'd seen of Fairhart and Blackwood, hadn't she said something along those very lines? That Fairhart had found her, and introduced her to WAR? He'd probably showed her exactly how important it was to separate mere friends from allies...

He skimmed through more memories for validation of his thoughts, sure that someone had mentioned before the repetitive nature of people and their misdeeds. The words flew into his head with powerful clarity, but it was not Fairhart, or Waddlesworth, or even his father who had said something along these lines. It was Ares.

What defines us, as people? Is it our actions or our words? Our triumphs or our failures? Is it our flaws, or our mistakes, or our vices, or our feelings? No. It is our habits. Society has truly failed when it repeats itself precisely and expects things to change. Destroy, rebuild, destroy, rebuild. An endless cycle.

Chills went up Albus' spine as he rolled over onto his side, letting the truism in these words resonate. Ares had said these things to him two years ago, at the end of the Hogsmeade Massacre. It had been within an hour of these words that he'd died. For all the wrong that Ares had done that day, he'd been spectacularly right in at least some of what he had said.

His entire body clenched up at the thought. He had no intention of sleeping tonight; he was sure that the nightmares would terrify him.

Albus didn't mention the club meeting over the next few days, as Scorpius was almost never around and it felt weird speaking about his qualms with WAR to Morrison with Melonie in earshot. Even in Friday's Potions lesson he had kept quiet to Mirra, and it wasn't until the weekend that he had both of his friends alone at the breakfast table. Predictably, however, no one was paying him much mind.

"We've already established that the Protector's Club is bad news" Scorpius said dryly.

"But they are teaching teamwork" Morrison commented from across the table, scooping up corn kernels off his plate. "Brainwashed or not, these kids are still leaving with something."

"It's not just kids, people older than us are involved too" Albus said. "But you should have seen how rapt they were when Larson mentioned how Wands and Redemption were 'allies'. Had they had a sheet of parchment there, people would have been signing up."

"Well they didn't, and they weren't" Scorpius said shortly. "Anyway, let's hurry this up before Melonie gets back from the bathroom. I'm thinking that jewels aren't too bad so long as we add a personal touch-"

Albus rolled his eyes. Eager though he was to spend Christmas with his girlfriend, he couldn't bring himself to brainstorm about a present with so much else on his mind. Besides, he wasn't sure that Mirra was all about fancy accessories anyway. What she'd probably want most is something that showed that they were together...

"Hey" Albus cut into the conversation, rounding on Morrison. "There were photographers at your sister's wedding last year, right?"

Morrison thought about it. "Yeah, muggle ones though, I think. Why?"

"Any chance you could write home and ask if there's any pictures of me and Mirra? Maybe when we were dancing or something?"

"Sure" Morrison said, shrugging, but at that moment they were interrupted by Scorpius.

"Heads up guys" he said, and they both turned, expecting to see Melonie. It was someone far shorter however, with the dark red hair throwing them off even further. Lily was walking toward them.

Albus gave an incredulous stare, this having been among the more unexpected things to happen recently. He only ever really saw Lily in hallways, and even then, it was scarce. Though her appearances weren't as infrequent as some other family members, like Fred or the twins, Molly and Lucy, her approaching the Slytherin table made it something truly worth a double take.

A chorus of booing erupted from his housemates at once, making him grow red with anger; how immature. Lily too wore an embarrassed look at it this, her face turning a bright pink, but it wasn't until a fourth year boy from down the table yelled something that things got a bit of a hand.

"Get out of here, murderer!" he hissed. He was reprimanded almost immediately by Scorpius.

"Detention!" he barked down the table, and when the boy began to mouth his indignation, he was cut off.

"Yeah yeah, I know, whine whine whine...take it up with McGonagall, she made me your superior."

"You know, I'll probably end up Prefect next year myself!" the hard-faced boy retorted arrogantly.

"Oh yeah?" Morrison spoke up. "Well Scorpius will probably be Head Boy, so you'll *still* be taking orders from him! Now shut it!"

The boy folded his arms but went quiet, and things died down at the table immediately. Morrison and Albus then both scooted over in opposite directions, allowing Lily to sit.

"Sorry" she mumbled, not seeming at all like her usual, firm self.

"Don't worry about it" the three of them told her. "What's up?" Albus added.

She tensed up a bit, her body language suggesting that she was extremely uncomfortable with what she was about to say. Her voice was low when she answered him.

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Okay" he said, scratching the back of his head in curiosity. Only a second before she started to speak again did he realize what it might be about.

"It's about Hugo and that- that club that he goes to."

"Ah" he said, frowning, and he knew that Morrison and Scorpius had done the same. "I already know about that. It worries me too-"

"He keeps begging me to go" she said sternly.

"What?" Albus asked, appalled. "Why? Since when!"

"Just recently. He keeps telling me that I need how to learn to defend myself and his friends are getting pretty bad with it to and I- I really don't want to go, I spoke to Mirra about it and all and she agrees-but if going once will shut them up-"

"No" Albus said, shaking his head as though he was denying her permission. "Don't do that. If Hugo wants to go off and join WAR and get himself killed-"

Lily gasped, looking horrified.

"I didn't mean that!" Albus said quickly, and it was true. "I just mean- look- I-"

But he faltered there, unable to lie to her. The sad thing was, he could grant her no assurances that he'd be of help. What else was there to do? He wasn't going to be able to change Hugo's mind if his own mother couldn't, and the bigger ordeal here-the mere existence of the Protector's Club-was an even more difficult obstacle to overcome. Interestingly enough, however, he wasn't even sure as to why his sister had come to him. What was she expecting?

"Hey," he started, lowering his face, "just out of curiosity, why are you coming to me with this? Why not one of the Prefects in your house, like Charles Eckley?"

It was not meant to be a go at Eckley; it was a legitimate question. Albus didn't have nearly as much control over the school, nor was he as popular.

"Well..." she squirmed a bit. "I would have, but- you know Donny right?" she changed her sentence in the middle.

"We've met" Albus said plainly.

"Well he and Donny having kind of been having rows about it all year, I don't even think they've been talking like that, and I didn't want to bring it up. Normally I would go to James...but he's not here anymore."

Albus nodded, acknowledging the importance of this last statement. With James gone, the burden of being the older brother fell squarely on his shoulders. And it was a burden that he had no problems accepting, regardless of the fact that he had no real answer to give his younger sister.

"Look, I'll figure something out" he told her, making sure that his determination sounded in his voice. "Just- just don't go. Hold out a bit longer, and give me a few days while I work out a way to stop this nonsense with Hugo. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded.

"Good. And do me a favor" he added. "Whenever the next meeting is announced, fill me in okay? Or pass it along through Mirra or someone..."

She nodded again, and left with a mumbled thanks. He knew that he'd done a very poor job of convincing her though, and Scorpius' comment once she was out of ear-shot didn't help matters.

"You shouldn't have humored her" he said sharply. "Me and you both know you have no options. Even McGonagall told you that the best you could do is ignore it."

"Thanks for the help mate" he said sarcastically.

"You never know" Morrison spoke up. "Maybe Al just isn't thinking of all the possibilities."

Albus gave him a weak smile, but it was hard to even voice agreement with it himself. He was not James; not as physically imposing or as revered. He couldn't just go up to Hugo's friends and bark in their faces, or shake his cousin powerfully and tell him to snap himself out of it.

And he couldn't exactly campaign against the club either. Though he hated admitting it, Scorpius and McGonagall were right. He didn't have enough pull with the students, and if the headmistress spoke out, it would just get the school as a whole in trouble. If only he could get a teacher to do something-their opinions normally affected the students, and as it was just an individual speaking, it wouldn't carry nearly as many repercussions. Who could he ask...

Hagrid was on good terms with many students, but wouldn't be taken seriously. Neville would cater to the Gryffindor crowd, but he wasn't nearly aggressive enough. No, he needed someone that the students respected, and someone who had no problem standing up to WAR. Maybe even someone that the students fancied...

His lips curled into a smile as the answer smacked him in the face. He glanced up at the high table, where the teachers were all clearing out; lunch was over. Albus pushed his own plate away and stood up quickly, scaring Melonie, who was just now returning from the lavatory.

"Is lunch over already-"

But he'd already wordlessly whisked by her, and in an instant he was down in the dungeons, faster than any other student, waiting by the door of the Potions classroom. Only a few moments later, an inquisitive looking Professor Malfoy had arrived.

"Albus" he said, nodding his head. "Can I help you?"

"Can we go into your office?" he asked tensely.

Scorpius' father gave him a bemused look, but tapped his wand to the door and opened it, then extended his arm as if to welcome him in. Albus accepted the invitation, taking his usual seat at his desk while his professor did the same.

"What can I help you with?" he asked immediately.

"It's a long story" Albus breathed, and suddenly, he felt somewhat nervous; could WAR be listening at the door? "But basically it involves the Protector's Club" he continued, realizing that he didn't really care at this point anyway.

"I see" Professor Malfoy said, leaning forward and giving him a steely gaze. "Is this about the conspicuously absent notifications in the Slytherin Common Room?"

"No, but- wait. What?"

"I've been removing them almost as soon as they're put up" his professor said dryly. "It's typically overnight, so no harm done."

"Why have you been doing that?" Albus asked, distracted.

"I thought that much would be obvious" Scorpius' father replied, his oily tone reminiscent of his son's. "Because it's trash" he finished with a shrug.

"You didn't want people going?"

"I don't want the students in my house to be any closer to Wands and Redemption than they have to be, which, due to the tightened security here, is already too much. Sadly, I can do little for other students."

"Have you seen what they do there?" Albus asked, shaking somewhat; finally, someone who he could speak to openly about it.

"No" he replied curtly. "But I can guess. But if you're not asking about the bulletins, then what is this meeting about?"

"I was hoping maybe you could get rid of the club entirely" Albus said dramatically. A tremendous sigh told him that the rest of the conversation was not going to be so optimistic.

"Albus you are marching into a field of politics, and believe me, you want to turn around at once. The Protector's Club is here to stay. If the school speaks out about it-"

"But I'm not talking about the school!" Albus blurted out. "I'm just talking about *you*. If you spoke out- from your own opinion-"

"I have nothing, not even an eyewitness account. My comments will be disregarded at once."

Now it was Albus' turn to heave a sigh. He knew going in, of course, that he would be headed for another road block, but his desire to make good on his word to Lily pressed him forward.

"So what if I could get a student to say what awful stuff goes on in there?"

"Then maybe there would be something that I could do-"

"But I've seen it!" Albus said, ecstatic. "I can-"

"Can people verify your appearance there?" he asked, and it was such a strange question that he wondered whether or not Professor Malfoy, of all people, was aware of his Invisibility Cloak.

"Well- no, but me being seen there wouldn't be such a good idea-"

"Albus I need you listen to me" he was cut off, but he knew that it wasn't due to disrespect.

"People are terrified all throughout the wizarding world now. The build up to this war is nearly as ominous as it was in the days of the Dark Lord, and in some ways even more so. Unlike in those days, the main threat here is not accepting new recruits. If you weren't in with 'Death's Right Hand's' crowd when he started it up, then you are officially in danger now. And things will only get worse...and very soon, too."

For the second time now, Albus was left in wonder as to whether or not there was more to Professor Malfoy's words than he was letting on. Anyone could say that it was bad in the outside world, but he had specifically mentioned something happening soon...just as his Aunt Hermione

had. Scorpius' grandfather, Lucius Malfoy, had been a spy two years ago. Just how in contact was Draco Malfoy with the same people?

"What I'm trying to tell you," his professor continued, "is that in these times it will be extremely difficult to convince anyone that WAR is doing something wrong. I would definitely need some sort of proof that their actions were negative on the club members.

"So- so if I could get you someone who could say all the bad stuff that goes on in there, and people saw him there, you could maybe do something about it?"

Albus watched as his professor made a movement of hesitation.

"Professor please," he started desperately, "my cousin is running with that crowd and he's trying to get my sister into it too!"

Scorpius' father nodded. "Get me a witness who can claim to be there...and I will do whatever I can. Though I can't make any promises of the end result."

Albus nodded, smiling. It wasn't much, but it was something to work toward-and something that he could give Lily, at that. Excusing himself pleasantly, he hurried out the door and through the labyrinth again, eventually entering the Slytherin Common Room looking winded.

"Where were you mate?" Morrison asked, stopping mid-move from a game of chess with Melonie, Scorpius half paying attention as he jotted down homework.

"I need a favor from you" he asked at once, and all three of them looked at him expectantly. "I need you to go to a Protector's Club meeting."

"Mate we talked about this-" Morrison started, giving a shifty look over to his girlfriend, who was unaware of the Cloak's existence.

"No, you're not getting it" he cut him off breathlessly. "I don't want you to go *with me*, I want you to go as a legitimate member."

As he'd hoped, word did reach Albus of the next Protector's Club meeting through Mirra, who had apparently been unaware that he was unable to get the information himself. It was scheduled for the very next Thursday, which, oddly, meant that the school would be quite busy. Those old enough and who had signed up would be able to take their first Apparition lesson on that day.

"I got to admit...I'm pretty excited for it" Morrison said as they all sat around in the Common Room, occupied with various things. "Though I wonder how they'll do it. You can't apparate in or out of the castle, right?"

"They'll take the enchantments off for a short bit" Scorpius commented, his nose in a book.

"That's a bit dangerous isn't it?" Melonie commented from behind her own book. "Anyone can just apparate in..."

Albus silently agreed, but also knew that he was probably missing out on some deeper level of magic involved. And even if there wasn't, they could at least be sure that the randomness of the time prevented any threat from being aware that the castle defences were down. No, he was much more concerned with something else...

"So you remember the plan right?" Albus said to Morrison. "Just go in there, don't bring attention to yourself-"

"But talk to people, as proof I was there" Morrison finished irritably. "I get it."

It had actually not taken much convincing to get Morrison's permission to use him as bait at first, but as they drew closer to the day, he was starting to seem a bit anxious. On the surface, Albus was sure that there was *technically* nothing to worry about. But Morrison would be the only visible Slytherin in there, and he was known as one of Albus' best friends. Would this draw too much unwanted attention?

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to" Melonie told her boyfriend plainly, and Albus shot her a look. "What?" she threw his way, somewhat confrontationally. "He doesn't."

"It's fine I'll do it" Morrison snapped to nobody in particular, sounding very much as though he'd been accused of cowardice. "I was just commenting that I can't wait to Apparate...damn."

Thursday carried an air of excitement to it not unlike what would be experienced the morning of a Quidditch match. This was only for the sixth years, of course, but it was still easily noticed throughout the castle. Albus' classes seemed to drag on doubly long, with the prospects of both the Apparition lesson and the subsequent Protector's Club meeting weighing on his mind. Defence Against the Dark Arts in particular seemed to go on for longer than usual. It was one of those rare days when Professor Handit had them going over the theory of a new hex-in this case *Occuscura*, a spell designed to blind the opponent-and the work written down had been both laborious and mentally draining.

The lesson was scheduled for before dinner, meaning that the students didn't have to wait long after their classes to meet in the Great Hall for the lesson. Upon entering with his friends, Albus noticed that tables had been pushed alongside the walls as they usually were for club meetings, though in this particular case, there were also innumerable hoops strewn across the floor in an organized fashion, each one of them roughly five feet away from all of its neighbors in every direction.

"We have to Apparate into those" Scorpius said knowingly as they all surveyed the room. "My dad told me that's what they did in his day anyway."

As if on cue, Albus caught notice of some of the teachers in the Hall. There were only four of them here though, the heads of the four houses. They were all standing against one of the walls, as though to allow space for the students. Professor Flitwick and Neville were chatting with smiles on their faces, Professor Handit was speaking to a student, and Professor Malfoy was standing more to himself, face expressionless.

"You guys excited?" came a voice from next to them, and Albus saw that it was Mirra who had approached him. She gave him a quick kiss before turning to Scorpius, who was answering.

"Not really" he said. "I've side-along Apparated before, it's a pretty uncomfortable feeling. Convenient though..."

"I'm ready for it" Morrison said enthusiastically, slapping his hands together.

"You know the odds of any of us doing it successfully today are slim to none, right?" Melonie piped up from next to him. "It takes a lot of practice."

"Meh" was all that Morrison could muster.

Albus was hoping that this wouldn't be the case with him either. James' constant Apparating was rather annoying, and despite what else was on his mind, he was eager to be able to do it as well. All of the chatter in the hall was stopped abruptly by a loud, unfamiliar voice though.

"Students!" cried a man from the front of the room. He was short and balding, with a wrinkly face and prominent front teeth. His official-looking robes alerted everyone at once that he was from the Ministry. "If I could just have your attention please, all eyes on me-"

The heads of houses went to work at once, sweeping through the large group and organizing them by house. Mirra was whisked away with a small wave by Neville, while Scorpius' father, without comment, directed them on how to stand; each roughly five feet in front of their hoops.

"Yes, yes, very good" the Ministry man said quickly, his hands flying all over the place as he spoke. "My name is Alfred Snapp, and I work at the Ministry of Magic. To be more approximate, I work in the office that involves administering Apparition licenses!" he squealed out. "Now you're all here today because you will soon be old enough to take your Apparition test, and it's never too early to start practicing! But of course, Apparating on your own to start is *never* safe, hence why the Ministry of Magic is pleased to have provided you with a guide to proper, safe travel by Apparating!"

The class stared at him blankly, but Albus allowed his eyes to wander the Hall. The teachers had returned to their spot by the wall, eyes scanning it as though they were watching for misbehavior. His stomach dropped however, when he saw WAR members on the opposite side of the wall, none of which Albus recognized from the club meetings, but all of which he'd seen around the castle...

"Now I see that most of you are in your appropriate place, standing at a good open space away from each hoop. The rest of you follow suit along now-you there, yes, very good, in front of the hoop-now, a few quick things of note. First and foremost, you all need to understand that Apparition will only be possible within *this* room, and only for the time being. Do your best to focus on nowhere else...Anti-Apparition enchantments can be tricky business for those who already aren't very adept at it. Next, if you leave here today without having made any progress, *do not be deterred!* It takes a very large amount of practice to get right; Apparition involves letting loose of the laws you've created for your own body and experiencing something entirely new, after all."

The array of sixth years nodded automatically, but Albus could tell that most, if not all of them, would not accept such a circumstance. Apparition was usually one of the things that young wizards and witches looked forward to most. He knew that no one here today would be content with leaving the Hall no better at it than they'd been the day before.

"And the third thing to understand," Snapp said loudly, "is that there is a definite method to follow, of which will be taught to you now. The number one thing that *must* be learned before you are ready to Apparate, is the three D's."

Albus again didn't have to decipher what anyone was thinking this time either. Many students had exchanged quizzical glances, though a few seemed more informed. Scorpius, for instance, was already repeatedly muttering something under his breath.

"That's right, the three D's" Snapp said, smiling widely. "Destination, Determination, and Deliberation. You may laugh now...but this mnemonic device is a staple of tutelage when it comes to Apparition! Now, let's try and apply them correctly. Step one is *Destination*. Where do you want to go? Why, inside the hoop in front of you of course! Focus on that space now, as hard as you can. Let it be the first place in your mind."

Albus did as he was told, allocating all of his focus towards the dusty circle in front of him. It was difficult, however, because if the hoop hadn't been there to identify it, there wasn't much special about that particular part of the floor.

"Step two, *Determination*. Let occupying this particular space be a necessity for you. Early on, you'll find that Apparition is easier when you have such a strong desire to go somewhere. Over time, you will learn to harness this concentration to help you go *anywhere*. But for now, you must be determined. Stay focused on your spot. How badly do you want to go there? Be prepared to channel it!"

Albus continued to stare at his spot, concentrating powerfully on it. From the corner of his eyes he saw Scorpius doing the same thing. Morrison had a somewhat relaxed look on his face though, and didn't even appear to be listening all that much; he just seemed like he was eager to actually try it out.

"And last, but certainly not least," Snapp shouted loudly, "is *Deliberation!* When I give the say-so, turn on the spot, moving with great deliberation into nothingness, your mind still focused on your burning passion to enter your selected destination! One...two...three!"

Albus closed his eyes as he spun on the spot.

Crack!

He opened them, astounded, before realizing that he had felt nothing. The sound had come from somewhere close to him...

He turned to look at Scorpius, sure it had been him, but it wasn't.

"Ha!" shouted Morrison, who was standing in the center of his hoop, shaking slightly. "Did you- did you guys see that!"

"You jumped!" Scorpius said angrily, but Mr. Snapp's comment seemed to indicate otherwise.

"Well *done* young man!" he said, beaming and pointing. "See here, the rest of you? Do you see what the three D's can accomplish!"

"What the hell are the 'three D's'?" Morrison asked aloud, looking around with a look of genuine confusion on his face.

The teachers all hissed, except for Scorpius' father, whose murderous look made Morrison go quiet at once.

"Let's try again now" Mr. Snapp said. "And remember, don't be deterred if nothing goes your way at first! Just remember to focus on *destination, determination, and deliberation...*

After a few more tries, Albus knew for sure that being deterred was the only "D" he could properly execute. He wasn't alone though. No one else apart from Morrison had done anything worthy of note, and he could tell that the congregation as a whole was becoming seriously irritated, particularly because Morrison's successful attempt had not exactly been luck. Though he couldn't always do it, at least three more times he was able to Apparate into the hoop.

"Today's lesson is at an end I'm afraid" Mr. Snapp said. "I will see you all again soon enough! Remember, though you will be unable to Apparate, you will always be able to practice *in your heads!* Don't be afraid to dwell on it a bit, and exercise your minds..."

The entire group of students filed out of the Hall looking disappointed. Albus couldn't help but wonder how this would factor into his plans for later; many people were throwing Morrison looks of resentment as they left, but this at least meant that he'd have a conversation starter in the Protector's Club meeting later. People would definitely be able to vouch for him and say that he was there.

"That's a strange feeling" Morrison said, shaking his head as they all exited the Great Hall. "Apparating. It's like being squeezed into a tube, you know? Well maybe you don't, not yet, but you'll-"

"Yes yes, we get it, you're a prodigy" Melonie said flatly. Scorpius wasn't speaking period. Albus looked behind him to see where his girlfriend was, and saw that she was laughing at something with Eckley. Strangely, this didn't bother him at all. A few clusters of people behind them were Hornsbrook and his pals, including Rose. It was a weird sight, seeing the once tight Gryffindor group split into halves...

The return to the Slytherin Common Room was made agonizing by Morrison's subtle gloating, but he settled down once Melonie forced him to study alongside her. The most recent surge of intensified homework meant that the all but obsolete Apparition lesson had cost them some spare time, forcing all four of them to skip dinner as they did homework, Scorpius' pile suspiciously higher than everyone else's. At a little before eight o' clock, however, Albus closed his books abruptly.

"Ready to do this mate?" he asked Morrison.

His friend cracked his knuckles. "I guess" he said, closing his own book. Melonie gave him a cautious look, but he batted it aside. "I'll be fine Mel, I'm not going to actually participate in anything. I'm just going so I can tell people what's really going on..."

Albus left for his dormitory as they spoke, covering himself once more with his Invisibility Cloak, which he realized now was getting more work than it had in years. He returned to the Common Room and gave Morrison a light tap on the shoulder to indicate that he was ready to go, and then the two of them departed, leaving a very puzzled Melonie behind.

"Aren't you going to wait for Albus?" she asked cluelessly.

"He already left, you didn't see him?" Morrison called back lightly as they left. "Do you reckon we can tell her about the Cloak?" he added in an undertone as the stone wall slid shut behind them.

Albus shrugged, though of course, his friend couldn't see it. "Up to you" he said, though he made his displeasure in the request noticeable in his voice. "But I mean...do you really have to? I thought it was just between us?"

"Doesn't Mirra know?"

"Yeah but she found out..."

They walked a bit slower through the labyrinth, the company of one another hindering what would normally have been a fast pace. When Morrison next spoke, there was a small quiver in his voice.

"So this is just like a meet-and-greet right? Just pop in, say hello to some people, and shut up for the rest of it?"

"That's the plan" Albus admitted, though his stomach sank at the prospect of the alternative scenario.

"The plan where I don't get picked to randomly duel some bloke who I've seen like twice?"

"Basically" Albus admitted shamefully. "I mean...I'm hoping you don't attract too much attention, Larson tends to pick the same people sometimes. But your Apparition stint earlier might have given you some unwanted attention...how did you do that anyway?"

"Just second nature" Morrison blurted out, and he sounded sincere. "You know me, I tend to space out a lot. It was a bit like that, only with less breathing. But anyway, back to this club meeting. If I *do* get picked...?"

"Then you duel" Albus said, frowning, though once again, this sentiment didn't carry any weight, as his friend couldn't see it. "Which reminds me, they have some special rules there that I think I mentioned before. They don't do countdowns, so always be ready. And try and move a lot, because most people know to go for the legs by now-"

"I can duel mate!" Morrison responded irritably as they headed up the stairs.

Albus went silent. Though it was true that Morrison was not particularly *bad* with a wand, he wasn't as well fleshed out as someone like Scorpius. With a sinking feeling, he realized the awful risk that he was putting his friend through here. The end certainly justified the means-they'd be a step closer to closing this wretched club if they succeeded-but Albus had seen an abnormally large amount of students whisked away to the Hospital Wing in recent weeks...

He stopped walking abruptly, then made a grab for Morrison's arm, as he hadn't noticed.

"What's up?" he asked.

"You really don't have to do this if you don't want to" Albus said guiltily.

"I'm fine" Morrison said, pulling his arm away nonchalantly. "Seriously, I'm not scared or anything, I'm just kind of preparing...it'll be fine anyway..."

Albus didn't object to his stubbornness, and together they marched through the open doors. The WAR members were already there, including Larson, but they were standing idly and waiting for more arrivals.

"I'll be in the corner" Albus muttered to him from underneath the Cloak. "You go socialize."

"On it" Morrison replied dramatically, and he immediately whisked himself toward a group of fifth year Ravenclaw girls.

Albus stood back and watched from a distance as Morrison paraded himself around the room, though he kept one eye on WAR the entire time as well. Once or twice he thought he saw one of them throw a look Morrison's way, but his nerves calmed when the moment ended without further incident.

Finally, the giant doors closed, and the students who comprised of the Protector's Club assembled themselves in line. Clear among them was Hugo, standing with his friends and looking dignified, and Hornsbrook, looking identical with his own friends further down in the line. Morrison was standing awkwardly in between two Hufflepuff boys, looking extremely out of place.

Larson walked back and forth in front of them as he usually did, his loud footsteps bouncing around the Hall. He spoke in his soft, yet authoritative voice quicker than he usually did.

"Last lesson you learned to function as a team. You learned to cooperate to attain a collective goal, in this particular case, defending someone important. Today we're going to-"

Larson stopped talking abruptly, ending his pace right in front of the spot where Morrison stood. Albus felt his heartbeat quicken. All at once, his body froze up. This was not going to end well. He'd been foolish to put his friend up to this.

"What's your name?" Larson asked Morrison coolly, and at first, Albus couldn't quite see how he'd been spotted so easily. Only now did he realize that the silver and emerald linings on his robes made him stand out, as well as the fact that other people in the line had been throwing him small, distracted looks. It seemed as though those from Slytherin house were not as welcome in the club as others would have liked to claim.

"Uh- M- Morrison Vincent" Morrison stammered out, scratching at the back of his neck loosely and looking intimidated.

"I see" Larson said, his low voice cascading the words out of his mouth loosely. "And tell me Mr. Vincent, have you ever been to one of these club meetings before?"

"Yes!" Morrison lied directly, head turned downwards. "Yes I have" he added pathetically.

"I don't recall seeing you here" Larson said, his voice louder. Everyone else in the line had their heads turned now. Hugo was looking stoic; Hornsbrook was grinning slightly. The WAR members at the other side of the room all had entertained looks on their faces as well.

"I- I usually- I usually stand in the back?" Morrison half said, half asked. Albus cringed from his corner. Morrison either didn't know or had forgotten from Albus' retellings that the students had been lining up since day one; it would have been impossible for someone to be in the back during any of the meetings, unless they had an Invisibility Cloak of course.

"I see" Larson repeated, though Albus knew that everything from here on out was just a predator toying with its food. "And were you here last lesson, Mr. Vincent? Do you recall what we discussed in that one?"

"I missed that one, I was sick" Morrison said at once, still looking down. Only in Morrison's embarrassment did Albus appreciate how good of a liar Scorpius was. Scorpius could lie directly to your face, eye contact and all. Morrison did not possess this innate gift.

"And what about the lesson before that?" Larson asked.

"I missed that one too, on the count of my friend being sick" Morrison said, smiling weakly at his own terrible lie. "I was with him in the Hospital Wing. That- that's how I got sick in the first place. Being near him."

"Mhm" Larson grunted. He then turned his attention to the rest of the line, who all forced their eyes back towards him as well. "It seems to me as though Mr. Vincent is a little behind. I don't think he understands that when someone is in the Protector's Club, they need to be able to demonstrate their abilities. Step forward Mr. Vincent."

Albus started to panic. He knew that he'd have to interfere soon...

"Harrison, get out of line" Larson said, and, surprisingly, a fourth year Ravenclaw emerged. Morrison stepped forward as well, letting loose something that resembled a laugh.

"Okay!" he said excitedly, sizing Harrison up; he was quite tiny, and even looked a little frail.

"Hornsbrook" Larson announced suddenly, and Donovan Hornsbrook stepped out of the line. "You'll be *my* partner."

Albus gasped. Hornsbrook joined Larson, while the Ravenclaw boy stepped toward Morrison, legs shaking. Morrison began to protest at once.

"Uh- uh exc-excuse me- M- M- Mr. uh- ponytail sir- I think there's been some sort of a- a mistake-"

"Let's give Mr. Vincent the benefit of a countdown, as he's missed so much" Larson said sarcastically, withdrawing his wand.

Albus stepped forward, knowing that the plan was ruined, and that he to do something. From underneath his Cloak he withdrew his wand.

"Three!" Larson said loudly, and Morrison began fumbling around for his own wand. Albus was preparing himself to take off the Cloak to provide a distraction-

"Two!"

A streak of red light flew through somewhere in the room, hitting Larson in the stomach. His wand practically jumped from the tips of his fingers, snatched out of mid-air by a surprised Hornsbrook. Albus, like everyone else, looked around frantically for the source of the spell. His eyes fell upon Professor Malfoy.

"I think I've seen enough here" he said smoothly, and Albus saw that the giant doors had been quietly opened.

Hornsbrook handed Larson back his wand as he got to his feet. The WAR members-who Albus would have expected to have attacked, or made some sort of noise at the least-were watching curiously from a distance.

"Excuse me!" Larson spat, his hair falling out of the sleek, short ponytail. The students were all murmuring now. Morrison rejoined the line looking relieved.

"I said I've seen enough here" Scorpius' father repeated icily. "What was the purpose of that demonstration? You teamed a newcomer up with a fellow student, and then prepared for you yourself-a trained adult-to do combat with him?"

"In the real world you don't get to pick your attackers-" Larson started, but he was cut off.

"In the real world," Professor Malfoy started, walking forward, "these students are here, in this castle, learning defensive magic that has nothing to do with what you're teaching. Only in your *own* little world should these students be vigilant of an impending attack, despite the safety of the castle. Safety that you apparently provide" he added.

"The Protector's Club is designed to help students for when they leave the school! To face the terrors that await outside these walls!"

Larson looked back at his fellow Renegades after this statement, and they all nodded their heads approvingly, as if this was the proper answer to give.

"Really?" Professor Malfoy asked loudly, his voice sagging with sarcasm. He then pointed to a random fourth year student. "Because that boy there is in his fourth year. He won't be leaving Hogwarts for three more years. Why prepare him? I thought that Warren Waddlesworth was going to end this war quickly, should he be elected? And yet, students are being trained for a battle to take place three years down the road? Does Waddlesworth plan on this confrontation going on for so long?"

"He- no- I don't-"

"Because if he only plans on keeping this war going for years to come," Professor Malfoy said loudly, "then I can only wonder why these student's parents should even bother voting for him!"

Larson looked as though he'd been slapped in the face, and a clatter of vocalization went through the line of students at this point. Albus could see the turmoil on their faces. A professor that they admired was arguing with the man who thus far had taught them all that they knew. If they had equal respect in them both, then the deciding factor would be whose argument made more sense.

Albus smirked at this. Everything that his professor was saying, as well as the way that he said it, was perfect. Larson had no chance arguing against a man who had an entire lineage of sneaky, cunning Slytherins to boast about.

"Th- these students- it isn't just about the war outside!" Larson spat, a vein bulging in his head. Albus had never seen him anywhere close to where he was now. "These students need to be taught proper defence! You would deny them that?"

The line of students murmured once more; it was though they were watching a political debate. And, of course, Professor Malfoy's rebuttal was flawless.

"You speak as though they don't have a proper Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. I, for one, think that Hugh Handit is a wonderful teacher. Do you agree students?" he asked, turning to them all and directing his question, strategically, towards Hufflepuffs. The entire line murmured in approval.

Professor Malfoy turned back to a furious Larson. "They seem to like Professor Handit. Why don't you?"

"I- I- I never said-"

"Why do you think that Professor Handit is such a bad instructor?"

Larson was breathing heavily now, and Albus could only laugh silently, still under the Cloak, at how his words were being twisted and thrown in his face.

"I didn't say that!" he blurted out, and then he turned to the students looking ravenous, his teeth bared. "New lesson!" he spat. "Last week we learned how to identify allies! Now, we learn to identify enemies!"

He lunged at Professor Malfoy, causing several of the students to yell and back away. Albus knew at once what Larson was desperately trying to do; he was trying to rip at Scorpius' father's sleeve, trying to reveal to the students the withered Dark Mark that would reveal just whose side their professor was on-

"No!" Albus yelled, once again going to discard the Cloak. But no one heard him amidst the other yells, and a quick flash of blue light revealed Larson to be on the floor, Professor Malfoy untouched.

The other WAR members all ran up to the scene, some of them reaching down to check on their ally. Albus wondered why they weren't attacking, but then realized that they too could do little now. They could hardly just attack a well-liked professor, after all.

Larson was sputtering on the ground when Scorpius' father turned to the entire group of students, who were no longer in an orderly fashion.

"Let that be a lesson" he said. "To respect other people's personal space. And you lot," he added, turning briefly to the other WAR members, "what kind of cooperation was that? Standing back and watching, looking like helpless oafs. If you were any slower you'd all be going backwards."

They all threw him a malicious stare, but it was ignored when Professor Malfoy turned back to the students, all of whom were looking astonished at what had just transpired.

"You're all welcome to continue taking part in this club. But I'll be checking in regularly. As for today's meeting...I think you all have learned enough. Dismissed."

They all filed out in groups, talking in powerful whispers and moving right by Larson and the other WAR members without a second glance. Knowing that he'd have to thank his professor in private later, Albus nudged a smiling Morrison sneakily as they left the Hall. He took a final look behind him at the scene, and saw a few familiar faces marching by just a few feet away. Hornsbrook was looking irate. Hugo's mouth was hanging wide open, as though he had a lot of thinking to do.

Chapter 13: Respect

Though he knew that most of the glory should be handed over to Professor Malfoy, Albus couldn't help but think rather highly of himself over the course of the next few days. Left and right he was hearing students recount the confrontation between Scorpius' father and Larson, and, even better, every formidable looking member of WAR that walked the castle halls was looking surly.

Albus couldn't exactly be proud of himself for any physical activity that he did; staying underneath his Cloak and spectating hadn't accomplished anything. But it was the way that the situation had been handled, and the excellent end result, that made him grin at random points of the day. First, he had went to a single teacher, rather than getting the headmistress herself involved. This kept everything low-key, and ensured that if Wands and Redemption was angry, they would have no way of retaliating against the credibility of the school. The opinion and actions of one instructor, after all, didn't reflect on the management of Hogwarts as a whole.

Next, an unexpected but certainly welcome surprise had arrived in the attitude of many who had been too frightened to attend the Protector's Club before. With their Head of House monitoring the meetings, Slytherins were now interested in going as well, and seeing as how it was unlikely that Professor Malfoy would be allowing any dangerous foul play, these numbers were sure to grow for the other houses as well; and they would be taught proper, extra-curricular self-defence, and nothing more. And there was absolutely nothing that WAR could do about it without harming their reputations with the students.

And the best thing about the entire thing was...Albus hadn't gotten hurt. He hadn't gotten in trouble, or escalated things foolishly, or worried his friends any more than usual. For the first time in his life it seemed, he'd stayed under his Cloak, shut his mouth, and let an adult take over. And it had worked spectacularly well. This was a welcome change for his friends as well.

"You did the right thing, Albus" Melonie Grue said during a particularly enjoyable Halloween feast. "Getting Scorpius' father involved was a good idea!"

"I agree mate" said Morrison, nodding his head from next to her as he slammed another piece of pumpkin pie onto his plate. "Remember that we talk we had before? Where I said I would have punched those kids in the face? I reckon you just proved that way of thinking wrong."

"Cheers, Morrison" Albus said with a smile, raising his goblet.

"Let's not forget who *actually* did something though" Scorpius said testily, only a small sliver of his tone sarcastic. "It was my dad who barged in there, risked his life, and shut up those idiot Renegades. "

"And no one's taking that away from him" Albus rebutted. "We owe your dad a lot..."

As he said it, he glanced up at the high table to view his Potions professor. Scorpius' father, who usually looked somewhat reserved, was laughing quite comfortably along with Professor Handit at some private joke. All the times that Albus had seen his Head of House since the incident at the Protector's Club-including a full Potions lesson with him-he had made no mention of what happened.

Not all were pleased with the dramatic change in the club's activities, however. As Albus learned during an impromptu library meet with Mirra in the middle of the week, the person whose involvement had provoked the change seemed disheartened.

"I don't really care, to be honest" Albus said gruffly, upon hearing the news that Hugo was in poor spirits. "He can be ticked off all that he wants, the fact of the matter is, he's not risking his skin every week now."

"He's been snapping at everyone as far as I've seen" Mirra told him as she waved her wand across her Arithmancy notes, highlighting the most important portions. "Even Rose, but their spat was short."

"Whatever" Albus said casually. Hugo's demeanor was not nearly as important to him (or to the rest of the family, Albus was sure) as his safety was. "But I still don't really see why he'd be acting like such a prat. Some other Gryffindors don't seem to mind too much" he added, remembering a conversation that he'd overheard in the loo the other day.

"I think it's just because of how it all went down" Mirra said. "I get the feeling that he doesn't even really like Professor Malfoy to begin with. Donny is kind of the same way."

Albus nodded silently in understanding. There were actually two different reasons for the inherent dislike of Scorpius' father by these two individuals. Hornsbrook's own father, of course, was a Renegade, meaning that anyone who could even be suspected of being on Voldemort's side during the Second War had slipped under the radar of Wands and Redemption, and should thus be dead. With Hugo, it was a bit more complex. He had been raised disliking the Malfoy name, and though Albus was sure that his parents had long since changed their minds on the matter, it was probably a bit more difficult for the younger Hugo to do.

But again, Albus didn't really care. He was not going to let these two factors downplay his small triumph over Warren Waddlesworth. He decided to change the subject

"So are you proud of me?" he asked his girlfriend cheekily, propping his face on both of his hands. "For staying under my Invisibility Cloak like a good boy and not trying to take on WAR by myself?"

"More than anything," she started, "I'm curious as to why you just recently discovered this tactic, and whether or not you plan on using it in future dangerous situations" she finished curtly.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Well you know I'm playing Quidditch this weekend" he told her. "That's pretty dangerous."

"You're right, it is" she said, looking up and smiling. "I hope that Charlie will be okay..."

"Haha...go back to your studying..."

She smiled again and returned to her notes. Albus was in no mood to do any extra studying however; he'd managed to catch up on all of his work without the added stress on his shoulders, and was thus aiming to simply relax. He tilted his chair back on two legs and stretched, but just as he did so, he heard a semi-familiar giggle.

Looking both ways, he saw Anastasia Anifur sitting at a table with books strewn across it. He expected to see Scorpius accompanying her, but this wasn't the case. A boy from her own house- from her own year by the looks of him- was sitting rather close to her. He had dark hair and an average looking face, the only thing of note being a rather curved nose. Albus watched as the boy leaned in to her and whispered something. She giggled again.

Albus rocked his chair forward. "Do you know that kid?" he asked his girlfriend, who looked up and craned her neck to see the same scene that he was viewing.

Her eyebrows shifted furtively as she concentrated. "His name is Kyle" she said decisively. "He's the other sixth year Hufflepuff Prefect, isn't he?"

Albus focused his eyes on the boy, noticing that he was indeed wearing a silver badge identical to Anastasia's. He vaguely recalled Scorpius mentioning this name last year, when identifying the Prefects of all the houses, and knew at once that Mirra was right. He had no idea what Kyle's surname was though, and he barely recognized him from classes as well. And what he was *really* clueless about was what it was that he was witnessing here.

"What else do you know about him?" Albus asked, his voice suddenly lower.

"I don't know" Mirra shrugged. "I see him whenever he shows up to Prefect meetings, but I've never patrolled with him, and we've never spoken. Why?"

"Just curious" Albus said, and after a few more seconds of whispering, he tore his eyes away.

With his good mood maintained for the next few days, Albus was reluctant to participate in any strenuous activities, which included last minute practices being scheduled. Scorpius had been uneasy about this at first, but Albus quickly reminded him that they would not be playing the top-tiered Gryffindor team that had defeated them last year. As he learned only two days before the opening match, James' captain ship had been passed down to his Chaser, Rudolph Tabbers. Gryffindor's star Chaser for the last few years, who Albus only knew by the surname Finnigan,

was no longer playing, eliminating their greatest offensive threat. And what's more, whoever their new Seeker was, of course, couldn't have more than a few month's worth of practice under their belt.

"But we can't expect to breeze by them just because of those things" his friend had said condescendingly.

"I'm not!" Albus had replied. "But I can be confident..."

And his confidence carried all the way through to the morning of the match. The fifth of November came with much excitement throughout the school, as with James gone, Slytherin were the rare favorites to win the first meeting of the year.

"You know the entire school is hoping you guys get crushed, right?" Morrison said the morning of the match. They'd all went down somewhat early for breakfast, Albus well rested and excited. His last few days of personal nirvana had contributed even to his competitive spirit.

"What else is new?" both Albus and Scorpius responded simultaneously, Albus stacking bacon up onto his plate.

"Well this year it's going to be *really* bad" Morrison told them blandly. "You've never been less liked, Al."

Albus shifted his mouth sideways, unwilling to respond to this comment. Melonie chimed in with a different approach though.

"But Scorpius will get some support too, because of his dad. So it evens out."

Scorpius gave her a big smile, but at that very moment, applause came from most of the Hall. Albus turned in his seat and watched as the entire Gryffindor team entered. He couldn't see much in the brief amount of time that they were walking, but he did catch a glimpse of the new Seeker. To his immense surprise, he looked remarkably young; second or third year maybe. He had a frail and wispy look to him, but he also looked rather speedy. It seemed as though they were going for a different approach than James, who had been muscular and fit.

Albus turned his head away, not bothered by it. His own team-most of whom had joined the table by now-looked reasonably collected as well, with the exception of the usually haughty Lucas Strossen, who appeared somewhat nervous. Perhaps he thought that his performance today, considering past incidents, would determine his future with the team. Albus couldn't exactly say anything reassuring to this though; he was correct, after all.

"Looks like a nice day out" Scorpius commented, staring up into the bewitched ceiling, where, sure enough, the sky looked completely clear. Albus too was going to comment on how beneficial this was-as he hated playing in the normally rainy November-when fluttering came from above. The mail was here.

Something unusual had happened though. Many owls were carrying editions of the *WAR Weekly*, which was strange, considering the most recent issue had just come out days ago. What news was so important that it couldn't wait?

And then he remembered. His Aunt Hermione had mentioned something big happening soon...

Albus felt a knot tighten in his stomach, though he refrained from panicking. Even if it was news about Darvy, chances were it wasn't going to directly affect him anyway...

From the second that the first paper dropped, the Hall went into a frenzy. All of the teachers up at the high table had stood on their feet and began walking, eager to either see the news for themselves or to help restore order. The WAR members standing guard were caught up trying to restore peace as well, looking very unorganized as they tried settling everyone down. Rolled up newspapers were dropping over all four tables now, and the second that the shower began over the Slytherin table, Albus made a grab for something that didn't even belong to him.

No one cared though-many of the students were now talking loudly, and Albus noted that the vociferous scene was accompanied, not by fear as he'd initially thought, but rather by confusion.

He unrolled the paper slowly, Scorpius looking over his shoulder as he did so. Morrison and Melonie leaned over the table to read as well. Slowly, a dark, ominous photograph came into focus before all of their eyes. Albus made out the picture of the tall, foreboding facade of Azkaban before he could even comprehend the large black letters in the title.

Death's Right Hand Spotted On Azkaban Island

Albus swallowed an enormous lump in his throat. People who were reading alongside him all made noises of intrigue, but his own eyes were instead focused squarely on the moving picture. There was Azkaban; a dark, vertical structure that seemed to leap off of the page. And though it appeared to be mostly surrounded by water, what was clearly a small island could be seen surrounding it, improperly displayed due to the size of the fortress that demanded attention.

"On the island?" Morrison asked. "How big is that place? I thought it was just located on a pile of rocks!"

"There's an island surrounding it, a nice sized one" Scorpius said knowingly, his own eyes focused on the paper as well. "I've met someone who was in there before" he added.

Albus stared at the picture, mouth sagging as he put two and two together. There, on that small piece of land just barely visible at the base of the prison, was Darvy. And just a centimeter away- he traced it with his fingertip-was his father. His father and Darvy were separated by maybe a mile at the most.

"Al, are you reading this?" Scorpius said, and Albus shook his head slowly, but proceeded to do so at once. He was so dazed that some lines he had to read twice.

Reports came in today that Death's Right Hand-who confirmed to have left his last residence somewhere in Ireland-had been spotted on the island surrounding the infamous wizarding prison Azkaban. Suspicions first arose when evidence of breaches were seen in the protective charms and spells surrounding the prison. Death's Right Hand's presence was all but confirmed when a patrolling guard found the discarded mask of a Dark Alliance member.

Though impossible to determine how long the Dark Alliance has been in the area, a guard from Azkaban had revealed that it could have been be weeks.

"Many people don't understand the size of the land that Azkaban sits on," says the guard, who has chosen to remain anonymous. "There's an entire burial ground for prisoners who die here, and huge sections of vegetation as well, which used to be for the Dementors when they weren't patrolling inside the prison.It's a very, very expansive piece of land, and one that's usually overlooked due to the nature of the prison itself."

But still, another guard who has chosen to remain anonymous commented on the unlikelihood that the entire Dark Alliance is present, as well as the expected duration of its lingering.

"The surrounding island is uninhabitable, in every sense of the word" the guard told WAR Weekly exclusively. "The amount of defensive measures in place around the prison is staggering, and this includes things even beyond the control of the Ministry. Whatever Death's Right Hand is doing here, he's going to want it done quick. And though the island is indeed large, it would be impossible to conceal the entirety of the Dark Alliance. Most likely only a select few are present now."

The reasons behind Death's Right Hand's residence in the North Sea vary depending on who is answering, but Golden Gronk, a member of the Wizengamot, has provided a common explanation.

"More than three quarters of the prisoners from the second war are contained in Azkaban. The Dark Alliance, though sizeable, pails in comparison to the sheer manpower that comprised of the Death Eaters. There is little doubt in my mind that Death's Right Hand hopes to launch an attack on the prison, in order to increase his followers dramatically."

When asked about whether or not the Ministry would be doing anything about this said attack, however, Gronk dismissed it, citing the safety of the Department of Magical Law-Enforcement as well as the futility of attack as his reasons against it.

"Death's Right hand has no chance of penetrating Azkaban-none at all. The island surrounding the prison becomes steadily more dangerous the further you go into it, and the Dark Alliance has proven nothing by managing to survive the outskirts of the island. The dangers lurking in the environment are unfathomable by anyone who is not already aware of them. Mark my words, Death's Right hand has defeated himself in this foolish attempt. Within the next two weeks, the

pieces of his body-as well the bodies of his followers-will be seen scattered around the island. And even if by some miracle they managed to reach the prison, it is completely impenetrable. Only members of the Ministry of Magic with exclusive and rare insight to the prison are capable of entering it, and even then, there's only one way in. The idea of the building being stormed into is laughable."

For these same reasons, squads of well-trained Aurors are being refrained from searching the surrounding island. Gronk later goes on to claim:

"Sending people to search for the Dark Alliance is essentially condemning them to death. Many portions of Azkaban Island are designed strictly for defensive purposes; to eliminate immediately, should anyone ever try to leave or enter without permission. There are few safe trails through the island that lead to the prison, and even these are unfit to be walked by anyone who has not had extensive experience with the prison and the surrounding area. The biggest danger that Death's Right Hand faces now is his own audacity."

Warren Waddlesworth, candidate for Minister of Magic and leader of Wands and Redemption, has agreed that the nature of the island will not permit Death's Right Hand to reside there for long. Contrary to Gronk, however, Waddlesworth believes there are different reasons for the Dark Alliance being in such a place.

"Sebastian Darvy is frightened" Waddlesworth announced in an interview this weekend. "His most recent attempt to kill me did not follow through, and with the election dated, he understands that the days are numbered for his impotent band of terrorists. He is now backing himself and a few extremely devoted followers into a corner, using the infamous location for his own protection. This will, of course, fail. He will be brought to justice. He will never leave that island. I will make sure of it."

Albus let the paper slide from his fingers, the cacophony around him sliding in and out of his ears smoothly. These merged together sentences did not register with him, nor did the noises of his friends as they tried to rouse him out of his thoughts.

Wrong. Again. Both of them, both the Ministry and WAR, were wrong again. They had no idea what was going on...had no idea how much danger his father was in.

He stood up so quickly that he banged his knees on the table. Incapable of feeling pain and pulling away from the grasps of his friends, he turned sharply and tore through people, running quickly towards the the giant doors of the Hall. He heard someone call his name loudly-possibly Scorpius' father-but he exited the Hall a moment later. He found himself skidding to a halt as he ran directly passed the place where he needed to go, the lavatory on the first floor. He entered it gasping for air, spending a second to take in the clean white tiles and glimmering lights hanging above before leaning over the nearest sink and spilling his breakfast out into it.

He sank to his knees as he vomited, the most powerful wave of nausea possible passing over him with an intent to kill. He didn't even register the appearance of the bile, his eyes were jammed shut tightly, his mind racing.

His father's prediction had come true. Darvy's final step towards ending the war had been realized. He had been seeking a place to build his army, a place to create an insurmountable collection of the vicious creatures that Albus had once seen with his own two eyes, and he'd now succeeded. His constant meandering around the world had been designed to keep people unaware of his true intentions, but now, he had settled himself in.

And he had found, it seemed, the best possible place to do it. The island around Azkaban couldn't be breached by even its own creators; even the Ministry of Magic didn't want to be on it. He would be undisturbed and fully protected as he created his array of monsters, and even then, he had a secluded place to organize them to attack. And the prison itself...Azkaban may indeed be impregnable by normal standards, but Darvy's army would make quick work of it. Azkaban would be turned from a prison into a base of operations overnight, and permanent residence for Darvy as he launched his attack on the world. His own personal fortress, guarded by both the defenses that the Ministry itself had created, and by his own army of beasts; a fortress of the dead.

And as for the prisoners already residing there...there was only two options for them. They'd either give their allegiances to Darvy, or be executed. And his father would undoubtedly select the latter of the two...

Did he even know? What were the odds that the prisoners in Azkaban were given editions of the *WAR Weekly* to skim through? Would they have been informed of Darvy's presence, not far from where they were at all? No, probably not. Telling the prisoners would probably only rile them up, get them excited about the prospect of possibly being freed. His father was sitting in a cell clueless right now...awaiting a death that he didn't even know was coming for him.

He hurled again, beads of sweat running down his face as he turned on the faucet and rinsed the sink out. He splashed water on his face, desperate to cool it down before it bursted into flames. His legs were too weak to stand back up. The powerful acceptance of his father's imminent demise prevented him from doing anything other than laying hunched over, this unanticipated sickness taking over every facet of his physical being, and this time, he knew, it had nothing to do with a nightmare. This was very real, and that made it so much worse...

He was hoisted up by two arms-one arm stronger than the other-and he turned on shaky legs to see who had done it. Not that it was even necessary.

"I know what you're thinking right now mate" said Scorpius, whose pale face looked even whiter somehow. Morrison was standing next to him looking tense.

"No you don't" Albus said shakily, his voice trembling. "You have *no* idea..."

Morrison reached into a stall and withdrew some toilet paper, which he handed over without speaking. Albus, aware of its intent, wiped his mouth of the disgusting liquid coating his lips and continued to stare at Scorpius.

"You're thinking that your dad is in trouble right now-" Scorpius started.

"Got that part right!"

"- and you're thinking that it's your fault he's in there in the first place."

Albus felt his entire body turn ice cold. He hadn't even reached that part yet. Close to collapsing once more, he leaned himself up against a stall, trembling.

"But that's not true mate" Scorpius told him.

"Don't listen to that rubbish newspaper!" Albus choked out. "They have no idea what's going on; they don't know about what Darvy's planning, about the Executioner's Veil, about anything-"

"It doesn't matter!" Scorpius spoke up. "Listen, Darvy's been there for weeks right? According to them? Do you agree with that?"

"I- I guess-"

"And *nothing's happened yet*" Scorpius said, and Morrison nodded from next to him.

"That's right, nothing *yet*!" Albus argued back.

"What do you think Darvy's doing, eh?" Morrison asked.

"He's building an army-"

"Where's it at?" Morrison said.

"You saw it!" Albus roared at him. "You saw the stuff that he makes, those- those- those disgusting skeletons that attacked us, and there's horses too now and all kinds of-"

"Don't you think that these things would have been spotted in bulk?" Scorpius asked him sharply.

"If a large group of Dark Alliance members can't stay hidden there, what makes you think that those things will? Darvy may very well be *trying* to make an army there, but it's not working, obviously, if it was, Azkaban would have been penetrated weeks ago!"

Albus stared at them both. He knew that they were grasping at straws; doing anything to help lessen the throbbing in his head. On one end, he had perfect counters to all of these arguments. Darvy could be postponing the creation of his army for some reason. Maybe it was being built as they spoke, but it simply took longer than they thought. How long did it take to get the

Executioner's Veil to even work? He could just be building it slowly...Ares, after all, had created those monsters even without the Veil, so it simply seemed to be a method of accelerating...but to what degree?

But on the other hand, these things meant absolutely nothing.

"But he's still there" Albus gasped out. "And no one's doing anything about it. Let's say that he has hit some sort of snag-maybe Silhouettes are more difficult to make in bulk than he'd thought-it's still happening, isn't it? At one point? So what if my dad's not going to die tomorrow? Is it any better if it happens in a month?"

"He only has to hold out until December though" Morrison said, and Scorpius threw him a dark look.

"What do you mean?" Albus said quickly. What happens then? Had he ended the article prematurely?

"What Morrison means," Scorpius said, hesitantly, "is that no one has a better shot of stopping Darvy than Waddlesworth's lot. WAR runs everything now, and once he's elected, he may be able to end this war before an army gets created, or Azkaban gets infiltrated-"

"No!" Albus spat, astonished. "Don't you get it? Waddlesworth isn't helping things at all! Darvy is making this army to *prepare* for when that election happens, he's looking forward to the fight! That's the deadline, if anything! By then, Darvy will definitely have invaded Azkaban for good!"

"Well then maybe your dad won't even be there by then!" Morrison blurted out, holding his hands up defensively.

Scorpius groaned, but Albus gave him a quizzical look.

"Huh?"

"Your dad's innocent" Morrison said, hands still held up. "Maybe before then...his name will be cleared? Maybe your family will step forward and say what really happened. You could-"

"Shut it Morrison!" Scorpius snapped, and he then turned to Albus. "Look-mate-I know you've got a lot going on right now, but we need to go."

"Go where?" Albus said, still somewhat distracted from what Morrison had been saying.

"We've got a game to play."

Morrison cringed, but it was nothing to the look on Albus knew was on his own face.

"A- a *game*?" he whispered, furious. "After all that, everything we've said, you're worried about-about a game of Quidditch? Are you serious?"

Scorpius sighed. "Look mate, standing here isn't going to get anything done. It's out of your hands. We've already established that nothing is going to happen today, and you've got a game to play."

Albus stared at him, mouth wide open.

"You said it yourself, this team comes first!" Scorpius said loudly. "The faster you catch that Snitch, the faster we can go over everything again. But you can't be seen like this mate. You can't let people know that you've cracked. Not- not that you have- "

"I get it" Albus said darkly. "Let's go."

"Breakfast isn't over yet" Morrison said quietly.

"It is for me" Albus said darkly, staring into the stained sink.

Ten minutes later, Morrison was gone, and he and Scorpius were in the locker room.

"How're you feeling?" Scorpius asked him, pacing back and forth.

"Wonderful" Albus shot out from his seat on one of the benches, his uniform sloppily thrown on. "My head's as clear as the sky outside-" he continued in mock cheerfulness, but Scorpius cut him off.

"I meant physically. Still feel like vomiting?"

"No, I got it all out of me" Albus told him, and this was true. His stomach, though queasy, was in no danger of erupting on him, and though his lethargy remained intact, his head was no longer on fire.

The team arrived to get dressed soon after, all of them chatting idly, the *WAR Weekly* article a thing of the past. They'd discussed it all at breakfast; it was already old news. So what if their captain's dad was going to die? They didn't care...

He was in no mood to give an enthusiastic pre-game speech, so Scorpius took over, commenting that their captain was in a deep meditative state and wasn't to be disturbed until the game began. Albus half-listened, noting that Scorpius had a way with words that he himself didn't possess. Even with his mind perpetually showing the same photograph of Azkaban over and over again, he couldn't help but think that had Scorpius been on the team when Atticus had left, that he himself wouldn't be the captain right now...

The sound of cheering in the audience snapped him back into reality. Still clammy, still shaking, and still dwelling on his father, he was given a small nudge by his Keeper and knew that it was time to play Quidditch.

The rest of his team was chatting excitedly as they lined up in preparation to enter the field; even Lucas Strossen was looking eager now. Albus heard their names being called, and walked forward slowly.

A surprising amount of sunlight entered his field of vision as he continued his brisk walk, and Albus knew that now that he was out in the open, there was no going back. He would proceed with this meaningless game, and then retire to his dormitory as a reward.

But still, the sounds of jeering in the audience reminded him of just who was in it, and he stared into the crowd of Gryffindors with anticipation. He found Mirra's face at once; she was the only one making no noise. Her face looked anxious and worn, and her grey eyes met his own with something that resembled longing. He knew exactly what was going through her head; she knew what he was going through, and she didn't want him playing Quidditch when he could be with her, being comforted. From a few seats down from her Rose sat as well. Her face was a mix of several emotions. She too seemed concerned, but it was a more uneasy expression, indicating that she was simply hoping that he was okay, but not in any particular hurry to speak to him about it.

He shook his head quickly to get himself out of his daze.

"Stay sharp mate" Scorpius said from right behind him. "You'll feel loads better once you get up in the air."

Albus grunted to confirm that he'd heard him, then stopped in the center of the field, directly across from Rudolph Tabbers, who was giving him a menacing look that Albus didn't even care to return. Who was this nobody, that Albus should even be considering animosity toward him, with everything else on his mind?

"Captains shake hands!" bellowed Mr. Wood, and Albus extended his slowly. Tabbers grabbed it and squeezed it unnecessarily hard, but Albus paid this no mind. He instead glanced upwards into the Slytherin section of the crowd. He was looking for Morrison and Melonie, but he found Scorpius' father's face instead. It was completely blank, but he was definitely staring back.

A whistle sounded, and Albus, conditioned to kick-off at this noise, rose into the air quickly. The commentator-whomever it was this year, Albus didn't even know-launched into a detailed analysis of both teams, but his words sounded like mumbled patches of noise with the wind in his ears and his father on his mind. He found that being in the air relaxed him, but this ultimately allowed him to dwell on everything that he'd learned in the last hour or so. He thought of Waddlesworth's assurance.

He will never leave that island.

Of course he wouldn't, he had no reason to. Darvy was now set up exactly as he wanted to be. Albus was thinking about his father's safety, but Darvy's plan had not revolved around this at all.

Was he even aware how close he was to Harry Potter? Did he even care, or had he just written him off as another prisoner?

"And Potter's Beaters are already hard at work!" shouted the commentator, who had the deep voice of a seventh year. "That's twice now they've saved his head!"

Albus turned to his left and saw Strossen hovering near him, looking winded. "Pay attention!" he barked, and Albus nodded.

Flying even further upwards, he tried to settle himself into the game by familiarizing himself with it. He'd locate his rival Seeker first, and then take precautionary measures. He'd play defensive.

What if the defenses of Azkaban actually held up? That Wizengamot member, he'd stated that Darvy would be dead from his own ignorance in a few weeks. Was Albus perhaps greatly underestimating the protection around Azkaban? Hadn't his father always told him that it, along with Gringotts and Hogwarts, were the most heavily fortified places in the Wizarding World? And Gringotts had never been broken into, right?

"And Slytherin takes the lead!" yelled the commentator, amidst a chorus of booing. "Malfoy makes a save and sets up his Chasers with a fine pass, and Winkly makes the shot. One to nil Slytherin..."

Albus continued to peer through the sky, searching for the frail, nameless Seeker from Gryffindor. He found him at once, skimming along the grass, trying to stay out of play and in search of the Snitch at the same time.

"Another save by Malfoy!"

Albus glanced over to Scorpius, who was looking confident, though also somewhat distracted. His head kept turning in two different directions, one way towards the Slytherin portion of the stands, where his father was, and the other way towards the Hufflepuff, where his girlfriend's cheering was thankfully blocked out by the rest of the noise on the pitch.

Albus lowered himself gently, trying to move just enough to get a better straight forward look; perhaps the Snitch was in the middle of all the action.

Was WAR really the best shot that Albus had? Was he really supposed to depend on them to defeat Darvy before anything could happen to Azkaban? Scorpius had said that WAR controlled everything...so why couldn't they do something now? Why wait until Waddlesworth won the election?

But then again, what were they supposed to do? March in after Darvy to protect one prisoner?

An *innocent* prisoner. Morrison had been right. His father had a strong case to not even be in Azkaban right now. If only people knew...if only they knew that it should be someone like Fairhart rotting away in Azkaban, awaiting death, and not his father. But Morrison had been foolish to assume that his family would do anything. His family listened to his father; the patriarch. His father, who wanted that terrible secret covered up to protect his son...

But WAR controlled everything. If *they* knew that his father was innocent...it wouldn't matter. They wouldn't care anyway. Waddlesworth wouldn't at least, so consequently, that meant that WAR wouldn't. Unless Albus spun it to them real well...

A flicker of something that felt uncannily like hope ignited in his chest, but before he could elaborate on it to himself, he heard roaring from the crowd. He glanced down and saw that he'd been correct; the Snitch was in the middle of all of the action. And the frail looking Gryffindor Seeker was already an inch away from it.

Albus lunged forward, but the deafening applause told him that he was much too late. He saw Tiffani Garret try and fly in his way, but the Gryffindor Seeker had already snatched up the Snitch.

"Gryffindor wins!" yelled the commentator. "One hundred and fifty to ten! A blowout for Gryffindor, and a quick one at that! Potter must be reeling, his head didn't look like it was in the game at all!"

Albus threw a contemptuous glare toward the commentator's booth, but Scorpius caught his eye first. He'd already landed, and had thrown his broomstick down angrily, having lost with both his father and girlfriend watching.

Ten minutes later and Albus had done exactly as he'd planned, retired back to his dormitory. He'd spoken to no one along the way, not his team, who were all probably disappointed and confused, not Scorpius, who was probably angry, not even Mirra, who probably still wanted to be there for him. Even though it was still only the afternoon, he was laying in his dormitory bed, the failed Quidditch game only the tip of a long list of things on his mind.

How was it possible that yesterday he was in a good mood? His small triumph over the Protector's Club had been just that; a small triumph. It hadn't actually mattered at all, because, ultimately, WAR was not the adversary here. They weren't exactly his friends either, but they were against Darvy...and they could do things that he couldn't. Waddlesworth was practically already the Minister of Magic. Waddlesworth could get his father out of Azkaban.

And he had a Hogsmeade trip next week. And he'd be able to enter WAR headquarters.

He knew that on the surface it was stupid-knew that it was a direct contradiction to the Albus that had been successful by hiding and letting adults take over-but the stakes were higher now. No one was going to help his father, either because he didn't want them to, or because they didn't

care. But Albus was not going to roll over and just let that be it. In one week, he'd have his chance to see Waddlesworth one on one, and he would ask him-no *demand* his help. He could do something to make a difference.

So do it rattled a voice in his head.

"I will" Albus announced to his empty dormitory.

He laid back in his bed, a sharp pain stabbing him behind his eyes. For a single second, the room around him had been tinted gold. He thought of Darvy, and realized that all of this depended on what Darvy was doing as well. What was he up to on that island in the North Sea...

"VESNOVITCH!"

Sebastian Darvy practically spat the word into the air, his mouth tired from having recited nonsensical noises for the past half of an hour. The Foulest Book-which lay on the dirty, natural made floor as though it were a carpet-began to glow faintly. Within moments, a substance akin to smoke was swirling itself upwards, taking solid form-

Darvy smiled superciliously, his long blonde hair hanging down over half of his face. Finally, he'd uttered the incantation correctly; it had only taken him twenty tries or so.

The gaseous substance had finished manifesting itself into an actual image, and now, standing upright with feet protruding from the thick, black book was a being that was neither man nor ghost. A tuft of wispy silver hair sat upon the head of the thin man, whose beady eyes were surveying its surroundings through ghastly, unnecessary spectacles. The lanky, morose figure of the famous wandmaker settled his sights on Darvy after a moment or two, taking in his human appearance with intense dislike.

"What happened to the other one?" Vesnovitch asked, his powerful accent made even clearer by the reverberation of the cavern that they were in. "The talented one?" he added.

The smile vanished from Darvy's face. "He's dead" he said coldly, his electric blue eyes instinctively lowering to the Foulest Book, where the Dragonfang Wand lay in the crease.

Vesnovitch looked downwards as well. Catching sight of his creation, he heaved a sigh. "I suppose he didn't die in his sleep, did he?" he asked, the sarcasm heavy in his voice.

"No, he didn't" Darvy said, the sadistic smirk returning.

"Where are we?" Vesnovitch asked suddenly, distracted. There had been a clap of thunder.

"The island surrounding Azkaban" Darvy answered him. "It's always stormy here..."

There was a silence between the two of them, Darvy looking both excited and nervous, Vesnovitch bored. It was Darvy who spoke first.

"I have some questions for you" he said bluntly, staring into the silvery figure with determination.

Vesnovitch heaved yet another sigh. "Ask away..."

"I keep having dreams" Darvy started at once.

"That isn't a question-"

"Let me finish!" Darvy roared, in time with yet another clap of thunder. His eyes bulged menacingly, and Vesnovitch refrained from commenting further. "Let me- let me start from somewhere else" Darvy said, voice lower, and he began pacing back and forth, his cloak-which was torn and singed-billowing along behind him.

Vesnovitch again remained quiet. Darvy didn't stop in his walking back and forth, but it slowed considerably when he managed to spit out what was on his mind.

"I- I'm having trouble controlling them" he said uneasily. "The creatures created from this Wand-"

"I have had this discussion before, you were even present at the time" Vesnovitch said matter-of-factly. "If you cannot control what is summoned from the Dragonfang Wand, than it does not respect you" he added slowly, as if he were speaking to a child.

"It's different this time!" Darvy screeched at him. "This is- this is different. I am not summoning them from the other side. They are- they are walking over. I found a portal of sorts. A Veil. It enables me to bring them to this world much faster, but- but I'm still having trouble getting them to follow my orders" he finished lamely.

"The manner in which these creatures arrive is irrelevant. Their loyalty remains with whoever the Wand respects."

"But I can control them sometimes!" Darvy lashed out, and he snatched the Dragonfang Wand up from the book, where the golden stick flashed brightly underneath the light emitted from Vesnovitch. Vesnovitch flickered momentarily, but made no comment. He instead crinkled his silvery nose, scratching at it in what seemed remarkably close to bewilderment.

"When can you control them?" he asked, sounding legitimately intrigued.

"When they see this" Darvy said darkly, holding the Wand up. "When they see this in my hands, they respect me-"

Vesnovitch let loose a derisive laugh, and Darvy flushed immediately. "They don't respect you!" he said loudly, and he couldn't have sounded any more condescending. "They *obey* you, because they see that you are in possession of the Wand. They will only respect whoever the Wand respects-

"Obedience, respect, it's the same thing!" Darvy said loudly, gripping the wand tightly as saliva flew from his mouth.

Vesnovitch continued to laugh, clutching at his intangible ribs and wiping an invisible tear from his eye before addressing Darvy again, once more sounding like he was speaking to a child.

"A man commands you to do something, or else he'll murder you. Obviously, you obey him. But do you respect him?"

Darvy was shaking now, his embarrassment evident in every line on his face. When he spoke again, it was low and cold.

"They respect me, I know that they do" he said. "You haven't seen them-

"Oh yes, perhaps you're right" Vesnovitch said sarcastically, waving his silvery hand. "Yes, what would *I* know? Surely, years of study in wandlore, and the actual creation of the Dragonfang Wand itself *pail* in comparison to *your* vast, innate knowledge-

"I get it!" Darvy barked. "But it- it makes no sense! I can summon them, can't I? Doesn't that mean that they have *some* respect-

"From what I am aware" Vesnovitch cut him off quickly, "the Wand shared owners briefly. Who the other owner is, I do not know, but the man I spoke to before seemed to have half of the Wand's respect, yes. If I had to guess, I would say that it admired his raw power, hence his ability to summon them. Assuming that you killed this man," he continued, leering at Darvy, "this particular ability may have passed to you temporarily. After all, the Dragonfang Wand can not suddenly have no true master. Unable to locate who shared its respect, the next person who touched it probably would have inherited this gift, but it is impossible to determine how long this will last. If the Wand somehow manages to fall into the possession of its one remaining, true owner-who it respects-then your ability to summon these creatures would most likely pass to this individual."

Darvy stared at him, mouth sagging open in confusion. "But they do obey me" he said stupidly.

"They at least do that, so long as I have the Wand in my possession-

"You don't know what these creatures are, do you?" Vesnovitch asked, and it sounded as though he wanted a legitimate answer.

"Si- Silhouettes?" Darvy commented stupidly. "That's what they're known as here-

"Not an entirely inaccurate term" Vesnovitch said, more to himself than anything. "These creatures were once wizards and witches. They poured their souls into the Dragonfang Wand, expecting to have their power increase due to what they expected was limitless potential, not even realizing that it was slowly sapping them of their essence. Time and time again, people did this, for hundreds of years-everyone who sought the Wand and attempted to use it-and they all ended up as the shells that they are today. Void of life, able to pass over to this world because a remnant of themselves remains. They crave the Wand, because it has the one thing that they want-that final piece, the most important one-that will make them whole. They follow you blindly in the hopes that they will one day possess their essence of life again, perhaps to finally move on."

"But there's so many of them!" Darvy said, astounded. His face bore some excitement however; he seemed to enjoy the idea that he had other beings living in the palm of his hand.

"Yes, there are" Vesnovitch said. "But not every 'Silhouette' is a different individual."

Darvy raised his blonde eyebrows in confusion.

"I'll try to explain, though it will be difficult...I don't believe that someone living could understand it" Vesnovitch said lightly. "A human being is comprised of body, soul, and mind, correct? The mind is the link between the two others, but of them both, only one is everlasting. You are not, as you may think, a body, with a soul contained inside. Instead, you are rather a soul-an essence-confined within a body. The flesh is an ephemeral thing, it disappears quickly. So long as the soul remains intact, in this world, flesh and bone will continue to manifest for it. These creatures, every time that they are destroyed, will come back, desperate to be reunited with their essence once more. How the soul does this I do not know-I doubt anyone can explain the magnificence of such an entity, but its perpetual nature demands some sort of casing. The creatures that you summon are but bodies, craving a soul, with a severed link of a mind to give them just enough consciousness to have desire."

Darvy scratched at his chin, soaking this information in. "So as long I have this Wand in my possession...these Silhouettes will obey me, and continue to do so, even after they're destroyed? They'll just come right back?"

"Of course" Vesnovitch said. "What else would there be for them to do? They can't move on."

Now it was Darvy's turn to laugh. His cackle bounced off of the walls of the cavern, but then stopped suddenly. "And these other creatures?" he asked. "These horses, and there's these birds now too, giant, the color of coal-"

"Companions of the Silhouettes, from the other side" Vesnovitch said carelessly. "I don't imagine them being remotely sentient however, the same rules would not apply for them."

Darvy nodded, then raised the Wand up high in front of his eyes. "And after how long of them obeying me, will they come to respect me?"

Vesnovitch widened his eyes in disbelief. "They won't!" he groaned. "Ever! I cannot *stress this enough*, they will never-"

"Why not!" Darvy lashed out, his good mood completely eradicated. "The Wand respected Red a bit, didn't it! And I killed him! Proved I was stronger! It should-"

"The Wand will not respect a murderer!" Vesnovitch said stiffly. "You have sealed your own fate in that regard."

Darvy let the wand hang loosely from his side. He spoke with the hint of a whine in his voice. "Why not? Why won't it respect someone who's killed-"

"I said it before and I will say again only once" Vesnovitch told him crisply. "The Wand is deceitful by design. The main power that it gives is actually just power that one already possesses; it blurs the lines of morality, allowing you to tap into abilities that you wouldn't use otherwise. As you lose your inhibitions, you will feel more comfortable with the nature that most probably choose to push away. Murdering, for instance, becomes simple. And of course, this makes the Wand useless. The Wand *is* powerful by itself-it carries the souls of hundreds of wizards and witches, after all-but it will grant an individual this power only to test them. Those who use it ultimately lose the Wand's respect anyway. To keep it's power, you would have to choose not to use it."

"Thus making it useless anyway" Darvy snapped, and Vesnovitch shrugged.

"Some may see it like that" he said. "But only some..."

"This power" Darvy said, pacing once again. "How is it manifested? I think- I think that I have seen it before."

Vesnovitch simply shook his head slowly. "I cannot say for sure; I have never been tempted by the Wand. But you can imagine the power granted by the souls of so many. I would imagine that, during those instances in which the Wand presents its power, the one harnessing it would be granted immense magical abilities, as well as, obviously, the ability to control those following the Wand masterfully. I also wouldn't be surprised-"

"If there was a physical change?" Darvy blurted out. "A golden aura? Hollow eyes-"

"Perhaps" Vesnovitch said offhandedly. "The individual would be harnessing a great power, after all. But again, this would only work for who the Wand actually respects-someone who is constantly presented with its vast power as a test. It is a difficult thing, to struggle with ones self. And, of course, each time this power is harnessed it becomes that much more difficult...you

slowly lose yourself, after all. To a different part of yourself" he added thoughtfully, staring upwards into a stalactite.

Darvy was shaking now. Strangely, a smile had cracked on his lips.

"Those dreams" he uttered lowly. "The- the dreams I mentioned from before..."

"What about them?" Vesnovitch asked, looking as though he desperately wanted to end his interview.

"There's two of me in them. Me- me and- and- and another me" he blurted out excitedly, stopping in his tracks. "And the other me...the other me is like that. With the golden eyes. It overpowers me, each time. Throttles me in my sleep."

"Interesting" Vesnovitch said, though it didn't sound in his voice. "I suppose you want to know how to overcome this double?"

Darvy gave him a perplexed look. "What? Wh- no! No, no, no! I want to know how to *become* him! How do I wield that power? How do I become the one, who kills the weaker one?"

Vesnovitch looked at him blankly, as though he'd never seen anything quite like him. "You can't" he said after a moment. "I told you, that power belongs only to one who the Wand respects. In this case, your double in the dream represents the darker, more vicious aspect of your personality. And this half of you always wins because, well, you want it to. This separate personality is your true self. You simply can't obtain the power that normally comes with it. The Wand refuses to do so."

Darvy's smile faltered. "I- I-"

"You do understand," Vesnovitch started, extending his ghastly hands as though he were preaching, "that this power is a curse, yes? A constant struggle between two individuals in the same state of being. The Dragonfang Wand is merciless; relentless. Over time, the chronic battles would become more and more arduous, and neither of the two resolutions are anything to desire. Giving in to the power forces you to lose sight of your true identity, and neglecting it only forces insanity; one of them must occur, one of them is inevitable."

"Then how come I'm having these dreams?" Darvy asked stubbornly. "The Wand doesn't even respect me..."

"You mentioned a gateway of sorts to the other world, did you not?" Vesnovitch asked him. "A Veil? The Dragonfang Wand is now being used rapidly it would seem, and the sudden increase in power had made both its possessor and its master experience such things. Whereas you have only dreams to deal with, however, whoever the Wand *actually* respects is going through something much worse, something that will only intensify over time. Until they choose to use

their power, they will be struggling with themselves; a more direct, barbaric presence will be attempting to manifest, to take over."

"But he still has power" Darvy said, his teeth bared in something that looked uncannily like jealousy. "They can still do things unheard of magically, can still control these creatures in ways that I never could-"

"You are worried that this individual can stop you, in whatever it is you are attempting to do" Vesnovitch announced. It was not a question, it was a statement.

Darvy glared at him, then hesitated. "Yes" he said finally.

Vesnovitch shook his head. When he next spoke, he did so as if he had been contemplating what could actually come from his remark.

"You have no grasp of the situation" he said lowly. "These creatures *obey you*, requiring only a visual cue. You suffer from no repercussions, and can not possibly lose this power, so long as you remain in possession of the Wand. This other individual, however, is utterly powerless to stop you. Even if they did choose to use their destructive power against you, it wouldn't work."

"Why not?" Darvy asked, dumbfounded.

"The Dragonfang Wand cannot respect a murderer" Vesnovitch reiterated. "It would rather kill its own master than allow them to sink so low as to commit such an unspeakable act. A Killing Curse would rebound, as would any spell meant to kill. Whoever the Dragonfang Wand's one true master is now, you can kill them with no ramifications. But they cannot kill you. They would die trying; the Dragonfang Wand would make sure of it, whether it was the wand in use or not."

Darvy blinked stupidly. He made to speak, then raised his head up, his malicious smirk from earlier returning slowly.

"So what you're saying then," he started delicately, "is that I cannot possibly lose?"

Vesnovitch gave a low groan, as if he did indeed regret having said anything. "It certainly seems that way, yes" he admitted sadly.

Chapter 14: Bartering With The Best

The days following the article about Darvy's presence on Azkaban proved to be among the most restless that Albus could ever remember having. The powerful shift in his priorities made the entire idea of a proper experience at Hogwarts ludicrous, with far bigger things weighing on his mind throughout the duration of each day. House points were even more meaningless than they used to be, the unappreciative glares given to him by his teammates now blended in seamlessly with the callous expressions of others, and completing coursework seemed more of an afterthought as well.

There was simply no denying that this article had been a harsh reminder of the times that they were all living in, and though its effect on most others in the castle was minimal, it was especially harrowing for Albus. He'd been foolish to occupy himself with things like Quidditch, and his own personal vendetta against the Protector's Club. What *really* should have been on his mind, this entire time, was the same thoughts that he'd had as he left the school last year: getting his father out of Azkaban. He tried keeping this information private, but naturally, one person in particular wasn't buying his apparent indifference on the matter.

Mirra was staring at him with a tense face, unwilling to speak first. They'd sat through several classes together during the week-two Care for Magical Creatures lessons and a Potions one, to be exact-but Albus had acted normal for all of them. Now, however, with nothing to keep them busy and sitting alone in the library, they could share their uncomfortable silence appropriately.

Albus cleared his throat as he turned the page of his Potions textbook, intent on skimming over something that he already knew. Mirra too had a book open, but she wasn't even bothering to put on a charade about reading it.

"You've been quiet" she eventually said, her voice sounding surprisingly dainty amidst the low, typical noises of the library.

"Just studying" he replied weakly.

Mirra didn't acknowledge his lie. Instead, she dived into her speech, her voice slow and calming.

"Albus I know that you have *a lot* on your mind right now, but if you need someone to talk to-"

"I already talked to Morrison and Scorpius about it" Albus said truthfully, looking up for a second. "It's fine, they calmed me down. I'm fine."

He returned his attention to his book. He was not trying to be disingenuous; he simply knew that making eye contact with her would make him uncomfortable. He had the strange feeling that Mirra was quite adept at Legilimancy, even if it was only with him.

"Well I talked to Scorpius last night" Mirra said quietly, and Albus groaned. He'd forgotten about their Prefect meetings. "And he says that you're not fine. That you're still really worried-"

"I admit it crosses my mind a bit, yeah" he blurted out, biting back harsher words. He was not going to take his aggression out on anyone, not this time. This time, he was going to channel it correctly.

"He also said that he gets worried that you're going to try something stupid" Mirra said, and her voice grew stronger at this, as though getting her point across was more important than sparing his feelings. "He told me that you mentioned something about WAR to him, and Hogsmeade."

Albus sighed. He had-in a moment of weakness the day following the *WAR Weekly* article and the Quidditch game-alluded strongly to having a personal chat with Warren Waddlesworth in Hogsmeade. He had made no mention of it since then though, and had been hoping that his friends would have forgotten about it by now, or had passed it off as rambling. Obviously, neither was the case.

When Albus didn't answer, Mirra continued.

"You said something to me last year on the Hogwarts Express" Mirra said darkly. "Do you remember? You said something about leaving."

Albus immediately lunged forward, holding out his hand demonstratively to defend himself. "That was entirely different!" he said at once. "That was just- that was just an errant thought! I was thinking of trying to- it doesn't matter what I was thinking" he finished weakly.

Truthfully, he'd been thinking of something relatively idiotic. In his desperation to rectify the situation with his father, he'd considered attempting to find Sancticus Fairhart and bringing him to justice. Though his father's words about staying in Azkaban during his visit over the summer had cut into this idea tremendously, Albus' own use of logic had contributed to his reservations as well. There was simply no getting around the fact that he had no idea where Fairhart was, had no way of getting to him even if he did, and, realistically, had no chance of defeating the skilled Renegade and handing him over to Ministry officials.

"So you're not going anywhere then?" Mirra asked strongly.

"No- well, I mean- I'm going to Hogsmeade."

She raised her eyebrows, but he covered himself quickly.

"Look I'm going shopping with Morrison and Scorpius, okay?" he said. "But that's all I can tell you."

The beauty of this lie was that it wasn't really a lie at all. He'd already worked out the details with his two friends the previous day, and it involved the three of them all shopping for presents together, so they would all be able to ask each other for their opinions; they were all novices in purchasing gifts for girls, after all. What Albus omitted to Mirra though, as well as to his friends,

was his intentions of skiving off afterwards and heading for the headquarters of Wands and Redemption, where hopefully, he would still be allowed to enter from a magical standpoint.

Mirra said nothing, but a flash of a smile had strangely hinted on her face; perhaps it was the idea that her boyfriend would be shopping for her. Somewhat placated by this idea, and the assurance that he would not be leaving, she allowed herself to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"Well listen," she started, appearing apprehensive, "another thing that I wanted to mention was just that- well- since I'm sure you're not the only one worried and all, if you want to change plans for this winter break and be with your family-"

"No, no, no" Albus said, shaking his head back and forth to stress this. "Look, I'll be fine, okay? I really want to get to know your grandparents, and to spend this break with you."

It was certainly true. Spending the holidays with Mirra was one of the few things that brought him comfort in the foreseeable future, and indeed, if things went well this weekend, the stress of his father being in Azkaban would be diminished by then anyway.

She nodded, breaking into a toothy smile. Albus returned it uneasily. *If* was the operative term there.

Classes progressed methodically. Albus attended each, rarely doing more than the bare minimum, and then segued into the next one automatically, somewhat unaware of where it was his legs were taking him. Scorpius and Morrison, who split their classes with him apart from Herbology (where thankfully, Albus had had no trouble) seemed to always be by his side, whether for comfort or on guard duty he wasn't aware. He found it slightly irritating, however; what did they expect him to do while in the castle? Just make a run for it?

Nothing was mentioned by his friends though, or any of the professors that he was closest with. Neville had said nothing, but had eyed him with intensity during the weeks lessons, and Hagrid, who couldn't really get him alone due to the nature of the class, was unable to do more than smile at him warmly in passing. It wasn't until Friday that something of note happened.

"Blimey I'm embarrassed to hand this in" Morrison said, cringing as he held up a vial of blue potion that looked close to exploding.

"It's really not that bad" Melonie told him, placing her own lavender concoction on the tray.

Today had been one of the few lessons where partnering had not been available, as their professor wanted to get a grasp of their individual talents before a big upcoming test. Albus had succeeded in his attempt, he was sure, as his own potion was the deep purple mentioned in the textbook. Scorpius' near identical potion only strengthened this idea. They all began shuffling out

of the classroom, Mirra being one of the last to place a vial down-her's too, like Melonie's, was lavender-when Scorpius' father said something aloud, to only one of them in particular.

"I was wondering if you could stay behind for a moment, Albus?"

Albus was not the only one who turned; everyone in his own private circle of friends did.

"Just something about your last homework assignment" his professor told him, and he began rifling through drawers. "I just wasn't sure what you meant by something, and wanted to go over it with you in person-"

"Yeah sure" Albus said, he and his friends the only ones still in the classroom. Everyone else had left hurriedly, before they could catch the look on their professor's face that indicated how they'd done.

He turned to his friends at once. "I'll catch up with you guys..."

They all left wearing different looks, though Scorpius' and Mirra's were most noticeable. She looked somewhat wary, Scorpius highly suspicious. His friend actually lingered by the door briefly, without closing it, when his father spoke up.

"You can shut that, Scorpius. Yes- thank you."

The closing of the door altered the feeling in the room immensely. Albus had a very good idea what this was all about, but he wasn't sure that he was fully willing to talk to his professor about it. Unless...

Had Scorpius told his father of his plan to meet with Waddlesworth? The thought bubbled in the back of Albus' head, and he silently let both worry and anger seep through him. He wouldn't say anything yet though, not until he had confirmation.

"You can sit" his professor told him, closing all of the drawers at his desk without removing anything; he was making it very obvious that none of Albus' homework assignments had anything to do with this private meeting.

Albus did so, right at the front table, as was now usual. He allowed false explanations to circle around inside of his head, but they all evaporated when his professor spoke.

"So the Protector's Club is a success" he was told pointedly, his professor lounging back in an easygoing manner as he said it. "Well done."

"I didn't do anything really" Albus said with a shrug, still recovering from the fact that nothing about the upcoming Hogsmeade trip had been mentioned...yet.

"Yes you did" Scorpius' father said. "Your determination in stopping the Club proved to me exactly how far it was going. I took a huge gamble marching in there that night. I could have left

with all of my credibility with the students destroyed. As it turns out, things are better now. Without knowing that I had to be there for you and your friend-who's an atrocious actor by the way-the course of events that followed would have never happened."

Albus gave a weak smile and nodded. Something was askew though; why was his professor mentioning this now? That meeting had occurred weeks ago...

"Something on your mind?" his professor asked.

"Huh? Oh- n- no" Albus said, sitting up straight. "Just curious why you're mentioning this to me now" he told him.

"Well I didn't want to bring good news until I could actually confirm it. There was a Protector's Club meeting last night. It went well."

"Really?" Albus said, genuinely and pleasantly surprised. What a strange feeling that was. There'd been so little of it recently. "I didn't hear about it!"

"A bulletin was posted" Professor Malfoy said simply. "But then again, you may have simply been too distracted by other things to notice it."

Albus opened his mouth, then closed it immediately. Whether Scorpius' father knew about his intent in Hogsmeade or not, he at least knew that the article on Darvy and Azkaban was weighing on his mind. He decided to change the subject.

"So what all happened? Were there a lot of people there?"

"About as many as usual" he was answered lightly. "Of course, it was still Larson and the rest of our security doing most of the talking. But I stayed and watched. No curses or hexes were taught, and students were restricted to using strictly defensive magic-shield charms and basic jinxes-when they competed."

"Were countdowns allowed?" Albus asked, and his professor frowned slightly.

"I'm still working that one out with Larson. He is very vehement on the necessity of preparing people for unforeseen attack. I can't say I disagree, especially considering that nothing too dangerous is being used anyway. We don't get along, me and him" he said strongly. "But we've worked a few things out already. I'm sure that more will be arranged at later points in time."

Albus nodded, pleased with this status report. He had a question to ask though.

"Was my cousin there?"

"No" he was answered quickly. Albus made a scoffing noise, but his professor gave him a weak, wry smile.

"You've put yourself in a very balanced situation, Albus. If any of your family or friends chooses to attend these meetings, then they get the benefit of learning additional spells. If they choose not to, then they're right where they were before the Protector's Club even existed, which is what you wanted in the first place. Don't try and find fault in this situation."

Albus said nothing, but noted the tone of the statement. There had been a hint of finality to it, but only so much to know that this particular part of the discussion was over, and not the entire conversation itself. Curious as to what could be next, he was taken off guard once again.

"So I hear that my son has a girlfriend now" Scorpius' father said, and Albus opened his eyes in surprise.

"Uh..."

"Is this news to you?"

"No" Albus said quickly, and he saw, with relief, a slight smile playing on his professor's face. "It's just- who told you that?" he asked, curious.

"Word gets around, even to the teachers" he was answered. "So what do you think of Ms. Anifur?"

Albus hesitated, organizing his thoughts accordingly before speaking. "She's- she- she's not bad."

"Fair enough" his Potions professor said. "You can go now, I don't want to keep you from seeing your friends."

Albus stood up at once, confused. That had been the ending to their talk? Just like that? He moved himself over to the door cautiously, then turned with yet another question.

"Is that all that you wanted to talk to me about?" he asked incredulously.

His professor's cold, unmoving eyes bore into his own before anything was said.

"No" Professor Malfoy said. "But it's all that you're comfortable talking about right now, so that will have to do. Enjoy the rest of your day, Albus. And have a good time in Hogsmeade."

The day of the Hogsmeade trip was widely anticipated by many of the students, mostly because coming into the year they had probably doubted its existence. Albus found himself spending quite a bit of time getting ready on Saturday morning, and it had nothing to do with looking nice in casual dress attire.

He stared at his silvery Invisibility Cloak fiercely, taking in its stretched out appearance on his bedspread. Should he bring it? It would be very suspicious to his friends if they found out, but

then again, he was leaving the castle, and had been instructed by his father to always have it on him, just in case. Would that excuse hold up for why he had it on him, or would Morrison and Scorpius read too much into it?

"You coming mate?" asked a voice from the door, and Albus hastily stuffed the Cloak back into his trunk.

"On my way now!" he hollered, and he began walking down the stairs quickly. He walked with Scorpius and Morrison into the Great Hall, where a large assortment of students were waiting to be granted permission to leave the castle. Albus noticed that his pockets-like those of his two friends-were jingling noisily as they walked. Evidently, they were all aware of how costly jewelry could be.

"What do the girls know?" Morrison asked as they merged into a mess of people that could hardly be considered a proper line.

"I just told Mirra that I'm going shopping with you guys" Albus admitted. "But I didn't say where or anything like that, or what it was for."

"Anastasia didn't even bother asking" Scorpius said flatly. "I reckon she has other plans...worked out perfectly for me."

Morrison looked between them, then waited for a ruckus up the line to stop. A second year had been caught trying to sneak by.

"Okay," he started, "well I told Melonie that the three of us were going to a store to pick up gifts."

"*What?*" Albus and Scorpius bellowed simultaneously.

"I crack under pressure!" he shouted, and they all moved up in line. "I was just making sure that you guys didn't do the same thing. Oh don't look at me like that, they probably figured it out anyway, they're not ruddy stupid!" he added, seeing the expressions of frustration that they were wearing.

They were given permission to go by Neville, who checked their names off of a list idly. He made to say something to Albus as they walked by, but was forced to abandon it as he picked off another younger student attempting to sneak by. Albus could see other groups of people ahead of them, including Lily and the twins, Molly and Lucy, who were all walking in a large group of scarlet and gold. Hugo, he noticed, was not among them.

It was not snowing outside, a usual occurrence during most Hogsmeade visits, but it was extremely cold. Albus walked with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his coat, the cold wind blowing in his face as Morrison and Scorpius argued about the location of Iridesence, the shop that they would be going to.

"It's definitely by the antique shop" Morrison said loudly. "I specifically remember connecting the two in my head."

"Maybe because they both sell expensive things?" Scorpius suggested. "Because I'm pretty sure it was the other way, down closer to Agatha's Household Item Shoppe..."

Albus said nothing, though he privately hoped that wherever it was that they did go, it would be close to the Hogpenn-the outskirts of Hogsmeade where the rundown Quality Quidditch Supplies shop that housed WAR was located.

They entered Hogsmeade after a brisk twenty minute walk or so, and it wasn't until all of the students ahead of him slowed down to take in the village that he realized how surrounded they were by Wands and Redemption. The WAR members that usually patrolled the halls and grounds of Hogwarts were walking in strict clusters, almost hovering over students who were not already in a large group to speak of. He noticed that the streets were lined with Ministry members as well, hulking, intimidating figures who dressed in official robes and stared straight into space. He wondered if there would be any interaction between the two forms of security, considering that soon they'd probably be joined together anyway.

"I don't really see what the point is in all of this security" said a voice from ahead of them, and Albus saw that it was a fourth year Ravenclaw who had been speaking to his two friends; he recognized him from the Protector's Club meetings. "Death's Right Hand can't attack right now, he's near Azkaban!"

Albus bared his teeth aggressively. Yes, there was no reason for them to fear an attack by Darvy, because he was dangerously close to storming the wizarding prison and killing half of the prisoners there instead-including his own father. But there was no reason to announce such a reminder out loud...

"Stupid git" said Scorpius, who had also heard him. "The Dark Alliance didn't *all* go with Darvy..."

"Yeah don't listen to him Al" Morrison said reassuringly, clapping him on the back. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. We're *all* in danger right now mate."

"Thanks Morrison" Albus said said dryly.

"Stop in for a Butterbeer?" asked Scorpius suddenly.

They'd meandered their way toward The Three Broomsticks, among the most frequented hot spots in Hogsmeade, especially among Hogwarts students. Albus was quite cold and eager for a drink of the warm, frothy treat, but he was also anxious to get the events of the day over with.

"I can skip it" Albus said. "If you guys-"

"No it's fine" said Scorpius stiffly. "We'll just head right to Iridescence, and get it out of the way. I'm pretty sure it's around this corner coming up."

Morrison nodded silently, and together, the three of them all started down a different street. Albus peeked into the window of the pub and saw that it was already occupied by students, as well as surly looking WAR members. He saw, at a table in the corner, Mirra, sitting along with Charles Eckley and a girl from Gryffindor that he knew only by sight. They all seemed reasonably cheery as they sipped on their drinks and talked.

Perked up a bit from the sight of his girlfriend having a good time, Albus fought his way through the cold with his two friends, who were once more bickering on where the shop was. Finally, Scorpius had enough tact to ask an elderly lady walking by, who pointed them in a direction completely different from either way that they were unable to agree upon going in.

"Alright yeah, I knew it was down passed this way" Morrison said, pointing up at a sign that had a picture of a toad on it. The words written on it were in some strange, esoteric language.

Scorpius shot him a look, but said nothing as they progressed down the street, turning at a corner just as the elderly woman had kindly instructed them. Albus noticed an increase in affluent looking, middle-aged women roaming the streets at this point, which told him that they were actually pretty close. He was just wondering if they'd be able to spot the shop right away or not when Scorpius skidded to a halt outside of a large one.

"Blimey this place looks costly" he said. Morrison looked speechless, and Albus mimicked this as he too looked into the shop window.

From the outside, its contents resembled more of a museum than an actual shop. Albus could see pedestals littering the large open space, all of them holding large necklaces with sizeable stones of varied colors. Hanging on the wall behind the counter where you made your payment looked to be priceless items, so extravagant that Albus wondered how long they had been there, just waiting for someone with an outrageous amount of gold to buy them in a spur of the moment. Albus was fairly confident that Warren Waddlesworth wasn't married, but he had the strange suspicion that if he was, his wife would be one of a select few capable of shopping here regularly.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Morrison asked him, teeth chattering.

"What's that?" Albus asked.

"Just how much gold did you bring?"

Albus thought about it. His family had always been well off-indeed, his mother would be right up there with Waddlesworth's pretend spouse as one of the few who could persistently shop at a place such as this. But still, he and his siblings had never exactly been spoiled, with gold being

thrown their way mostly for holidays or for doing certain chores around the house. Albus was never a big spender though, unlike James, who splurged frequently, and thus had a considerable amount saved up.

"Enough, hopefully" he said.

Scorpius boldly opened the door to the shop and entered it, the small tinkering of a bell alerting the shopkeeper to their presence.

"Good afternoon" he said curtly, and Albus noticed that he wore some sort of odd combination of decorated jeans and a black vest. He had a scrawny, yet cared for look to him, and his hair was light brown and tossed over to one side of his pointed face.

"H- hello" Morrison answered for the three of them.

The man leered at them for a moment before speaking.

"You seem to be new to Iridescence, I don't recall ever seeing any of you here anyway, so I will inform you of our policy. You are free to peruse our items, and those outside of cases may be touched and even worn to help you select your product of choice. Those inside of cases, however, must be purchased without doing so. We also have a strict policy against thievery here, one that merits powerful consequences, considering the possessions in question."

All three of them exchanged a glance, before Scorpius spoke up.

"Noted. We'll just be browsing now-"

They all began walking toward the same aisle, which, right away, showcased shelves of brilliant tiaras that all sparkled without any direct light to speak of. They pushed their way passed a boisterous woman with curly brown hair, who was comparing two different tiaras-both of which looked identical to Albus-and immediately headed for the back of the large shop, which is where the three of them all seemed to collectively figure the cheapest items would be.

"That bloke is creepy" Morrison announced out loud. "So what now?"

"Well I don't know what you guys are interested in getting your girlfriends" Scorpius said. "And I reckon you guys don't know what I want to get mine, so I reckon we just split up, then meet back here and laugh at each other's poor selections."

"Fair enough, but let's try and make it quick," Morrison started, casting a nervous glance towards a woman a few feet away, who was wearing what looked like a stuffed eagle on her head, "this place terrifies me.."

Both Albus and Scorpius nodded in compliance, and soon enough, they'd left the company of one another to search the store. Albus spent ten minutes alone in a section devoted entirely to

earrings, all of which seemed to be so heavy that they it would surely hurt to wear them. One set in particular had large rubies dangling from each, which seemed a bit overboard in Albus' own humble opinion.

Nothing that he saw that reminded him of Mirra however; it all seemed too bulky and ostentatious, two things that he definitely didn't associate with his girlfriend.

What are you doing here? You're wasting time, you have bigger things to worry about.

Albus didn't have to look around to realize that no one was actually speaking to him. It was in his own voice that the words had been uttered, in his head.

"I'm shopping for Mirra..." Albus muttered under his breath.

Just pick something and get out of here.

"No" Albus said, a bit louder than intended. Speaking to Waddlesworth was important, yes, but this was important too. He wanted to be able to give Mirra something special for Christmas, not something rushed.

His defiance and forcefulness seemed to have ushered this portion of his mind away, as it didn't make its presence known again. Albus was on the verge of contemplating just how often a normal person should be having arguments with themselves when a very real, different voice was whispered into his ear.

"Mate. *Mate!*"

Albus was poked in his side, and he spun around at once, nearly dropping the onyx earrings that he was now holding. It was Morrison.

"What's up?" he asked.

His friend held up an average sized, apparently flexible circle. Miniature stones of all different colors were attached to it.

"Is this a necklace or a bracelet?" Morrison asked him seriously.

Albus examined it closely. "It- it looks adjustable" he said with a shrug, not actually able to tell for sure either.

"So it's like a sale then?" Morrison asked. "Like a two for one?"

"I- I don't know mate" Albus told him. "I'm lost myself..."

"Gotcha. I'll go look around a bit more..."

Morrison departed, leaving Albus back to his own considerations, which always involved picking something up and putting it back down almost immediately.

Finally, out of the corner of his eye, he saw something in a bin filled with different items that caught his interest. Two things actually. They were both well sized, heart-shaped lockets-large enough to hold something in them, but small enough to look complimentary-and the only difference between them was that one was a bright gold, the other a sleek silver.

Albus weighed them both in his hands, excited. This was the kind of gift that he was looking for-it actually went well with what else he had planned. But which one to get?

Unwillingly, Fairhart's silver ring popped into his head. A ring once meant for a girl. He went to discard the silver locket, and carry back the gold one, but as he went to, he had a second, sudden thought. The silver one, for some reason, was inexplicably prettier to him, and it would probably go better with Mirra's misty eyes.

He instead dropped the gold one back down into the bin, leaving the aisle with the silver one instead. He headed back to the rendezvous point, where Scorpius was already waiting.

"What did you end up picking out?" he asked his friend.

Scorpius held up a pair of earrings, which, unlike the ones that Albus had seen in a different aisle, didn't actually look too bad. They had a very weightless look to them, and the gold color was very deep and appealing to look at.

"Did you notice that none of these things have price tags?" Scorpius asked him, earrings still held up.

"It's so that we have to wait to get to the register, where we're less likely to turn around and put something back" Albus told him. "Check out what I got-"

Morrison arrived, however, holding what looked like the most expensive item of the three. It was clearly a bracelet this time, nothing confusing about it, and rather than an array of gems, it was only emeralds that were spaced around it.

"What d'you think?" he said excitedly. "It's perfect for her! Slytherin colors!"

"Is she that big on her house colors?" said Scorpius, and Albus knew that he was more worried about the cost than anything else.

"Absolutely" he answered, looking ebullient. "Said it was why she was hoping to be sorted here in the first place."

Albus gave a weak smile, but neither he or Scorpius said anything as the three of them headed back to the register, where the shopkeeper was just finishing up with a tall, bony woman with hair the color of a tangerine.

"Have you all found what you're looking for?" he asked quickly, his eyes hovering, strangely, on Albus for a moment.

Taking this as a sign that he was to step forward first, he placed his locket on the table and withdrew his money bag, hoping that his item wasn't absurdly over-priced. As it turned out, he was able to afford it. Granted, it did cost quite a bit of gold, and his bag was rather light as he tucked it back inside his robes, but overall, he was satisfied with his purchase. Scorpius paid next, handling his fee lightly, as he slid a pile of counted out galleons over to the shopkeeper in exchange for his product, a smile on his face.

"Where'd you come across all that?" Albus asked, eyeing the pile of gold with interest as the shopkeeper counted it to himself.

"Well my dad is earning more than usual this year" Scorpius reminded him. "And my birthday wasn't that long ago..."

"Fair point."

Morrison stepped forward once Scorpius' item had been bagged, grinning as he handed over the bracelet. He then proceeded to dump his entire bag of money out on the counter.

"This'll be enough, right?" he asked.

Albus knew at once that it wouldn't. Though there was quite a bit of coins in there, the bag had mostly contained sickles and knuts, with only a few pieces of actual gold thrown in. The shopkeeper seemed to realize this as well, though he still counted it all out dutifully.

"I'm afraid," he started, eyeing Morrison in a very businesslike manner, "that this is not *quite* enough."

"Damn" Morrison said, brows furrowed. "Well how much do I need?"

"Eleven galleons" he was answered stoically.

Morrison frowned, then went to shovel his money back into his bag. Instinctively and wordlessly, however, Albus and Scorpius had both reached into their own pouches, Albus withdrawing six galleons and Scorpius five. They threw the gold down automatically, and the greedy shopkeeper snatched at it all and deposited it in his register, which opened for him magically.

Morrison gave them both thankful, embarrassed smiles as his product was placed in a fancy little bag. Once they were dismissed from the shop with a curt bow, he addressed them as well.

"Thanks, really" he said sincerely. "I owe-"

"Don't worry about it" both Albus and Scorpius told him.

They then stood outside of the shop aimlessly, apparently void of a destination. Albus knew that Scorpius and Morrison would most likely be up for heading somewhere warm at this point, as well as somewhere away from their respective girlfriends, lest their gifts be exposed. He himself had different plans however. If there was ever a moment to split from his friends and go to the headquarters of WAR, it was now...

"Anyone up for the post office?" he asked them both, thinking of a plan on the spot.

"Maybe later" Morrison said. "That's all the way on the other side of Hogsmeade, and I'm actually getting a bit hungry..."

Scorpius didn't respond immediately, he instead eyed his friend with curiosity.

"The post office?" he asked.

"I was thinking of sending a letter home" Albus lied with a shrug. "Haven't really heard from James, and their owls are faster than the Hogwarts one. My mum's been using Marauder like crazy recently, so that's not really an option."

If Morrison had caught on, he wasn't going to reveal it. Scorpius wasn't as polite.

"You really think that we're that thick, don't you?" he asked, and Morrison groaned from next to him.

Albus heaved a sigh and tossed his hands up. "What?"

"You're off to go see WAR!" Scorpius hollered, and a few people turned to watch the scene.

"Will you be quiet!" Albus snapped, looking over his shoulder. Just down the block there were two Ministry wizards standing as security, and in the distance, he could see two WAR members doing the same thing.

"I told you he wasn't just caught up in the moment" Morrison said to Scorpius. "Told you he was for real about it-"

"Yeah, yeah I am!" Albus said hoarsely. "Look, why not? What do you guys expect to happen, eh?"

"We expect your visit to end in crushing disappointment" Morrison said bluntly. "And we actually expect you to do something dumb, like divulge the truth about what happened and get yourself kicked out of Hogwarts."

"Waddlesworth probably won't even be there mate" Scorpius argued. "He's too busy, it's a waste of a trip-"

"Then let me go!" Albus said quickly. "I can handle disappointment" he added, turning to Morrison abruptly. "And do you really think that they'd kick me out of Hogwarts now? With all that's going on? Maybe last year, when my dad first took the fall, but not now. All that it's a matter of now is convincing people that my dad really is innocent-"

"-they'll never hear you out-" Scorpius started.

"Just let me try!" Albus argued, letting the anger show in his voice. "What it sounds like to me is that the things that you guys are worried about the most isn't all that bad! At the very worst, things stay the same, and I'm ignored. And you said it yourself mate, just now," he continued, now speaking directly to Scorpius, "Waddlesworth might not even be there. But you've got to let me try. I can't just stand back and say that I didn't even *try*."

Morrison and Scorpius exchanged an anxious, all too familiar look. Scorpius in particular looked worried; perhaps it was because he was naturally the most responsible of them all, and the decision mostly fell on him. Eventually, Morrison turned his head away, and Scorpius stared at Albus with unblinking eyes.

"Let us go with you" he eventually declared.

"No" Albus responded at once, and then, realizing that he needed a legitimate argument against this, he pulled an idea from thin air. "I'm the only Secret-Keeper out of three of us. Since what happened with my dad and uncle, they may have defences against other people coming in now. There's no point in risking that."

He let this idea hang over the heads of his friends for a moment, all the while hoping that that they would buy it. The truth was, he actually considered some danger in going in to WAR's headquarters, and he would not let his friends risk their own safety for something he and he alone needed to do. All he could do now was hope that this answer was acceptable...

"You've got an hour and a half at most" Scorpius said, his cheeks tinged pink from the cold.

"You don't meet us by the Three Broomsticks by then, and I'm telling anyone I can find-a professor, a Ministry member, anyone-where you are. Got it?"

Albus nodded appreciatively, relieved and with his mind now racing. He handed over his own fancy bag, weighed down by Mirra's locket, to Scorpius.

"Keep this out of sight, especially if you meet up with Mirra. And if she asks...I'm at the post office."

Scorpius nodded, and Albus walked passed them both without looking back, Morrison giving him a light clap on the back as he went. He walked down an alleyway, knowing that first and foremost, he needed to get into the grimy, outskirts of Hogsmeade that would lead him to the Hogpenn. At the same time, he tried to keep a low profile; if any WAR members standing guard saw a straggler, they would probably become an irksome shadow. He didn't want to have to deal with the Renegades until he was only a couple feet away from their leader.

He mostly stuck to alleyways and crooked streets, and, to his immense surprise, found that he almost instinctively knew where to go. He was forced to maneuver around other Hogwarts students as he went, which actually, in some ways, worked to his advantage. So long as he appeared to be part of a group, he would remain inconspicuous. Realizing that it would be best if he found an actual familiar face to stick close to, he slid his eyes over different groups, eventually settling on, oddly enough, a group of girls from Hufflepuff.

It was very fortunate that Scorpius and Morrison had went the other way through the village, as Scorpius bumping into his girlfriend with her present would have been extremely disheartening for him. Albus decided that walking alongside Anastasia was better than nothing, and so, he crept up to her group from behind, hoping that maybe, as he was sometimes seen around the girl, his presence there would look legitimate.

Only a few feet away from them, however, he stopped in his attempt. He had heard Scorpius' name.

"Well I *hope* to be with him next year too" Anastasia was saying to her chatty friend. Albus smiled from behind the group. This was refreshing to here, considering what he'd seen in the library not too long ago.

"And you really think that you'll make Head Girl next year?" a different friend asked.

"Of course" Anastasia replied smugly, sounding, strangely, eerily similar to Rose. "I mean, I'm dating a professor's son after all..."

Albus stopped dead in his tracks. Perhaps he had missed the context of the conversation, but that had sounded incredibly selfish.

His momentary lapse in movement put distance between him and the Hufflepuff girls, though he didn't really care; he wasn't even sure if he wanted to hear anything else. He instead veered off of his previously laid out track, deciding that, with enough thinking, he could work his way to the more sullen areas without staying out in the open.

He eventually saw the sign for the Hog's Head, the same pub where he had met with his father and uncle last year, during their excursion to WAR's headquarters. From here, it was as simple as retracing his steps in his head.

The only difference was that he had foolishly not taken his Invisibility Cloak this time, meaning that he could no longer walk down the roads in an easygoing manner. There weren't many people around as he entered the area known as the Hogpenn, and those who were seemed distracted by things like dirt or scraps of newspaper on the floor. At the same time, there wasn't much security either, which worked as a two-edged sword. There was no one around to stop him from what he planned on doing, but there was also no one around to help him should something go awry on his journey. Even as he thought it, he saw a pale, fidgeting man with a balding head dump a bag of sickles and knuts into the hands of a cloaked figure, who responded by handing over a vial of some gruesome looking scarlet potion that even Albus didn't recognize.

Both men turned slightly to look at him as he walked by, and he remember that the students of Hogwarts were not the only ones who disliked him. What would he do if they attacked him?

Come on...you know you don't have to worry about that...

Albus kept his gaze transfixed at what was in front of him, ducking into an alleyway that smelled putrid and exiting it through the other side almost at once, stepping over an elderly looking man that was slouched against a wall, an empty bottle of firewhiskey clutched in his hand.

Finally, after five or so more minutes of being terrified out of his mind, he saw it; the dilapidated, apparently worn out shop that he'd been inside of more times than he'd have liked. He was standing just outside of WAR's headquarters, the blatant lie that was 'Quality Quidditch Supplies' inscribed on a battered sign just above the front door.

Albus could see and enter this building only because he'd inadvertently been made a Secret-Keeper of it in his fourth year. The next time he'd entered it, he'd been accompanied by two highly accomplished Aurors. This time, he was alone.

For some reason he wasn't moving though. A terrible thought had just occurred to him. What if he was no longer a Secret-Keeper? What if there really was some powerful protection around it now, designed to keep intruders out?

Just go in.

He pushed the door open, and at once was met with a familiar atmosphere.

It was all back; the light, classical music playing from some device that he couldn't find, the crimson carpet with the elegant, intricate designs, the comfortable looking furniture, and, of course, the violent, self-righteous murderers.

His entrance this time invoked much the same reaction as it had before; outrage and confusion. There were even more people in the sitting room of WAR's headquarters than usual, which Albus could only take to mean that their numbers had increased even more over the last several months, and only one of them was a familiar face this time; Donovan Hornsbrook's father, who Albus had last seen moments before he'd seen his own father.

The music either stopped or was too low to be heard, and the men and women who proudly wore the sword-wand insignia on their robes all stood up, eyebrows raised and lips pursed. Albus tried counting them all, but lost track at about fifteen.

"What's going on here?" said a young woman, who, with her long blonde hair and forceful tone, reminded Albus strongly of Blackwood.

People murmured along with her demand, and Albus, not knowing what else to do, withdrew his wand and aimed it at the entire lot of them, beads of sweat dripping down his chin. The magnitude of his plan was now sinking in. What was he doing here?

They all plunged their hands into their robes, withdrawing wands as well. Albus, who had long since associated a much more attack-first mentality to Wands and Redemption, was surprised to see that none of them appeared to be willing to duel, but rather defend. Perhaps it was his young age. Wildly, he reasoned that perhaps he wasn't in as much danger as he thought; WAR wouldn't hurt children, would they? And then, with a pang, he realized that he'd seen for himself that this was not true.

And besides, he was no longer a child anyway. His mere presence here was enough to confirm that for himself.

Albus kept his wand held steady, deciding to finally speak only when no one else said anything. He hadn't actually planned this part out yet though, and thus, his execution was sloppy.

"No- no- nobody move?" he stammered out, wishing immediately that he could rewind the last ten seconds or so and alter his sentence from a question into a demand.

Everyone burst into laughter, even the blonde haired woman who had at first seemed so tense. Albus felt his face go red as many of them dropped their guard to smack their knees; it was as though they were watching a toddler try and imitate an adult.

"Do you know who you're dealing with here, kid?" asked a young man with chestnut colored hair, who looked as though he was extremely pleased with himself for being a part of the inner-circle of WAR.

Do you?

The voice in Albus' head was much more clear and icy than it had been when he was shopping for Mirra's present. Albus felt almost out of his element here, trying to intimidate people that he

had no business trying to frighten, and this outlandish and unexpected confidence in the back of his head was now the only thing keeping him from turning and running. He'd might as well let it guide him.

"I'm not here to fight anyone" Albus said, his tone stronger. "I'm here to see Waddlesworth."

No one laughed this time, though a few people did whisper to each other. It was Hornsbrook's father, of all people, who stepped forward to speak.

"Mr. Waddlesworth is an extremely busy man" he said, stroking his snow colored beard with his massive, hairy hands. "His campaign for Minister of Magic means that he's available by appointment only."

"Kid doesn't look like he has an appointment, Hank" said another woman, this one with large front teeth and short, ear length black hair.

"I'll escort him out-" said the man next to her, but Albus pointed his wand over in his direction.

Hold your ground.

"I'm not going anywhere until I speak to Waddlesworth!" he spat, shaking somewhat.

Hornsbrook's father gave a twisted smile and stepped forward slowly. "I'm afraid that you are not allowed to make such a req-"

The stairs in the corner of the room creaked noisily, and after a moment or two, a hulking figure surfaced at the top of them. Albus felt his heart beat quicken as the Hammer came into focus, his large, bald head gleaming from the light of the chandelier hanging at the top of the room, his brutal face appearing placid.

"Mr. Waddlesworth will see you now" he said, his eyes falling darkly upon Albus.

Albus didn't raise his wand toward the Hammer, instead, he allowed nostalgia to overtake him. Last time he'd been here, hadn't Waddlesworth's main enforcer done the exact same thing? Only then, it had been an imposter waiting up the stairs. Could the same thing be happening here?

He didn't say anything, and the other Renegades-not as highly ranked as the Hammer-all fell silent as well, making the light, melodic music dance throughout the room again. Albus nodded, but didn't lower his wand as he headed for the stairs, walking slowly and with poise. The Hammer turned abruptly on his heel, as if to lead him, and Albus followed suit, his eyes sliding over the WAR members on the first floor, all of whom looked quite disconcerted.

Albus still kept his wand held out as he reached the top of the stairs, where the menacing muscle of WAR could be seen waiting by a door at the end of the hall. A battered looking door was right behind him, one that led to a room in which Albus was very aware of what occurred there, but it

was an ordinary, red door on the left that he was meant to enter. He walked towards it cautiously, and then entered it with a quick, determined step.

Waddlesworth's office was, as he'd expected, an exact replica of what it had been for the last two years now. It was essentially a smaller version of the downstairs area, complete with bright carpet and paintings on the walls, the only addition a sleek desk that had small, organized stacks of paper on it. From behind the desk sat one of Albus' least favorite visages in the world.

"Albus, m'boy!" Warren Waddlesworth said, arms stretched out in welcome, and Albus knew, from this one opening sentence, that it was the real Waddlesworth that he was dealing with this time. "Good to *see you!*"

As this mere gesture and accompanying words, a door behind Waddlesworth opened. Albus, who had known this door to contain a butler with a tray of wine glasses before, was quite surprised to see two more men dressed in Renegade garb appear, both of them recognizable; Albus had seen them in the newspaper article from before, surrounding their leader.

He turned his wand to them at once, and they reciprocated by raising their own. From the corner of the room, he saw the Hammer plunge his hand into his own robes, and he knew that the plan had to be aborted here-

"Stop!" cried Waddlesworth, looking stymied, and indeed, he even stood up. He turned to the two men who had just entered. "Lower your wands, now! And you too, Zydrunas!"

They all did so without hesitation, and Albus felt his breathing return to normal.

Could have handled them anyway.

Waddlesworth, still standing, straightened the cream colored tie on his pretentious black suit, and returned his attention to his guest-the only person who still had his wand raised.

"Albus, I understand that you feel overwhelmed without the company of your myrmidons, but I must inform you that I do not approve of violence in this building. Especially not between my own faithful companions," he inclined his head toward the Hammer, "and my guests" he finished, his eyes returning to Albus. "And thus, I must ask you to lower your wand."

Don't do it.

He didn't. Instead, his grip tightened. He spoke his next words with a tremor in his voice. "We need to talk."

"Lower your wand!" growled the Hammer from the corner of the room, and Albus turned his arm to attack, but the action was again halted by Waddlesworth.

"That's enough Zydrunas!" he said crisply, turning his head towards him. "We must be patient with him! Albus is a teenager, his body is changing, and he is having desires, and his frustration is only intensified by his inability to discuss it with his father!"

Albus felt rage bubble in his stomach as Waddlesworth returned his attention to him.

"Al, I know what this is about" he said soothingly. "And I want you to understand, that if you ever have *any* questions about these very *normal* changes that your body is going through, that I would be willing to provide the role that your father can't at this moment-"

"Shut up!" Albus blurted out. "Shut up about my dad!"

The aggression in the room became palpable. Waddlesworth, stopped mid-sentence by this outburst, leaned back against his desk, his expression stony. His neck length, dark red hair was tucked behind his ears, making his piercing eyes, from either side of his rather large nose, appear both collected and calculating.

"Leave us" he finally said after a moment, and the two WAR members by his side retreated into the back room. "Not you, Zydrunas" he added, when the Hammer turned to leave as well.

Waddlesworth then snapped his fingers, and the door behind him opened once more, this time revealing what Albus had first expected; an elderly man holding a glass of white wine. Waddlesworth took it, then dismissed the man without speaking, all the while never averting his gaze from his guest.

"Would you like to sit?" he said darkly.

"I'll stand" Albus said breathlessly, his wand still raised.

"Lower your wand" Waddlesworth said suddenly, as if he hadn't heard him answer. "Lower it, or else this conversation that you seek will not occur."

Albus toyed with this for a second, then decided that it was in his best interest to do so. He kept it in his hand however, hanging loosely by his side.

"You came here to say something" Waddlesworth said, taking the smallest of sips from his wine glass. "You may do so now."

"I need you to do something for me" Albus said without thinking, his eyes connecting with Waddlesworth's.

"Elaborate" replied Waddlesworth.

"I- you know what's going on with Azkaban right now" Albus said slowly.

Another sip of wine, and then Waddlesworth rebutted.

"You are referring, I assume, to the recent stream of information that has revealed the presence of 'Death's Right Hand' on the surrounding island, yes?"

"That's right" Albus answered him, his voice steady. They were getting somewhere, which was a start.

"If you have suggestions as to how the situation be handled, Albus, I can only tell you that it is, at this point, a matter of making the right, timely moves."

"What I'm asking you to do has nothing to do with fighting Darvy" Albus told him, shaking his head slightly. "It's about getting my dad out of Azkaban before anything happens to him."

Waddlesworth gave him a look of surprise, and he briefly exchanged a meaningful glance with the Hammer as well. He recuperated quickly.

"I'm afraid that you are asking me to do the impossible" Waddlesworth said, downing the remainder of his wine in one long swig and placing the glass on his desk. "I am not yet Minister of Magic, Albus, and decisions pertaining to the incarceration of criminals convicted by the Wizengamot-"

"Don't lie to me!" Albus said, and though he hadn't shouted it, he had said it firmly enough to capture Waddlesworth's attention again. "I was at the Ministry! I saw the pull that you have there! You've got them all in the palm of your hand!" he added, thinking back to when he'd been waiting to visit his father, and Hornsbrook's father had dropped Waddlesworth's name to the attractive receptionist, resulting in her giving him something that he had no right having.

Waddlesworth maintained his position however. "I'm sorry, but I just can't."

Let him know just how serious we are.

"I'm not asking you whether you can do it or not" Albus said ferociously. "I'm just telling you to do it."

To his surprise, Waddlesworth grinned. He raised his head up somewhat, the leer playing on his lips molding itself into words.

"You've grown up, Al. Your argumentative abilities have been honed, it seems. A good, strong opening statement. A vague, yet ominous ultimatum. Next, rather than hint at the negatives of my failure to comply with your wishes, you will attempt to appeal to logic, yes? Attempt to coax me into sympathizing with whatever endeavor you want me to pursue?"

"This isn't a game" Albus told him, and his fingers, clasped around his wand, twitched. "Me and you both know that something terrible is about to happen with Azkaban. You can say all you want that Darvy is hiding, but you know that he can create those monsters, you know that there's more to it; that he has an army in the works. Once the fighting begins on the island, the prison is

isolated, even from the Ministry. If a prisoner is going to be released, it'll have to be before Darvy does anything else. That's why you need to free my dad now, and I know that you're capable of making it happen."

Waddlesworth heaved a sigh, then threw his hands into the air as if to insist, again, that the situation truly was out of control. Strangely, his words didn't support this thought.

"You're right. You're absolutely right Albus, I certainly do have the means to have your father released from Azkaban. But what I lack, you see, is a proper *motive*."

Albus stared at him with loathing. He went to speak, but Waddlesworth cut him off.

"Don't misinterpret that!" he said quickly. "*I'm* certainly motivated, how can I not be, when you make it so apparent the danger that I'm in if I don't appease you?" he added, the sarcasm applied very effectively. "But I can't just have a clearly guilty individual-one whose crimes were *so* reprehensible-released from prison because his teenage son is asking me to. The people won't allow it, Al, you know that. Why would they?"

Albus felt his throat go dry. This was it; this was the part where he'd need to work some wandless magic and find a way to clear his father's name. The task was daunting however, as his father *had* confessed to his alleged activities.

But Waddlesworth then said something that changed this plan completely.

"Unless, of course, you insist that your father is actually innocent. Is that the angle that you're attempting to play, Al? You want me to assuage the people by telling them something with no evidence to support it?"

Albus took a sharp breath. "I-"

"If only, Albus, if only things were a little bit more complex than they seem" Waddlesworth said, shaking his head. "If only there was someone else to take the fall for Janine Fischer's grisly, tragic murder, someone else who fit the profile of the justice-driven, but morally questionable Silver Wizard! If only- if only there was another face to show, instead of your father's. Or even *half* of a face, for that matter..."

Silence entered the room. Albus felt his heartbeat slow painfully as he tried to register what Waddlesworth had just said. Was he alluding to something here? Half of a face...

Could Waddlesworth already, somehow be aware that Fairhart was alive? That should be impossible...only a small circle was knowledgeable of this fact. But then he thought of the Hammer, who had fled the battle all those months ago, after having witnessed the Silver Wizard fight first hand. Albus now knew from several Protector's Club meetings that the Renegades from WAR all fought somewhat similarly, and though it was unlikely any were as skilled as he

knew Fairhart to be, the Silver Wizard's style may have been noted by the Hammer, who had returned and given the news to Waddlesworth, who was, unfortunately, highly intuitive...

Subconsciously, Albus raised his wand up again. Waddlesworth said nothing, and the Hammer didn't even bother interfering.

"How much do you know?" Albus belted out breathlessly.

Waddlesworth gave him an oily grin. "What do you mean, Al?"

"What do you know!" Albus repeated, and he felt every muscle in his body tighten. "Tell me!"

Waddlesworth straightened himself so that he looked more authoritative. "Until you enlighten me as to what it is you suspect me of knowing, I'm afraid that I cannot give you an adequate reply."

Just get it out of the way. Dancing around it is getting us nowhere.

"My dad wasn't the Silver Wizard" Albus said, biting his lip as did so; he had done it, he had officially, in his attempt to help him, betrayed his father's trust. "But that's all I'm saying. I need you to finish the story."

Waddlesworth beamed at him.

"Keeping secrets enters us into a frame of mind that will ultimately help no one, Albus. I suggest that from here on out, we speak of all that we know. Sancticus Fairhart is still alive."

"That's right, he is" Albus said, panic coursing through him. Where did he go from here?

"And what this means, Albus," Waddlesworth started, and he took a seat back behind his desk, "is that the solution to your problem is already available."

Albus stared at him blankly. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"What I'm saying, Albus, is that your father cannot be released from Azkaban unless there is someone else to take the blame. You bring me Fairhart, and the deed is done."

Albus' mouth fell open. "What do you mean *I* bring him to you? If you know he's out there, then you-

"The entire thing reeks of conspiracy, I'm afraid. I can't just go looking for someone to place blame on, that makes it readily apparent that the Ministry was aware of your father's innocence, and the backlash of this great, hidden knowledge will ultimately supersede everything that I've worked so hard to build in this government. Now, if Sancticus Fairhart were *presented* to me, then of course, it would be as simple as a trial and a release. A swap of sorts. Then it'll be our disfigured friend left dealing with whatever you're afraid that Sebastian Darvy will do, won't it?"

Albus stayed quiet, soaking these words in. Things were now connecting for him, and he knew at once that not everything was as it seemed. If Waddlesworth truly had always known that Fairhart was still alive, he could have went after him clandestinely. Could have had his men kill him, and consequently, erased any chance of his father's release—a dead man can't commit murder, after all. So why wouldn't he have just done that...

"You're afraid of him" Albus said after a moment of thinking. "That's why you won't go after Fairhart, you're afraid of him! You need someone else to do it for you, but it has to be someone who already knew that he was alive..."

And then something else entered his mind. An assassination attempt, one that Waddlesworth had barely survived, as the papers wrote it. Who did Waddlesworth suspect this assassin to be?

"And you're not just afraid of if you find him!" Albus said quickly, before Waddlesworth could give him an answer. "You're scared that he'll find you! That he'll get revenge on you for what you did to Blackwood!"

Waddlesworth leaned back in his chair, looking winded. "Excuse me?" he said. "Who? Oh, yes! The harridan!" he said, waving his wrist off-handedly as if he'd just remembered her. "I'm afraid that your knowledge on that matter is not quite as profound as your other acquired information, Albus. Ida Blackwood betrayed *me*. And anything that happened to her afterwards was entirely of her own doing, I did nothing to her, nor did my men—"

"You did plenty to her!" Albus barked, wand still pointed at Waddlesworth, though this normally imposing position was nullified by the fact that he could hardly attack someone whose help he so desperately needed. "Everything that you did for years, the things that you made her do! That's what Fairhart wants revenge for!"

Waddlesworth gave him a cold glare, looking as though he'd been legitimately offended. When he next spoke, it was in a completely different tone than the rest of the conversation.

"You think so lowly of me, Albus" he said, and Albus widened his eyes in shock. "Oh yes, don't pretend! You view me as a twisted and villainous demagogue, correct? As a man who has every intention of leading the public astray? Well let me ask *you* something, Albus. What makes your way of thinking so right? What has *your* government done, and your father and his circle, what have they done? Well?"

Albus said nothing. He merely stared back at him.

"Nothing to say?" Waddlesworth all but whispered. "The entire world supports me, Albus, they support what I've done, and what I plan to do, and *you* think of all of *them* as misguided! You think that only you, you and those who've been raised with the same way of thinking, know what right and wrong *truly* is, and that everyone else is blind and foolish! You think that *the world* is wrong, and that *you* are right! Isn't that it?"

Albus was shaking now, disappointed that he had no proper rebuttal for this. He was waiting for that confident voice in the back of his head to supply him with an argument, but it didn't happen; it was almost as if that voice agreed with Waddlesworth.

"Well maybe it's not the world that is so foolish, Albus" Waddlesworth said coldly. "Maybe-just maybe-people who have lived through far worse than what you have are tired of the same passive, unorganized, weak way of thinking that previous Ministers of Magic have enforced upon them, in which nothing is done until it is too late! But that can't be it, can it? Of course not. Because that argues with *your* way of thinking, and your father's *way*, and that makes it *wrong*."

Albus lowered his wand a fraction of an inch, still incapable of responding to this sudden attack. He hoped that the conversation returned to where it had been soon, and Waddlesworth did so accordingly.

"We are straying from the topic at hand" Waddlesworth said, still a hint of warning in his voice. "Let us return to the original matter of discussion. You have identified your issue, and in doing so, have also identified one of mine. The solution to both rests upon a single act, does it not?"

Albus said nothing. He had recovered and was waiting for Waddlesworth to say it, to outright state the nature of their deal-

"I want Sancticus Fairhart" Waddlesworth said. "And you want your father released from Azkaban. You bring me Fairhart, your father's name is cleared. It is as simple as that."

Albus stood on the spot, his ears buzzing. Finding Fairhart to free his father...it was the resolution that he had come up with months ago, and it had long since been wiped away. As he'd just stressed days ago to Mirra, the task was an impossible one, and the logic against it equally indomitable. He had nowhere to look, no way of getting there, and no way of overcoming the prodigious Renegade. And this outline was, again, made only more fierce by the fact that it wasn't in his father's wishes anyway, to have him endanger himself...

But that was before there was a clock hanging above his father's head. Darvy could strike at any minute. Whatever his father wanted, Albus was now sure that his survival trumped it. And now, finding Fairhart would not necessarily be so insurmountable. If Warren Waddlesworth really wanted this done, he'd be sure to assist in it...

But then there was the trump card, the final reason why he couldn't leave. He'd already told Mirra that he wouldn't go looking for Fairhart, and he was not going to break any more promises to her...

"I can't" Albus said suddenly. "I- I can't."

Don't be foolish. Either break a promise, or give up on your father altogether.

"Can't do what?" Waddlesworth asked.

"I can't go looking for Fairhart" Albus said. "I wouldn't even know where to start, and even then, I'd have no way of bringing him to you, and- and- I already told someone-"

But Waddlesworth had started laughing, a stark contrast from the mood shift that he'd just worked his way out of. It was an obnoxious, hearty laugh, and the Hammer's serventile guffaws from near the door only made it that much more unbearable.

"What are you laughing at!" Albus lashed out, making sure that his wand was still steady.

"Albus," Waddlesworth said, ending his laughter with a warm smile, "you put yourself in such difficult predicaments, don't you? I'm not asking you to do something as futile as searching for a man who my best trackers can't even find, and then to duel him into submission! No, there's a much more intelligent way to do things, so long as you know how to think in such delicate situations."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked, chills going up his spine.

"I asked you to bring me Sancticus Fairhart, Albus, I never asked you to find him. For all intents and purposes, the same goal could be achieved if *he* found *you*."

Albus tried putting it all together in his head, but at this single moment, he let relief wash over him. Whatever Waddlesworth was talking about, it didn't seem to involve him leaving anywhere or looking for anything. Meaning he'd be breaking no promises...so far.

"Go on" Albus told him.

"Well isn't it obvious, Al?" Waddlesworth asked rhetorically. "Fairhart *likes* you. For some unfathomable reason your safety has risen meteorically to the top of his priorities. It's almost as if- as if- as if you're the son that he never had!" he finished dramatically, giving a wide smile.

The Hammer laughed again, and though Albus knew that he was missing a private joke here, he was too invested in what Waddlesworth was suggesting to notice it.

"So what I just- let him- let him find me?" Albus asked stupidly.

"Well think now, Albus" Waddlesworth said simply. "Showing up at that wedding, right when things were getting out of hand. Returning to his own home to protect you; and don't pretend that you weren't there Albus, there's no point to it. How he keeps finding you in these situations, I do not know, but it seems as though, if there is any weakness on Sancticus Fairhart to exploit, it is his inability to ignore you when you are in danger. You want to find Fairhart, Albus, and the method is quite clear."

"You mean putting myself in danger" Albus repeated, the words weighing heavily on his tongue.

"Well don't act as if it's so difficult!" Waddlesworth said, straightening his tie once more. "Danger does seem to follow you everywhere, doesn't it? Perhaps lingering in it for once can finally result in some good."

Albus said nothing, but he lowered his wand. Waddlesworth seemed to take this as a reply in itself, because he went over the agreement once more.

"You get Fairhart to come to you, and find a way to lure him to me and my men; he will trust you. Or, if you want to be more thorough, you find a way to subdue him so that he can be taken. I will either have him imprisoned or executed," he continued seamlessly, and Albus winced, "depending on the severity of his crimes, when tallied, and your father will walk free, as innocent as he was when he was the hero of the Wizarding World. Do we have a deal?"

Albus hesitated. He had a lot to think about, but it could be mulled over at any point. There was only one more thing that he needed.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" Albus shot out at him. "How do I know you won't just get rid of Fairhart, then keep my dad locked up?"

Waddlesworth ogled him for a moment, then rose to his feet. He maneuvered his way around his desk so that he was standing only a few inches away, and then extended his hand.

Albus hesitated once more, and then the voice returned.

You'd might as well. It's the best that you'll get.

He moved his wand into his left hand and clasped Waddlesworth's briefly with his right, removing it almost as soon as he'd made contact.

"Do you know why I'm the best, when it comes to bartering, Mr. Potter?" Waddlesworth asked him, staring at him intently.

Albus said nothing, though he also registered the change in his title. He knew that he was dealing with a different Waddlesworth here, and it wasn't an imposter of any kind; it was the Waddlesworth who meant business.

"It's because I'm fair, because I'm always thinking of how to make each party win, and because, above all else, I keep my word. I have no reason to keep your father in Azkaban, no reason to tarnish my good name at satisfying those who I ally myself with. You keep your end of the bargain, Mr. Potter, and I keep mine."

Albus gave the slightest of nods, a powerful sinking feeling entering his stomach as he did so. It was not a feeling of sickness, but rather, of immediate, irreversible regret...

He turned on his heel and headed for the door. With the Hammer watching him, he opened it and stepped through, and was right about to close it when Waddlesworth spoke again.

"And Mr. Potter" he said lightly, and Albus turned. "I suggest that you hurry. As you so aptly put it earlier, something *terrible* is probably going to happen to Azkaban."

Albus closed the door without making a comment. *Now* he was feeling sick.

Chapter 15: The Decision

For two weeks following the visit to Hogsmeade, Albus didn't sleep. Not completely, anyway. His long, interminable nights in his bed sometimes involved a few hours of closed eyes and light breathing, with him being roused in the morning by his friends, but this was not actual sleep, it couldn't be. When someone actually slept, they were supposed to feel rested.

His pattern of attending classes and forcing Quidditch practices also now involved splashing water on his face daily, with the faint circles under his eyes forcing him to lie to his friends about how his nightmares had returned. He was, of course, still being attacked in his stretches of pseudo-sleep quite frequently, but this was not the main cause for his deteriorated health. Now, it was the knowledge that he was in cahoots with WAR.

Scorpius and Morrison had immediately ascertained from his behavior that Waddlesworth had indeed been spoken to, but either out of fear of knowing or doubt of being told the truth, they did little but allude to it. Far worse was the fact that he was now once more lying to his girlfriend by omission, but, of course, he *could* actually justify this one. He had never said that he wouldn't meet Waddlesworth, only that he was going shopping with his two friends, which he had certainly done. That wasn't so bad, was it?

So with his secret safe from those closest to him, Albus was stuck trying to accumulate information in the simplest of ways possible, including, of course, editions of the *WAR Weekly*.

"Anything new?" he asked Scorpius one morning towards the end of November.

"I'd have told you" Scorpius said to him mildly, folding the paper over and returning to his breakfast.

"Expecting something?" Morrison asked.

"No" Albus said quickly. "But you can never be too sure...things happen every day."

The truth was that he was keen on hearing about movement in Azkaban. It was awful, that he wanted news of activity, but at the same time, he couldn't help but crave information that could in some way alleviate his deal with Waddlesworth. Maybe the Ministry could have went back on its word, and was attempting a rescue mission of all of the prisoners in Azkaban, just as a precaution? Or maybe-and his false hope was never greater now, he was sure-Darvy's body had washed up on the shore of the island, just as a member of the Wizengamot had predicted weeks ago?

But none of these things had occurred, and as these scraps of paper were the only pieces of valid information available, he'd have to leave the rest to his imagination. He thought briefly of trying to contact his Aunt Hermione, who would undoubtedly be able to fill him in on a bit more, but he was still unwilling to send any letters with WAR roaming the castle, and thus crossed it off

immediately. Besides, no one in his family would be able to help with the much greater task that he now faced; somehow finding a way to endanger himself to help WAR win in their own smaller, private war with Sancticus Fairhart.

That's not what your doing. You're bringing someone to justice, to save your father.

This confident but menacing voice had been somewhat sporadic recently, with it being completely absent on some days, all but ubiquitous on others. Albus did his best to ignore it, knowing full well that it was abnormal for someone to be arguing with himself as much as he did. His father had once told him that hearing voices was a bad thing, but as it was his own voice-and as it had been explained to him before, at the end of his second year-he didn't find it unusual so much as unnerving.

But still, it at least had a point this time. There were two different ways to look at his arrangement with Warren Waddlesworth, the first, and most obvious one being that he was going to intentionally risk his own life in order to help WAR reach a perpetually difficult goal, all while Waddlesworth dangled his father's life above him for ransom. This would be the situation that his friends would see, if he chose to reveal it to them. But beneath this, he himself could see a much simpler, more clear way; one that justified his actions rather than made them seem foolish. Fairhart's life for his father's. How it was achieved was irrelevant, what mattered most was that an innocent man walked free, and that a guilty one was punished.

The most difficult thing to ponder on now was, once more, proper execution. The idea of hunting Fairhart like prey was far more unwelcome than the new plan, which simply involved trapping him with human bait. But still, there was the snag of not knowing exactly how Waddlesworth wanted him to go about this. Yes, he was supposed to put himself in danger. But how? The most dangerous thing that he could think of was barging into WAR's headquarters and demanding an audience with the Minister to be, but Fairhart had apparently missed his cue on that one.

"What are you doing under there?"

Albus looked around, paranoid. Morrison had not been speaking to him though, but rather Scorpius, who was next to him.

"Huh?" his friend said, looking up from his lap. "Nothing..."

And then, deciding that this answer didn't satisfy, he briefly held up a small textbook and a sheet of paper.

"What class is that for?" Morrison asked him sharply.

"Erm-"

But Albus had already snatched the textbook up, his reflexes beating his fellow Quidditch teammate's.

"*The Stars and Their Signs*, by Gazer Douglas" he read off with a sigh.

"You're doing Anastasia's homework again!" Morrison said, looking perturbed.

Scorpius snatched the textbook back from Albus. "Thanks mate" he said sarcastically. "And I haven't done this in awhile" he added to them both. "It's just- we have a huge History of Magic test to study for."

"And when are you studying for it?" Morrison asked, raising his head in mock confusion.

"I- I've almost got it all down anyway" he defended himself, running a hand through his crisp blonde hair.

"Just stop!" Albus said aggressively, his tone much darker and serious than Morrison's had been. "Stop doing her assignments for her!"

Their section of the table went quiet; even Melonie, who had been chatting jovially to Denise Toils, stopped to look at them.

Scorpius gave him an angry stare before speaking.

"There's nothing wrong with doing nice things for other people, Al" he said menacingly. "Or did you forget all of the work I helped you with for what- six or so years now?"

Albus flushed. "That's- that's different."

The bell rang at this very moment though, and Albus couldn't have been more thankful. Scorpius silently packed his things and went off for class, while Albus and Morrison retreated to the Common Room for a free class period. The second that they entered the eerie green room, they set up a chessboard and began conversing lowly.

"What was that all about?" Morrison asked, not even paying attention as Albus made his first move.

"What was all what about?" he responded, deciding to make his friend work for it.

"Lashing out at Scorpius" Morrison replied boldly.

"You don't like it either!" Albus said loudly, watching as Morrison made his first move. "Him doing twice the work this year."

"Yeah, but I'm not *mad* at him for it" Morrison answered him. "You seem pretty ticked though..."

Albus groaned. "It's really not like that" he said, and then, after a moment of hesitation, he explained what was on his mind. He was unable to give an unbiased account on some of the behavior that he'd seen from Anastasia Anifur, but still made sure to mention every detail, in

case Morrison could take it a different way. He mentioned both what he'd seen in the library and what he'd overheard in Hogsmeade, then waited for Morrison to process it all. When his friend finally did speak, their game was already over, and he sounded very much like he was trying to offer the benefit of the doubt.

"Yeah, that's all spotty and everything" he said, lounging back in a stone cut armchair. "But it doesn't have to be what you think it is."

"I never said what I thought it was" Albus said crisply. "I didn't make any accusations or anything, I just told you what I saw-"

"Yeah, but I got it" Morrison cut him off with a loose shrug of the shoulders. "You reckon she's not as serious about this whole thing as Scorpius is, and that she keeps him around for more than what she actually thinks of him."

Albus said nothing, but also didn't disagree. He simply crossed his arms over, waiting for a better explanation.

"I'm not saying that I like her all that much" Morrison continued, holding his hands up. "*But* she could just be on friendly terms with other guys. And maybe she was just joking about the Head Girl thing, you know, having a laugh with her pals. You said it yourself, you ducked out after it was said, you have no idea what happened next-"

"Okay, fair enough" Albus said. "But let me ask you something. If I saw Mel in the library, whispering and giggling with the same bloke, would you want to know?"

Morrison made a noise of disgust. "Look, I'm no good at this stuff mate. Ask Mirra."

Though unwilling to divulge too much of anything that he knew to Mirra as of late, there was no escaping the fact that she would be the best person discuss his Scorpius debacle with. The saddest and most immediately recognizable thing, of course, was that it wasn't any of his business directly anyway. But it still bothered him, and as it served as a distraction from everything going on with WAR and Fairhart, he made it a priority to clear his mind to his girlfriend. The best opportunity came during a Care for Magical Creatures class on Monday.

They were dealing with one of the most unique creatures that they'd ever encountered in the class, the Clabbert. Like the Demiguise from months ago, it had a certain monkey appearance, though the small horns and scaly, dark green skin made it connotate more to something of an amphibious nature. Average sized and springy, it crawled around in circles in front of Hagrid, the top of its scaly head flashing red at random moments.

"When it flashes like tha'," Hagrid was telling them, "tha' means that it senses danger. They keep to packs mos'ly, and there's a small group of 'em that like movin' around the deeper parts of the

Fores'. This one here I found a little far from home the other day, I thought I'd show him off a bit before puttin' him back. His hands are webbed, see? So that-"

"And where were you that you heard this again?" Mirra murmured to him from the back of the crowd. Morrison stepped away a couple of paces, clearly not wanting to hear what they were talking about.

"I told you, I was briefly separated from Scorpius and Morrison. But I was obviously still around students" Albus said quietly, again teetering on his own definition of a fallacy. "And I heard what Anastasia said, and I dunno, I remembered that day in the library too..."

Mirra frowned, looking as though she had advice to give, but was unwilling to give it. Finally, she settled on being vague. "Well he's your friend, Al. Whatever you think is best."

"He's your friend too" Albus said out of the corner of his mouth, watching as the Clabbert climbed up on Hagrid's shoulders and began licking at his face with a long, pink tongue. The laughing from the students allowed Albus to ask a question in a more regular volumed manner. "What would you do? In my position?"

"As close as friends to Scorpius as you are?" she asked, and she gave a slight sigh. "I would probably tell him. But only because I don't think it's as big a deal as you do."

"Not a big deal?" he said, a bit loudly, which was unfortunate, as the laughter had died down. Hagrid gave him a surly look before continuing.

"How is it not a big deal?" he asked, his voice back to being low.

"Because there's no concrete evidence to suggest that she's doing anything that you think she is. Could she be too close with somebody else? Of course, but that doesn't mean that she is. Could she have been serious about what she said? Maybe, but-"

"Okay, I get it" he hissed, not looking at her. "But you know her better than I do, you're both Prefects. Does she seem the type to...?"

He let his sentence hang, leaving Mirra to disregard his question completely.

"Look, I don't to talk to her that much," she started in a hushed tone, as Hagrid continued informing them of the Clabbert's mostly insect diet. "But from what I do know of her, I just see her as a bit- erm- "

"Weird" Morrison finished for her from a few feet away, and again, Hagrid looked their way, looking somewhat disappointed.

Morrison recovered quickly. "I'm talking about the- the- the monkey frog- the- the green thing" he confirmed for his professor. "It's weird..."

Hagrid seemed to accept this answer, as he returned to his lesson as though uninterrupted. Albus received a look from Mirra that he identified as a conversation stopper, as she clearly didn't want to be a part of any more disruptions, and thus, the topic was dropped.

He had a free period next, where, again, Scorpius was absent. Albus spent the time in the Common Room begrudgingly going over Charms notes, as Melonie had requested that Morrison use his free period to do some studying of his own. Scorpius was conspicuously absent at lunch, and Albus could only assume that his friend had found a place to do his girlfriend's homework without being attacked for it.

He was present in Potions though, where he gave the entire group curt nods as they entered. They settled themselves together in a familiar way; Albus in between his girlfriend and Scorpius in the front row, Morrison and Melonie sitting with Denise Toils just behind them. The light chatter in the dungeon ceased abruptly when Professor Malfoy swept into the room.

"Textbooks and parchment out, we are taking notes today" he said, not even looking at the class as he spoke. The students all obliged without comment. In any other class, there probably would have been sighs or mild complaints, but there was enough respect for their professor here to know that a theoretical lesson was not to be shunned. Some of the students doing a bit poorly in the class, like Morrison, even flashed a grin at the prospect of not having to turn in work.

Scorpius' father spent the entire double class period waving his wand across the board, words appearing and meant to be copied. The scratching of quills ended up being the only noise heard, with only the occasional cough or sneeze punctuating it. Most of what Albus was copying he actually already knew; it was about why some potions increased in potency over time, while others became less effective if they weren't used immediately. He was astounded to learn, however, that love potions in particular were part of the former, and that, in some cases, they could even do irreparable damage to the brain if uncured.

It was still very boring though, and made only more restless by the fact that he couldn't speak to his friend out loud. Deciding that his old methods from first year had never actually been proven obsolete, he decided to scratch out a note-easily masked by all of the other writing in the room-and slid it a few inches over, to just under Scorpius' nose.

Sorry about what I said earlier.

Immediately after he'd slid it, Scorpius jotted down a response directly underneath it.

No big deal.

Albus frowned; he could tell now, from the brevity of this message, that his friend was actually more offended than he'd originally thought. Not only did this annoy him, but now his opportunity to discuss what he knew seemed thin as well.

He didn't write back, with the remaining minutes being dedicated to sloppily writing down notes and contemplating how to approach the situation better. It was a relief when they were finally dismissed, but once again, Albus found himself being held back.

"A word, Albus?" his professor said as he gathered his things. As Scorpius had already torn his way out of the class, it was only Morrison who gave him an uneasy look. Mirra didn't seem to think much of it.

"Yeah sure" Albus replied stoically as his friends left, Morrison closing the door behind him with a quick, unintended slam.

No longer needing an invitation, he settled himself back in his own spot in the front row, watching as Scorpius' father surveyed him from behind his own desk. In this brief moment of silence he managed to notice just how similar Scorpius and his father were, and in more than just looks too. Their expressions were similar; they both knew how to give a blank look and play down the importance of a situation.

With a quick pang in his gut, he wondered whether or not Hogsmeade would be discussed. Could the Potions Master be aware of what he'd done in Hogsmeade? Had he been informed by his son?

For the second time in a row, Albus was incorrect. And, for the second time in a row now, it was the Protector's Club that was mentioned first.

"The Protector's Club is flourishing" his professor told him.

"Yeah, you told me" Albus said, a bit quicker than intended; he hoped he hadn't sounded rude.

"Well the only reason I bring it up," Scorpius' father started, "is because I'd really like for you to attend a meeting."

Albus raised his eyebrows curiously. Why would he need to attend a club meeting?

"Erm-"

"If you're too busy with all of your classwork, then obviously, feel free to decline" he was told pointedly. "But there's a few Slytherins in the club now, and I think that adding some older students to it could really help increase enthusiasm about it."

Albus nodded, and before he could even ask, he'd been answered.

"Any friends are of course invited as well" Scorpius' father said. "It's an open club."

Albus nodded again, but then something registered with him. Perhaps it was not so unusual that Scorpius' father had approached him in particular; they did know one another outside of school,

after all. But why hadn't he extended the invitation directly to his own son? Scorpius was invited too, even if it was unlikely that he'd go...

"There's a meeting tonight at eight o' clock" his professor said, snapping Albus from his thoughts. "If you do decide to come, then try and be punctual."

Albus nodded for the third time in a row, and was then dismissed. When he returned to the Common Room a few minutes later, he saw that it was again void of Scorpius, though Morrison and Melonie were cuddled up in a chair.

He briefly explained to them the nature of the conversation he'd just had, and Morrison jumped on it immediately.

"You know, I've been meaning to try out that club" he said smartly. "You up for it Mel?"

"We have studying to do" she told him daintily, as though she expected this to sway him out of it.

"Is that really more important than learning extra hexes and stuff?" Morrison asked her.

"Yes" she replied, as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

"Well I'm going" Albus chimed in, and they both turned their attention back to him. He had actually made his choice almost as soon as he'd left the classroom, figuring that he needed something to take his mind away from all that was troubling him, as well as that it would be interesting to see just how submissive the WAR members in the castle were being to Professor Malfoy's new standards for the club.

Morrison ultimately managed to argue his way into the meeting as well, but upon asking whether or not Scorpius was going, Albus couldn't provide with him an answer. In fact, none of them actually even knew where Scorpius was.

He retreated to his dormitory just before dinner, tapping the Marauder's Map sharply with his wand once he was sure that there was no one else present. Keen on seeing where Scorpius would be entering the Great Hall from, he scanned the map anxiously, checking for spots where he might be with Anastasia. She was in the Hufflepuff Common Room however, surrounded by other students, and he was nowhere to be found; not in the library, out on the grounds, or even already in the Hall.

Surprised, he accompanied Morrison and Melonie down to dinner expecting his friend to at one point show up, but it never happened. Both Morrison and Melonie insisted to him that it wasn't a big deal though, and by the time that dinner was finished, he was too interested in the upcoming club meeting to think much more on it.

Melonie retreated to the Common Room, but Albus and Morrison lingered in the Hall, watching as the mess of dinner vanished.

"So what d'you reckon's changed?" Morrison asked him as WAR members entered the Hall, preparing to clear the vast room before most of the students arrived. "About the club I mean?"

"Well hopefully there's less people being sent to the Hospital Wing" Albus told him, watching as two of the Renegades waved their wands, causing the four giant tables to be placed up against the walls. "Though I am curious to see how Larson interacts with Scorpius' dad..."

As if on cue, his blonde haired professor entered the Hall, flashing them both a grin as he did so. Without saying anything to them, he walked right up to Larson and began muttering something.

Albus noticed that the Renegade captain simply nodded his head in a melancholy fashion as Professor Malfoy spoke to him. Albus was sure that this had less to do with taking orders, and more to do with taking orders from someone who allegedly had a faded Dark Mark on their arm somewhere. Albus smiled with glee at the thought of how Waddlesworth's plan here had backfired. Perhaps his victory of the Protector's Club weeks ago had been trivial in the big picture, but it at least managed to occasionally cheer him up, which was more than what could be said about most other things in his life right now.

Students filed their way into the Hall about twenty minutes later, and Albus noticed that their numbers had, as he'd been told, increased since the most recent meeting that he'd attended. There were some noticeable absences; Hugo and his group of his friends were gone, and Hornsbrook alone from his group was missing, but the open spots were more than made up for by the fourth and fifth year Slytherin students that had entered, as well as a few unfamiliar faces from other houses as well.

"Line up!" Scorpius' father hollered.

Larson, as if to pointlessly one-up him, added his own shout into the silence. "Sort out now!" he barked out.

Albus and Morrison both exchanged a look of confusion, as did a few other students who may have been new. But as they learned almost at once, club meetings now started with two separate groups being formed, one for those who wanted to watch and learn from examining, and one for those who were willing to participate.

Albus could tell just from the look on Larson's face that he didn't approve of this new method, probably because it completely nullified his "there are no volunteers in the real world" way of thinking. Albus personally thought that it was brilliant though. Students who were already prepared could indeed be randomly selected, and the students in the other line-the one that Albus and Morrison decided to join, as it was their first time here under the new regime-would be able to watch and learn, so that eventually, they'd be prepared to cross over.

He had initially been worried that there would be a lot of hateful or disdainful glares thrown his way, but this didn't seem to be the case, probably because there were now enough Slytherins in the club that his presence was just as a new member from the house. He did notice, however, that there was some inter-house rivalries going on...mostly between the leaders of the club.

"Step up now, " Larson said, pointing to a burly seventh year Gryffindor, who stepped out of line dutifully.

Albus watched as Professor Malfoy sized up the line as well. Eventually, he pointed at a Slytherin girl that looked as though she were in her fourth year.

"Name?" she was asked by her Head of House.

"Evey Zabini" she said confidently, her stylishly curled hair hanging just in front of her dark skinned face, her brown eyes examining her opponent without moving.

Albus felt Morrison cringe from next to him, probably from humour after learning the girl's name.

Scorpius' father too seemed thoughtful at the name, but from the way that he tilted his head, it was more as though it was familiar, rather than funny. He eventually discarded whatever was going through his mind and began addressing both contenders.

"The duel begins as soon as you can draw your wand" he said. "And I want to see plenty of shield charms!"

Albus watched as both the large Gryffindor boy and Evey Zabini withdrew their wands at lightning speed. It was the Gryffindor boy who fired first-a large red stunner-but just as Professor Malfoy had commanded, the Zabini girl had deflected it. Quickly taking the offensive, she fired her own spell, a light blue one that Albus vaguely remembered as being the Jelly-Legs Jinx from his first year or so at Hogwarts, which was timely deflected by the Gryffindor boy.

This went on for an unnaturally long time, with both participants defending fiercely, as opposed to straight up attacking. Albus could see Larson muttering things to his fellow WAR members, but he quickly shouted in triumph as the battle ended.

"Yes!" he barked out, as Zabini picked herself up off of the floor. The Gryffindor boy had fired a spell down at her legs, which she'd been unable to block completely. Scorpius' father threw him a sharp look, at which point he elaborated on his joy.

"Just wanted to point out how effective directing your spells at weak points can be" he said, his voice returning to its soft, oily nature. "The legs in particular are hard to defend against. But you both did well" he added, sounding as though he didn't mean it all.

The Gryffindor boy walked back into the line while getting claps on the back, while the Slytherin girl was helped up by her professor. In his own opinion, Albus thought that her performance had been better overall. She had been defeated, true, but considering how much more magic the seventh year undoubtedly knew, she had still managed to keep the fight going; it was a testament to how important proper defence was in a confrontation.

Albus surveyed team based combat next, and interestingly enough, he bore witness to WAR members other than Larson participating. Scorpius' father arranged it so that to each team of three, randomly selected students, an adult WAR member was selected as well, as the person who couldn't attack. One team received the salt and pepper bearded man that Albus immediately recognized, the other team getting a WAR member that he only knew from Club meetings.

Albus couldn't help but laugh at the brilliance of it; as the person meant to be protected was the only person to whom damage was guaranteed, it was the WAR members, not the students, who were getting spells fired at them

"Begin!" Larson hollered, and the dueling began at once.

Albus watched as the fast-paced battle commenced, the Renegades ducking and dodging from instinct alone, both looking aggravated that they'd been forced to contribute in such a matter. It seemed to generally help the students, however, as there was no reservation against harming someone who they didn't attend a class with the next morning. Shield charms were again prevalent, but the battle ended quickly when Leonard, a Ravenclaw and one of the few people whose name's Albus remembered, fired a brilliantly casted Blasting Charm at the elderly WAR member, stopping the battle at once.

"Good job!" Larson said, ignoring the man on the ground, whose face was contorting in pain as he clutched at his ribs. Larson then jerked his head toward the other WAR member, who hadn't been injured at all. "Go give him to Lester" he said off-handedly.

Albus cringed slightly at this; it seemed like regardless of who it was, those who lost weren't that important. A bit unfair, as the elderly Renegade had been instructed to not defend himself. Then he remembered that the person was just that-a Renegade-and his conscience cleared immediately.

Before Albus knew it, the hour was up, and the students were being dismissed. They still walked in an orderly manner, but the usual gloomy and tense silence had been replaced by something that Albus identified more as excitement.

"Look like a chipper bunch, don't they?" Morrison asked him. "Think they've realized that they're being prepared as replacements?"

Albus scratched at the back of his head as he watched them all walk. "I don't think that they really are anymore" he admitted.

He then watched as the WAR members, all but the older ones anyway, returned the Hall to normal, shifting around the four tables with delicate and precise waves of their wands. Scorpius' father then approached them both from the side.

"So what did you think?" he asked.

"Brilliant" Albus told him truthfully, and Morrison nodded from next to him.

"Good" his professor replied. "I was hoping that you'd be impressed with it. Now what do you say about you adding an extra hand in the matter?"

Albus gave him a bewildered look, and from next to him, Morrison even made a noise of surprise.

"What do you mean?" Albus asked, sure that he was missing something.

"I mean attending regularly, helping plan certain activities and the like, you know, things of that nature."

Albus gave him a baffled expression. Not knowing how to respond-or even what his answer would be if he did so-he simply let sounds escape his mouth.

"Uhh- I- erm- I-"

"Just think about it" Scorpius' father told him, not even acknowledging Albus' confusion. "Get back to me whenever you've decided" he added.

And without another word, he swept passed them both. Within the next five minutes, Albus and Morrison were walking down into the dungeons, neither of them knowing where to start. It was finally Albus who did so.

"Was he serious?" he asked, staring straight ahead into the corridors of the twisted labyrinth, illuminated by torches at this point in the day.

"It seemed like it" Morrison answered him. "I mean he asked for an answer anyway-"

"Yeah, but why me?" Albus asked, not expecting an answer, but still hoping for one. "I mean, it was weird enough just having me there. I don't think he gets just how much people dislike me around here now."

"Maybe he's more interested in what you can offer, instead of what you can't" Morrison replied.

Albus stopped walking at once, then turned to his friend. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked curiously.

Morrison gave him a small grin. "Well isn't it obvious? WAR is trying to teach people about the real thing, and you've experienced a whole lot of it, haven't you? Maybe what Scorpius' dad is trying to do is get you to give a little hands-on experience, so that they're not stuck learning WAR's mangled version instead."

Albus considered this for a moment. Perhaps it was true to a degree; there weren't a lot of people in this school that could openly talk about being in danger with the Dark Alliance how he could. But the difficulty here was that the vast majority of times he'd been in trouble, it had usually been due to his own ignorance. No, there was something that he was missing here...Professor Malfoy was a Slytherin after all, there had to be a twist to it.

It connected for him in a single, split second. He ran ahead of his friend and blurted out the password to the Common Room, entering it with an angry expression on his face. He directed his question to the first person that he saw. In this case, it was Bartleby Bing, who was sitting by the fire and talking to a fifth year girl.

"Where's Scorpius!" he barked, and Bartleby twisted his thin neck to answer him.

"Huh? I dunno, I haven't seen him-"

Albus turned around quickly, bolting out of the Common Room and going back through the labyrinth of the dungeons. Scorpius had never returned from wherever he was, and he hadn't been seen on the Map either...

"Where are y-" Morrison started as he ran passed him, but he was already making a turn, and was soon enough starting up only the first of a series of staircases. In a couple of more minutes, he was on the seventh floor, hurrying passed a WAR guard who didn't even have time to cast suspicion on him. He finally came to a halt, panting, at a blank stretch of wall.

Was Scorpius aware that the Room of Requirement could be sealed, so long as the person required it to be? Or had he not even considered this? Albus would find out now...

He closed his eyes, still breathing heavily, and asked for a place where he'd find some solace. A quiet place, perfect for doing someone else's homework...

The door materialized, and before it could vanish, Albus opened it and entered. Sure enough, he found his friend at a desk with books stacked on top, sitting hunched over in what was, for some reason, an uncomfortable looking chair. The rest of the room was empty.

Scorpius turned at once, then breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, it's just you" he said.

"What did you tell your dad?" Albus asked him at once, making sure that his voice sounded strong and clear. The cold, unnatural voice in the back of his head was choosing to sit this one out for some reason, meaning that his aggression was all on him.

Scorpius stood up. "What are you on about?" he asked, but Albus detected the uneasiness in his voice.

"Your dad. He's been all about talking to me and distracting me and stuff. And just today, he offered to make me an official leader in the ruddy Protector's Club!"

"So?" Scorpius asked, his voice somewhat piercing. "Maybe he just reckons you're a talented wizard-"

"He's trying to get me to stay" Albus said boldly. "He's trying to get me caught up in stuff going on at Hogwarts, like this club."

"Why would he have to do that?" Scorpius asked blandly. "Or are you actually planning on running off and doing something stupid?"

"I-" Albus started, but he stopped briefly to select his next words with care. "I'm not planning on doing anything stupid. And that's not even the point. The point is, you told your dad something."

Scorpius groaned and threw his arms into the air. "I told him you were worried about your dad, you git! I didn't say anything else. You have it right, yeah, he wants to distract you, but he's not trying to *keep* you anywhere! I didn't tell him about your precious Hogsmeade detour, I wouldn't do that."

Albus breathed easy. He knew that he was in the middle of a row-or at least, for the time being, a heated talk-but it was still refreshing to know that this secret was kept. He could not let anyone surmise that he'd made a decision to work with Waddlesworth. Before he could say anything else, however, Scorpius had already continued along with the argument.

"Is that why you're so ticked off at me?" he asked. "Because you think I ratted you out to a teacher? Is that why you attacked me over the Anastasia thing?"

Albus absorbed this comment with interest. "What do you mean?"

"You practically reprimanded me today at breakfast" Scorpius answered icily. "Because I was doing a favor for my *girlfriend*-"

"You've got that all wrong!" Albus shot out. "All of it!"

"You didn't try and start a row with me earlier at breakfast?" Scorpius asked, and Albus could tell that he was expecting denial, just to exacerbate things.

"I wasn't mad at you for anything that you told your dad!" Albus argued back, and he realized, just now, that this was his second verbal battle with Scorpius in just a few months; their adolescence was getting the better of them. "I was mad at you for being thick! For doing things for a girl who doesn't give a damn about you!"

There it was; he'd said it. He waited for the residual effects of this sentence, expecting the shouting to only grow louder and more hoarse, but what happened next was far worse.

"What did you just say?" Scorpius asked, sounding as though he was slightly sick.

Not knowing what else to do, Albus strode over to him, picking up textbooks from off the desk as he did so.

"Astrology, Ancient Runes, History of Magic-"

"We both take that class!" Scorpius said. "Me and her!"

Albus shook his head, then took a deep breath. "Mate, Anastasia- she- she's not as into this as you are. I've seen her getting cutesy with other blokes, I heard her say something about- about being with you to make sure that she got Head Girl next year, all kinds of stuff. She's just- I don't know" he cut himself off, not wanting to raise the tension any further. Besides, he'd done enough damage.

To his amazement, Scorpius sat back down in the uncomfortable wooden chair, then ran his hands through his hair. "So you noticed it, huh? Did anyone else?"

Albus' jaw dropped. "Huh?" he said, looking around wildly for a chair of his own. A more comfortable, roundish one appeared behind him at the very thought. He lowered himself into it, still unsure what to make of Scorpius' comment.

"Don't you think I know all of that stuff?" Scorpius asked, shaking his head. "I mean, not the actual scenarios and all, but yeah, I know she's only really dating me for the sake of it."

"Then why are you with her?" Albus asked, astonished.

"I dunno," Scorpius started, and, as if determining that this was an awful answer, he added, "to have someone I guess."

Albus let loose a rattling groan. "Scorpius-"

"I know, I know!" he snapped. "It sounds pathetic. But this is my sixth year, and for the first time in a while, I'm looking for someone, rather than waiting" he said, eyes slanting sharply.

Albus knew that was referring to Rose here, which brought up an even older confliction. Should he divulge her sudden interest in him now, at this very moment? It didn't seem like he was very

enthusiastic about Anastasia as a person. To separate them, could a rejuvenated interest in Rose be necessary?

But then something far more important struck Albus. This wasn't about plotting things out, trying to sway Scorpius one way. His friend had his own decisions to make, and it was only fair that he knew every available possibility.

"Rose likes you" he said outright, and Scorpius, whose head had been dangling, picked it up.

"What?"

"Rose likes you" Albus repeated. "But- it seems like she's only interested in you this year, because you're popular and all that. She seems to think that she missed out on something, now that her and Lance are basically over."

Scorpius continued to ogle him. "When did you find this out?"

"Mirra told me" he confessed. "I didn't want to tell you, because I thought it would create a rift between you and Anastasia but...I'm not as worried now."

Scorpius let out a loose, short, callous laugh.

"Yeah, I see what you mean."

It was amazing how much the atmosphere could change in only a few seconds. Albus had been expecting a fully fledged row, a continuation of sorts of what occurred earlier in the year, but it seemed as though clearing the air about everything had warranted an unexpected effect. With nothing left for him to divulge, they could no longer bicker.

"So what are you going to do?" Albus asked, reclining back in his chair. "You've got a decision to make."

"Anastasia or Rose?" Scorpius asked.

"Or neither" Albus said casually, and Scorpius gave him a wry smile.

"I dunno" he said. "I just felt like I really needed this, this year. I'm sick of intruding on you and Morrison."

"What?" Albus asked, flabbergasted at this statement. "Don't be ridiculous-"

"It's true" Scorpius said. "I mean, say I split with Anastasia, and ignore Rose too? What happens next Hogsmeade visit, when you and Mirra want to be alone, and Morrison and Mel?"

Albus frowned at him. "That's not even how it works. Mirra doesn't dislike you or anything, and neither does Melonie. We can hang out all five of us. You don't *have* to be with anyone" Albus

told him, and he then cast a look of contempt toward the stack of books next to him. "Especially not with anyone who has you doing twice the work, so that she can fool around with some other tosspot."

Scorpius nodded. "I don't know what I'll do" he said. "I'll wait until after winter break though; I already got Anastasia a present, didn't I?"

Albus nodded as well. "Just going to hang out here and do someone else's homework then?" he asked, and Scorpius gave a slight smile.

"For now" he said. "I'll work everything out though. Like I said, after we come back from break."

Albus gave him a clap on the shoulder, pleased with how the discussion had ended. That hadn't really been that bad after all...

He stood to leave, and was right at the door when Scorpius threw a final comment his way.

"Thanks for telling me about Rose" he said. "And for- for everything that you saw with Anastasia too."

Albus smiled at him. "Anything to give you more to think about" he said.

Scorpius curled his mouth into a sneer, then gave him a rude hand gesture as he was in the process of closing the door. Chortling, Albus began walking along the seventh floor corridor, his mood a dramatic shift from where it'd been.

There was something very rewarding about clearing the air, and indeed, about eschewing indecisiveness as well. This entire time he'd been worried about the effects of admitting to Scorpius everything that he'd seen, but now that he'd done so, and stuck around to work everything out, he felt much better than when he had been unsure of what to say.

He was right about to turn the corridor when he heard something. There was a small squeal, followed by a yell of anger, followed by muffled laughter. Pressing himself up against the side of the wall, he peeked his head around to see the source.

It was Roxanne again. It appeared as though she'd been on her way to the Gryffindor Common Room, but some books had been knocked from her hand. And the source, as Albus had immediately expected, was the same as it had been last time.

Lionel and one of his friends-the same one from before actually, in the library- were tossing a notebook between them, over Roxanne's head. She was waving her arms and snatching at the air frantically, looking as though she couldn't believe she was in such a predicament again.

"Give it back!" she shrieked at them. "Give it-"

"You know you're not supposed to be out this late" Lionel said, tossing the notebook over her bobbing head in a fancy way. "This is what happens."

Albus felt his heart pound with fury. He waited for that voice to hit him-the voice that served as a catalyst for adrenaline and courage now, the one that he was so dependent on-but it didn't come. It was still absent, as though, once more, the issue at hand wasn't big enough to require it.

His thoughts once again returned to Dougie and Miles, only this time, it was about how quickly the idea had come to him. How he had instinctively devised a method for standing up for Miles, who was clearly unable to do so on his own. Last time this scene had been before his eyes, Eckley had come to the rescue. That didn't seem probable this time.

He deciding immediately what he was going to do. He didn't have any Ton-Tongue Toffees on him, but he did have a wand...

He rounded the corner loudly, making sure to capture the attention of the two bullies. Lionel's friend had just tossed the notebook over once more when he saw Albus approaching, and at the sight of him, he grinned stupidly. Albus continued at his brisk pace though, allowing his ire to show on his face.

"You stay away from her, you hear me!" he barked, and even Roxanne looked confused. "You stay away from her!"

Lionel started to laugh, but Albus, once in striking distance, made a grab for him. The other Gryffindor yelled an expletive as Roxanne screamed, but Lionel himself stayed silent with bewilderment as Albus grabbed him by the front of his robes. With strength that he didn't even know that he had, Albus forced him back up against the wall, one hand pinning him there by the chest, the other hand holding a wand directly up to his throat.

"Let go of me-" Lionel started, but Albus had already began roaring in his face.

"Stop this!" he shouted, and Lionel actually cringed. "This is done, do you understand me? You leave her alone!"

Lionel's friend, who Albus had actually expected to intervene, merely stood motionless, the notebook clutched tightly in his hands as his friend had a wand aimed at their neck. Lionel recovered quickly however.

"I don't have to listen to you!" he snapped. "You're a nobody, you're not even a Prefect-"

"That's right I'm not!" Albus said through gritted teeth, jabbing his wand into the flesh of Lionel's throat, making him wince. He thought of Eckley, and the passive, approved route that he'd taken. Then he thought of James, who had given up his post as Prefect, and instead returned to taking matters into his own hands...

"That's right I'm not a Prefect" Albus repeated hoarsely. "So I guess I haven't got a badge to lose then, do I?"

Lionel said nothing, allowing Albus to continue freely.

"Now you listen up, because I'm only going to tell you this once" he said, his tone bitter and airy. "You mess around with other people, you worry about getting points taken. But you mess around with *my* family, and *my* friends, and- and- and say anything about *my* girlfriend," he added, not even caring who had actually said it in Herbology that one day, "you do that, and you don't worry about detention, and getting points docked, you worry about getting a hex in the face" he finished, positive that his eyes were glinting with rage now.

Lionel said nothing, but gave the slightest of nods in compliance. Albus let go of him, took a step back, and lowered his wand.

"Don't think I'll do it?" he asked quietly, a sudden thought occurring to him. "Yeah, I bet Janine Fischer thought the same thing about my dad."

Roxanne squeaked; the Gryffindor boy next to her dropped the notebook in surprise. Lionel's look was the most rewarding however; it was of complete and total fear. A good indication that he wouldn't be repeating his actions.

"Let's get out of here" he finally said to his friend, grabbing onto his shoulder, and they both walked away quickly, without even so much as looking back.

Roxanne scooped up her notebook and added it to the pile she was carrying, then turned to her older cousin.

"Th- thanks" she said awkwardly, as if she couldn't believe that such a thing had just occurred. Albus knew that she had detected the lie in his last threat easily, but it must have been his general demeanor that had been frightening, because she hurried along without another word, leaving Albus alone in the corridor.

Ten minutes later, he'd returned to his own Common Room, and was laying in his bed, ready for another grueling night. His mind seemed strangely clear however, even his dilemma with Waddlesworth's plan was only sifting through his thoughts, and soon enough, he found himself generally calm and relaxed, capable of drifting off somewhat even, if he really wanted to...

He was running again, running through darkness. It didn't last long this time, as once again, he'd been knocked to the floor, a golden, blinding light flashing before his eyes as he did so. He skidded across the dark ground, which sounded as though it had been polished, then glanced up at his ferocious double, whose hollow eyes were boring into his own, the intense light sending chills up his spine. Once again he watched as the figure swooped down on him, grasping him around his neck, preparing to strangle him to death, and he somehow knew that this time there

would be no one here to defend him, so he pried at the icy fingers himself, pulling at them and pushing them away-

He felt relief course through him as the golden-eyed Albus was knocked back onto the ground. He sat up, gasping for air, looking around in the darkness for his savior, but found that there was none; it had been his own effort this time.

He managed to stand up all the way, and then removed a wand from the inside of his robes; his own wand, the one that he'd been using for years. He raised it, but the twisted version of himself raised a wand as well, a far more foreboding one.

"I'm not scared of you!" Albus hollered at the monster on the ground, the Dragonfang Wand glittering due to the light of his eyes. "I'm not scared of you!" he said again, and it was true; he wasn't.

The golden-eyed Albus said nothing. It simply continued to stare up at him, its expression hateful.

"You're not stronger than me!" Albus told it, shaking his head slightly. "And you know it..."

He kept his wand raised, and he didn't lower it until he woke up in the morning.

Chapter 16: The Tunnels House

Snow started to fall around the beginning of Decemeber, but as snowball fights were a thing of the past for Albus and his friends, he found it more of a hindrance than anything else. Some Care For Magical Creatures lessons were canceled, but Neville flat out refused to cancel Herbology for his older students, with the end result being that twice a week Albus would end up thawing his fingers dangerously close to the Common Room fire, cursing under his breath at how outrageous it was that some plants could even live in such a climate.

They had two more Apparition lessons as well, both of which were equally aggravating. Morrison had gotten the knack of it completely about midway through the second lesson, but he wasn't as disliked this time around, as others were now doing it to, even if sparingly. Scorpius, Melonie, and Mirra had all managed to even do it, Scorpius twice in succession in the third lesson. Albus though, of course, was part of the small handful that seemed utterly incapable.

"As least you haven't splinched yourself" Mirra said to him during a romantic Room of Requirement meeting in the second week of December.

Albus knew that she was thinking of two people in particular, Melissa Zuerte from his own house (who he occasionally saw speaking to Denise Toils) and Vanessa Adams from Hufflepuff. Both girls had inflicted minor wounds on themselves in the practice of Apparating, and had needed to be fixed up in the Hospital Wing accordingly.

Personally, Albus was a bit jealous that they'd at least made *some* progress, but he didn't voice this to Mirra, who he knew would be troubled by it. Instead, he simply complained.

"I really don't get why I can't do it" he said, shaking his head. "I mean, I'm deliberating! I know I am!"

"It's because you're not relaxed" Mirra crooned to him. "You can't focus if you have too much stressing you out! That's why Morrison is so good at it; he doesn't even know that it's supposed to be difficult."

"Well it's a little hard for me to be relaxed" Albus all but snapped.

Mirra twisted her mouth to the side. "Do you want a massage?" she asked carelessly.

He groaned.

"Yes" he said, feeling glum.

"Well you're not getting one until you learn to relax and Apparate!"

"Ughh..."

Though winter brought with it many unpleasant things, there was no denying that the feelings of anticipation had increased throughout the entire castle. It had started with a grueling, well played match of Quidditch between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw-resulting in a phenomenal two hundred and ninety to two hundred and eighty victory by Ravenclaw-and had continued with the prospect of the biggest news in the Wizarding World in years. The election was fast approaching.

As it was set for just three days after Christmas, issues of *WAR Weekly* were now being sent out only a day apart, with each issue now predominantly listing the various credentials of Warren Waddlesworth, as well the projected numbers in what would surely be a landslide victory. Albus wasn't even entirely sure how the voting would commence-such an election hadn't taken place in more than a hundred years, after all-but he was sure that the numbers were accurate, and, sadly, he was no longer sure in which way he felt about them.

He had day dreamed before about the impossible; about Waddlesworth losing the election. In his head, a sequence of events starting from this mere moment would lead to the crushing of WAR's confidence, and eventually the downward spiral of Waddlesworth and his gang of Renegades as well. This was before the Azkaban article however, and before his negotiations with Waddlesworth in Hogsmeade. Now, for this plan to work, Waddlesworth needed to be at the top of the Ministry, and for this reason, Albus was glad that his fantasies had been just that.

But of course, this plan required something as well, and that was the far more imperative ability of he himself. He still had no way to lure Fairhart to him, and, as he stared up at the ceiling of the Great Hall the morning that they were to depart back home for the holidays, he was sure that Fairhart wouldn't have come anyway. Snow was falling fast, and he knew instinctively that it was not the fluffy, beautiful snow of picture books, but rather the sloshy, wet, annoying kind.

"Can't wait to get hit in the face with that" Morrison said sarcastically, staring up into the ceiling.

Albus nodded in compliance, waiting for breakfast to finish, as he'd already wolfed down his plate of bacon. An unsettling feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with his meal overtook him though, as he considered his schedule for the next few days. He'd be returning home, of course, but even then, he wasn't sure who would be picking him up. No matter what, however, he'd have to face his mother soon, and he knew full well that she would not have reacted to the news of Darvy's revealed location easily. From there, he'd have to hope that his Aunt Hermione had made due on her word to pass along the news that he planned on spending part of the holiday with his girlfriend, which he realized just now was a very callous thing for him to do, considering the current state of his family's morale.

"Got something on your mind mate?" asked Scorpius.

"Huh? No" Albus said, turning to him. "You?"

"Nope" Scorpius lied as well. Albus knew very well that Scorpius was pondering what he was going to do after the break, which was, after all, the timetable that he'd assigned himself to make a decision about his romantic life.

A bell sounded at the next moment, and though it would usually signal the start of classes, it was this time used to signal that they were to journey home. As Albus noticed at once, the amount of people choosing to stay at Hogwarts had diminished dramatically this year, possibly as a result of families demanding that their children be safe and sound during the holidays. He didn't really see the logic behind this, though; like in the case where parents would have withdrawn their children had McGonagall spoken out about the Protector's Club, it was not in the best interest of the student's safety.

It was Neville who was ushering the students along through the Great Hall, waving to them merrily and bidding them a happy holidays as he did so. Albus saw the other teachers, up at the high table, waving down as well and shouting to a few students who were giving them similar comments. Albus also noticed that of all of his professors, the one bidding the least farewells was the one receiving them the most. Scorpius' father was trying to keep a stoic expression as many students hollered up to him, with several of the girls—mostly seventh years—blowing him kisses as they went. He was failing somewhat, however, as evidenced by the pink tinge to his cheeks.

"Isn't your dad coming home for break?" Morrison asked Scorpius, viewing the scene with interest.

"Yeah, but professors don't return on the train I don't think" Scorpius commented.

"He'll be along once he has a few nonverbal good-byes" Melonie joked, and Scorpius shot her a dark look.

"That's not funny!"

All but Scorpius laughed, but their chortles were silenced once they actually left the castle, where the bitter cold and strong wind made quick work of their cheeks and ears. They were then forced to trudge through sleet, Morrison slipping clumsily twice, as they voyaged to the carriages, the end gain being that they managed to stumble onto the cozy, scarlet Hogwarts Express just a few minutes later. Albus was hoping to locate Mirra as soon as he boarded the train, but eventually agreed with his friends that they'd be better off finding a compartment first. Settling in one just in the middle of the train, Albus allowed himself to collapse in a shivering heap.

"Not all snow is bad" Morrison said, shaking his head so that flecks of ice flew from it, showering the rest of them. "But *that* kind is."

Scorpius removed his wand and dried them all instantly, but even still, the mere sight of newly boarded students passing by their compartment was enough to make them all feel clammy again.

Albus watched the window with interest, noticing that whereas Lily had walked by with almost all of their cousins, Hugo had been absent among them. Albus caught sight of him a minute later, walking with his own group of fourth year Gryffindors.

He reclined somewhat in his seat, eager for the train to begin moving. With the aisle cleared, he'd have an easier time of locating his girlfriend.

This line of thought never came to fruition, however, as at that moment, the compartment door slid open, revealing a rather flustered looking Mirra. She was not alone though.

"Hey" she said, and they all waved and smiled, despite the distraction standing behind her. "Any chance that there's room for two?" Mirra asked.

Charles Eckley was standing just behind her, looking as though he was trying to hide his considerable physique. It was a most unusual sight, considering that Albus had always attributed a much more confident, almost cocky personality to the Prefect. His dislike of him had withered in later years-it was now nowhere near where it was back when Mirra had been dating him-and a sort of mutual ambivalence had been reached between the two, as far as he could remember. So then why did Eckley now look so out of sorts?

Nobody answered at first, but Scorpius gave a look that very strongly indicated that he didn't want Eckley near him. Albus could hardly blame him. Though he had his own problems with the Gryffindor prefect, Scorpius' had mirrored them perfectly, and he'd never even managed to resolve them.

"Of course we do" Albus said after a moment, and he beckoned them both in. Mirra gave a giant smile, then lead her friend into the compartment. She settled herself between he and a very disgruntled looking Scorpius, whereas Eckley took the edge of the opposite seat, next to Melonie and Morrison.

A powerful, uncomfortable silence overtook them all, one only intensified by the fact that Eckley was sliding his eyes over all of them individually, looking very much like he knew how unwelcome some thought him to be. Predictably, it was Morrison who initiated conversation.

"So where's Donny?" he asked, and Albus surreptitiously lowered his forehead to his palm.

"He's got a bit of a full compartment" Mirra answered, and Eckley continued it for her.

"We might pop in their later though" he added quickly.

Albus raised his eyebrows at the term "we", wondering whether or not he'd already discussed this entire train ride with Mirra in advance. He felt the smallest twinge of jealousy for a fraction of a second, then realized how childish he was being. Eckley would not be spending the holidays with Mirra. They wouldn't be exchanging gifts, and they most certainly wouldn't be holding hands as they departed from this train. No, they were just friends now-good friends, maybe-and

that meant that Albus had to do everything that he could to make Eckley feel comfortable; regardless of how much it bothered Scorpius, who was eyeing the Gryffindor with contempt.

"So are you guys getting up to do rounds at any point?" Albus asked out of the blue, though he directed his question to the straw haired boy across from him.

Eckley looked taken aback for a moment, but then answered. "We can, but there's really no point" he said. "No one's going to even remember that they got detention when they come back from break. Especially these younger students, and they don't even seem to care much anyway."

"Too true" Melonie said warmly, turning and smiling at him in a welcoming fashion. "Have you tried docking points from any of them yet? Did you get that long rant about how you're part of the same house?"

The train began moving at this point, and the atmosphere got steadily more comfortable as the minutes passed. Melonie and Mirra did most of the work, discussing Prefect duties with the newcomer, who looked to have settled down a bit, despite the obvious glares being thrown his way by the only other male Prefect in the compartment.

Albus nodded along the entire time, trying to do his best to both follow and simultaneously analyze everything that was going on. As Eckley entered his comfort zone, he began talking more and more, until, once again, Albus had managed to get a grasp of his character.

Charles Eckley was annoying. But he wasn't *that* annoying. Albus had remembered despising nearly everything about the boy years ago, but now found that either he had been biased, or that Eckley had indeed grown up quite a bit. He decided to favor the latter. Eckley no longer used the term "stud" as an adjective, and his tall tales-though still frequent-were now considerably shorter, receding from horribly told fallacies to what were probably just slightly exaggerated tales from over the years. He also did his best to keep an eye on Mirra, and see just how interested she was in these stories, but surprisingly, he found that his girlfriend's eyes were almost always on himself. She was using every available moment to throw him thankful smiles, and Albus knew that she must have been extremely worried about bringing Eckley by.

Morrison didn't seem to mind Eckley's presence much, possibly because he was dozing in and out of naps on Melonie's shoulder, but Scorpius remained silent almost the entire way through. That is, until Eckley worked up the nerve to direct a question his way.

"And speaking of Hufflepuff," he said, shifting away from a story that he'd just told pertaining to the house, "I heard you're dating Anastasia Anifur, huh? How's that going?"

His polite tone could not have been more dissimilar from Scorpius' reaction, which had involved a look being thrown Albus' way. Albus managed to read it perfectly. It basically said 'Is this kid serious?'

Albus offered no assistance on the matter, however, leaving Scorpius to deal with it for himself. After a long hesitation, he replied.

"It's whatever" he said darkly.

The smile slid off of Eckley's face, but he recovered quickly. "So remember my older brother Clyde? The one I mentioned before, who took me to see the Quidditch World Cup a few years back? This one time me and him were hanging out with some of his friends-"

The train ride progressed like this all the way up until the trolley lady had arrived, and only when they had all begun to gorge on sweets did Eckley announce that he was going to see if any room had been made in Donovan Hornsbook's compartment. Mirra assured him that she would follow, but lingered behind briefly to speak to them all after her friend's departure.

"Thanks everyone" she said, sounding extremely relieved.

"I get the feeling I'm missing something" Melonie piped up from next to Morrison. "Do you guys all have a problem with him or something?"

A barrage of different answers were given to her question, the most loud and prominent of which was Scorpius' ice cold "Yes."

Albus frowned slightly. "There *used* to be some issues" he told Melonie. "But we all-well most of us anyway-kind of grew out of it."

"He was a prat back in first year" Morrison said dryly, not bothering to maneuver around the answer like how Albus was. "There was some bad blood; we nearly broke his back-"

"-what-" started Melonie and Mirra simultaneously.

"- and then there was this fight between Scorpius and him, plus his friend who jumped in, then Albus got punched in the face. Then we kind of all had to hang out third year and he was real annoying-"

"That's enough of that" Albus said lightly, but he threw his friend a dark look. "Just some past problems, that's all" he added, blushing slightly; Mirra was unaware of just how bad the feud had actually been, and he was unwilling to elaborate on any of it with her.

"But what I don't get," Scorpius shot out, "is why he couldn't have went off and sat with his mates-"

"Charlie and Donny don't get along much anymore" Mirra cut him off. "Just a difference of opinions on some things. I told him that we'd go try and sit with him anyway and just be pleasant, but he was too nervous at first, so I told him he could come sit with us for a while."

Albus nodded from next to her, thinking that he understood the situation a bit better than his friends did. They may not have read between the lines, but hadn't his sister told him, not too long ago, that Eckley and Hornsbrook had been having rows? And Eckley hadn't been attending Protector's Club meetings, even back from their inception. The issues had probably started there...

"But anyway," Mirra continued strongly, "I just want to thank everyone again for being so nice" she said, though her eyes fell on Scorpius for a brief moment. She then turned to Albus. "And I'll see you on the platform" she added.

They shared a quick kiss, and she was gone. Scorpius went silent again, and Albus assumed that he was back to pondering the best way to go about his situation with Rose and Anastasia. Morrison and Melonie took it upon themselves to bicker playfully, leaving Albus alone to his thoughts for most of the train ride.

It was very difficult to get a good grasp of time while sitting aboard the train, what with the windows coated in flurries of sticky snow, but his boredom still managed to carry him through the hours, and once the train started to slow, he permitted himself to get restless.

"Come on, hurry up" he said to no one in particular.

"Eager to get frozen?" asked Morrison, who was in the process of stretching widely.

Albus said nothing, not wanting to reveal that he was mostly anxious for taking in the faces of the family members that he hadn't seen in a while, especially his mother and James. Once the Hogwarts Express came to a complete stop, he leapt upwards and lead his friends off of the train.

The mixture of harsh winds and icy ground again didn't welcome them, making them all eager to simply haphazardly toss farewells around and find their respective families. Such was the case with both Morrison and Melonie, who found their families in an instant and gave muttered good-byes to everyone else, including one another. Scorpius was next, being waved off by, surprisingly, his grandfather.

"Have a good holiday" Scorpius told Albus, slapping his hand.

"Same" Albus replied, but he didn't remove his eyes from Lucious Malfoy, who was staring over at them wearing one of the most expressionless faces conceivable. As Scorpius walked toward his grandfather, Albus gave a mild wave of acknowledgement toward the the man, whose blonde-white hair looked even more ghost like with snow swirling around it. He didn't respond with a wave, but gave the slightest of nods instead.

This meant that he just needed to locate Mirra, and then his own family. The former proved to be rather easy, as she appeared by his side a moment later, her dark hair blowing fiercely as she tried speaking over the wind.

"Thanks for waiting" she practically yelled.

"Sure thing" Albus replied, his hands shivering from inside of his pockets.

"And thanks again, for being so cool about Charlie" she added seriously, and he gave her a smile and a shrug.

"How'd that all go by the way?" Albus asked, but she didn't provide him with an answer.

"I'll tell you when I see you in a few days" she said happily, and she leaned in and gave him a warm kiss; her ice cold skin almost made him recoil though.

She then stalked off into the whirlwind of precipitation, vanishing after just a few feet. Albus pushed his trunk around aimlessly for a few minutes, until he finally caught sight of familiar colored hair. Hugo, Rose, and Lily were all waiting with two people; his Aunt Hermione and his Uncle Ron.

Albus strode over to them, hoping that they were his ride home, though this seemed to be confirmed by the fact that Lily was waiting for them.

"There he is!" Uncle Ron said loudly.

"Couldn't have went looking for me?" Albus asked as he neared.

"Ah, we knew you'd find us. There was no point in fighting the weather."

"Haha..."

He pushed his trunk along until he was directly in the midst of them all, and once up close, he managed to take in the appearances of the two adults with him. Aunt Hermione looked very much as she had in the Common Room fireplace that one day, though she seemed to be more tired, and her normally bushy hair was only worsened by the terrible elements. Uncle Ron's change was more notable however. His hair seemed a bit longer, there were signs that he hadn't been shaving as much recently either, and his skin looked rather clammy as well. Albus thought that he could deduce at least one of the major reasons behind this generally unkempt image. More than just a brother-in-law, Albus' father was Uncle Ron's best friend, and the most recent Azkaban article must have shaken him up considerably. Albus doubted very much if Aunt Hermione wasn't feeling the exact same way, but she, at least, seemed intent on not scaring their children.

At the mere thought, Albus turned to Hugo and Rose, and saw passive faces on them both. He wondered vaguely if there would be interaction between Hugo and his mother-that is to say, if she would bring up anything involving the Protector's Club-but they were all whisked away before any such thing could occur. Uncle Ron was already leading them through the solid barrier and over to his nicely sized black car. He loaded their trunks into the magically expanded back of

it, and then opened the back door to allow them entrance. Albus and Lily went in first, followed by Hugo and Rose. Within the next minute, Uncle Ron had already started the car, his wife turning to face them all from the passenger's seat.

"Everyone comfortable?" she asked, and they all nodded wordlessly.

"Okay, buckle up now..."

They were on the road a minute later, a strange silence accompanying the trip. No one seemed very keen on speaking, though Aunt Hermione was occasionally muttering things to her husband, all of which Albus couldn't properly discern. He instead took this moment to inconspicuously survey those in the back seat with him, starting with his sister. He hadn't had a proper conversation with Lily-or even an extended look at her really-since the article had come out in November, and he was so caught up with clandestine dealings with Waddlesworth that he hadn't even bothered to wonder what was truly going through her head.

Did she believe the reports in the paper, that Azkaban was truly impenetrable? Or had she, despite her relatively young age, managed to deduce that the prisoners of Azkaban, including her own father, were in much more danger than the Ministry would like to admit? Her face seemed to indicate the second possibility. She was looking deeply disconcerted, with her eyes maintaining a soft, dull look to them as she stared blankly into thin air. Things must be even harder for her than it was for him. He, at least, had his own personal hope to cling to. Lily had no optimistic resolutions to hold onto, aside from whatever she'd read.

Hugo and Rose also seemed preoccupied, but Albus was sure that, even with their uncle imprisoned in the same location where Death's Right Hand was currently residing, they were focusing on their own, more immediate issues. Rose was probably pining over her lack of a relationship, with thoughts of ensnaring Scorpius in her head as well, and Hugo was probably simply hoping that he would be able to avoid conversation about his going-ons at Hogwarts.

Uncle Ron broke the silence casually.

"So how's everyone? Al, how's your friends?"

"They're okay" Albus replied automatically. And then, without even considering the fact that Rose was listening, he added, "Scorpius has a girlfriend now."

Aunt Hermione made a noise of interest, but Uncle Ron took it a bit further.

"Get out!" he said dismissively. "A Slytherin? What's she like?"

"Hufflepuff" Albus answered, making sure that he kept his stare straight. He could see a bitter looking Rose from the corner of his eyes. "And she's- erm- I don't really know" he finished lamely, not really wanting to get into the situation.

"Ah, I see" Uncle Ron said as he made a turn. "One of those stalker ones, huh? Yeah, they're the worst..."

Albus noticed that his aunt had thrown her husband a quick, sharp look, but the conversation progressed nowhere passed this. After a few more minutes, Uncle Ron seemed determined to once again end the silence.

"The rest of you lot are awfully quiet" he said, slowing down as they came to a red light. "Anything on your minds?"

Albus didn't think that there would be any legitimate answers here, but he proved spectacularly incorrect.

"My dad" Lily answered, and the atmosphere in the car shifted to a very melancholy one indeed.

After a moment of hesitation (in which everyone in the back seat cast an awkward glance Lily's way) Uncle Ron responded.

"What about your dad in particular, Lils?" he said lightly, though his wife threw him yet another look; this one much darker by nature.

"I read a newspaper article while at Hogwarts" she answered, and Albus squirmed slightly in his seat.

"Ah" Uncle Ron mustered up quickly. "Yeah, I think I-"

"-turn signal-" Aunt Hermione interjected quickly.

"Oh right, thanks- anyway Lils, I think I know which one you're talking about. I uh- I wouldn't- I just wouldn't worry about that" he finished dramatically.

Albus perked his ears up, and everyone else in the back shifted slightly in interest. Aunt Hermione was now staring daggers at her husband.

"Why not?" Lily asked incredulously.

"There's no way that I'd let anything happen to your dad" Uncle Ron said strongly. "Hear that kids?" he added, looking back for a moment at his own two children. "Your Uncle Harry's going to be just fine!"

"Ronald!" Aunt Hermione hissed, and there was more muttering. Albus only managed to catch a single word, but it was telling of the reprimand as a whole. It was "stop".

Albus crossed over his arms, knowing that he should have expected his uncle to humor them all for the sake of not disheartening them. Lily didn't seem to pick up on it though. She was looking

extremely interested now, even leaning forward so much that her seat belt was starting to look uncomfortably tight.

"Really?" she asked breathlessly. "How?"

"I know people" Uncle Ron said confidently, though his voice had cracked momentarily. "I'll lead a rescue mission on to that island if I have to, damn it, I've got plenty of people in the Ministry backing me up-

"Ron, stop it" Aunt Hermione hissed, but he continued anyway, and Albus now detected the slightest of slurs in his speech. He should have guessed it right from the start; alcohol was factoring in here.

"Do you really have that much pull, dad?" Hugo asked foolishly, only adding fuel to fire.

"Oh yeah!" Uncle Ron said loudly, actually removing one of his hands from the steering wheel momentarily. "Oh yeah, absolutely. People don't forget. Half of the people I work with owe me their lives! They wouldn't even be here if I hadn't helped beat Voldemort."

His voice was falsely cheery, but Albus thought that it also sounded marginally wet. Was he holding back tears?

He continued seamlessly. "Yeah, that's right, they owe me their lives!" he reiterated, slamming his hand down so that the horn honked for a second. "Happens all the time! It's called a- a- what do you call those 'Mione? A life debt?"

"What's a life debt?" Hugo and Lily both asked, but Aunt Hermione turned to them both quickly.

"That's not what a life debt is, don't listen to- he- he's very tired right now-"

"And by extension," Uncle Ron continued, "their children owe me too! They wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me! So if I want these people to march to their deaths-"

Aunt Hermione exhaled deeply, shaking her head as those in the back seat merely stared.

"-then they will do it! I own these people! And so, they will meet every ridiculous demand that I make, whether it be illogical or-"

"Okay, pull over. Now!" his wife snapped.

Uncle Ron did as he was told, and within minutes, had switched places with his wife, who was now driving while he sat in the passenger's seat with his head lulled back somewhat. This effectively put an end to all conversations, and apart from a single small incident in which Uncle Ron had rolled down his window to yell at a muggle driver for having music blaring from his car ("Blasting that garbage into all of our ears like a damn degenerate!", he'd said) the remainder of the ride went quite smoothly.

They pulled up to the Potter mansion, where Albus and Lily would be dropped off, as they were taking their own children to their own home. It was Aunt Hermione who levitated their trunks out of the back of the car, despite the poor weather, and after a few quick hugs and some rather lame good-byes, Albus and Lily had entered their home.

One look at it told him that his mother was struggling, if only slightly, to keep up with taking care of the place. He supposed that with her children gone and James almost always working, that it should have been expected, but it was the quick view of a shriveled, half-sized being hobbling up the stairs and out of sight that made Albus realize just how bad things must've been.

"Was that Kreacher?" Lily asked, sounding somewhat skeptical, and Albus nodded.

He took a quick glance around the sitting room, which looked marginally untidy compared to how it usually did. Some dirt had accumulated on the windows, as well as the hanging in front of them, and the furniture looked somewhat disoriented too, though Albus couldn't quite place his finger on why; perhaps it was his imagination, and the difference was simply that it was so infrequently used now.

Both he and his sister instinctively made their way into the kitchen, where their mother was waiting for them. Here, Albus could see no notable differences. She still had the same tired, almost apathetic look that she'd had over the summer, but her face lit up at the sight of her children.

"You're home!" she yelled, standing up from her seat, where it appeared that she'd been reading older newspapers. She engulfed them both in the same large hug, then took a step back and examined them.

"How are you?" she asked. "Sit down, I'll whip something up."

Albus simply complied with his mother's willingness to dote, but Lily actually launched into an explanation of how her year had been so far-minus the drama, of course. It was a very different Lily than the one who had been so tense and nervous just a few minutes ago in Uncle Ron's car; this one just seemed anxious to be able to converse with her mother again.

Albus didn't say anything for the first ten minutes, and when he did, it was a basic question.

"Where's James?" he asked.

"Should be home soon" his mother replied, and then she immediately reverted back to her conversation with her daughter. "So what happened in Transfiguration? You were learning about what an Animagus was-"

Albus went back to staring around the kitchen, taking in its comfort and its air of use; it appeared to have been the busiest room while he was away at Hogwarts. He curiously went to reach for an old issue of the *Daily Prophet*, but then stopped when something caught his notice. Underneath

the first paper was a small white card, rectangular in shape and sturdy by texture. Albus slid it over and examined it, seeing that it consisted of three names, stacked on top of one another.

Hubert Gough

Thaddeus Moore

Warren Waddlesworth

The top two names were written in black, but Waddlesworth's was colored gold. Albus was wondering why this was-or where he'd heard those two other names before-when Lily walked passed him, leaving Albus alone with his mother.

He hastily placed the card down as his mother turned her attention to him.

"So Lily can't be the only one studying new things" she said. "How's N.E.W.T coursework treating you?"

Albus gave a light shrug. "Difficult. I'm not taking too many classes though" he added.

"How's Potions going with Professor Malfoy?" his mother asked, a hint of a smile on her face, and Albus matched her grin.

"Pretty good" he said. "I uh- I'm really looking into Potions as a career, and he's a good teacher to have."

"Well that's good" his mother replied, and from this mere sentence, the conversation went stale. Albus was sure his mother wanted to discuss more with him-sure that she wanted to, in some way, relate to him that things were not all as lighthearted as she wanted her to daughter to think-but she seemed overall unwilling.

Albus broke the silence with a bold declaration.

"I uh- I kind of plan on spending part of the holidays with my girlfriend, by the way" he added, scratching at the back of his neck to occupy his hands.

"I know, your aunt told me" his mother replied simply, and she gave him a weak smile.

"So that's- that's okay?" Albus asked, and his mother appeared to be taken aback.

"Albus you're almost of age. So long as you won't be in danger, it's your decision. Your brother is spending Christmas with his girlfriend as well" she added lightly, and Albus cringed inwardly.

The foundation of his family had been rattled. Both James and himself would not be here on a day designed for family, and their father simply couldn't, even though he definitely wanted to. It was just his mother and Lily this year, and maybe Kreacher too...

"It doesn't have to be Christmas Day" Albus said plainly. "I just-"

"No, spend Christmas with Mirra" his mother said, and her tone had an unusual amount of finality in it. She lowered her voice as she spoke her next sentence. "We all need a break from this house, Albus. I'm happy that you can take one."

Albus nodded slowly, but found that he had no actual reply for this. He'd have to write to Mirra to tell her that he could go to her house as soon as possible-that he could even be there for Christmas-but first, he was curious about something.

He picked up the eggshell colored card and tapped it. "What's this?" he asked.

His mother gave the slightest of frowns.

"It's how we vote" she said simply.

Albus stared down at it in shock. Now he recognized the two other names; they were the names of other Minister of Magic candidates. But that didn't add up-

"But the election isn't just yet" he said, and a cracking sound told him that his brother had just Apparated into the sitting room.

"No, it isn't" his mother answered. "But we have these cards until then. We can make our decision at any point before the election. On the appointed day, the cards will vanish, and the votes will be tallied. There hasn't been an election in which the people nominate the Minister in quite some time, but this was the method then, and it's proven."

Albus glanced down at the card again; he could hear Lily and James conversing loudly a few rooms away.

"Waddlesworth's name- his name is-"

"That's right" his mother said with a wry smile. "I've already voted."

Albus stared at her, mouth agape. His mother had voted for Waddlesworth? If there was anyone that he had counted on voting against the man, any set of people actually, it would have been his own family. True, he needed Waddlesworth to win for their plan to unfold together, but still, there was the principle of it...

Albus made to speak, but his mother cut him off sharply.

"I don't like Warren Waddlesworth, Albus" she told him. "You know that. I don't like Waddlesworth, I don't like Wands and Redemption, and I don't like the idea of them in our Ministry. But the fact remains that it is the only option left" she said, her voice cracking softly into a barely concealed whimper that unsettled Albus greatly. "The only chance of getting you

father safely out of Azkaban lies with Waddlesworth becoming the new Minister of Magic; no one else is as radical, or as determined-

"There are other ways!" Albus blurted out ridiculously, though he knew that there wasn't; indeed, he'd learned this from Waddlesworth himself. "Uncle- Uncle Ron was even saying in the car-

But his mother had let out a tremendous sigh. "Don't listen to your uncle; he became a wreck following the article that you undoubtedly saw as well. He still clings to a chance that his history will prevail. He thinks that if he can rally the support that the 'Boy Who Lived' had in the days of Voldemort, then he can manage something on his own. He refuses to acknowledge that in this particular case, things are now entirely out of his hands. Out of all of our hands."

Albus merely stared at her, in disbelief at what he was hearing. Not at the subject nature; everything that his mother was saying was true, after all. But at the sense of defeat that accompanied her words, at her admittance that Waddlesworth had truly, finally, succeeded. That he'd convinced even those most against him that he was needed.

And then, with a pang in his gut, he realized something else. Waddlesworth wasn't going to launch an assault on Azkaban if he won the election. No, he wasn't going to do that until he had Fairhart in his possession. What dawned on Albus now was the fact that he'd been played; goaded into moving his position on the board. Waddlesworth, as he'd stated, had enough control over the Ministry of Magic as it was to free Albus' father. But now-now he had no reason to. Because he'd already ensured something else that he wanted, something that Albus was going to give him. Something that Albus had promised him, the primary component of their agreement. Albus' father would not be set free until Waddlesworth was given Fairhart. Whether before the election or after it, he had no reason to free Albus' father, not when he could hold his life ransom in exchange for what he was truly worried about; the Renegade who sought revenge. Waddlesworth had allowed him to think that he was making a deal, when in fact, the deal was already set; Albus simply needed to agree to his terms. And it had to be Albus, because no one else could bring him Fairhart...

He'd played right into Waddlesworth's hands. His father's freedom did not depend on anything that Waddlesworth did, it depended on his own actions now.

His grueling thoughts were broken by the entrance of James, who, despite the depressing atmosphere, was smiling.

"So," he started, and Albus turned to him, "I heard you got demolished by Gryffindor in the opening match."

The first few days of winter break ended up being among the most solemn that Albus could remember having. Without their father there helping his wife hang decorations, or to sing merry

songs that he remembered from his youth, the large home itself became almost stagnant, and more of an antithesis to the would-be joyous season than anything else. Albus mostly stayed in the company of his brother, but as James was frequently disappearing due to his job ("I have to go in and help out, it's the busiest weeks of the year!") he was sometimes forced to spend company with more extended members of the family.

And these members included just about anyone Albus could think of. It was a true testament to the closeness of the Weasley family that in only three days of being at home, Albus had seen nearly every single one of his aunts and uncles, as well as their respective children. Only Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur hadn't visited, and that was simply because they were spending their holidays with Fleur's parents; though they would be returning in time to visit for Christmas. This actually worked out fairly well, as Teddy Lupin had stopped by with his own girlfriend—a drool-inducing, aspiring model for *Young Witch Weekly*—and there had been some anticipation as to how Victoire, an old flame, would have reacted.

This also meant that Albus was spending much more time around his fellow student cousins than he did at Hogwarts, though, admittedly, it was not the same bunch as usual. Rose mostly kept to herself, and this included taking part in conversations with the adults, and Hugo seemed to cater toward spending time with Fred, who was closest to his age. Lily, on the other hand, was dividing her time between Roxanne and the twins, Molly, and Lucy. Albus was technically around all of them, though he never lingered for long, usually just counting down the days until he could have some peace and quiet with Mirra.

Perhaps it was wrong that he really wanted to spend Christmas away from home this year, of all years, but he simply couldn't fight it. Some hurried letters back and forth with his excited girlfriend had made it arranged so that he would be flooing to her house on Christmas Eve, which meant that he could avoid most of the attention in his own home, which he knew was mostly for his mother's sake anyway. What he actually found most difficult about the prospect of leaving, however, was packing.

It had been one thing when he had stayed over Scorpius' house four years ago, when it had been as simple as bringing some clothes and basic toiletries, with his Broomstick following suit. But as it was unlikely that he and Mirra would be playing Quidditch, and as he didn't want to be a boring house guest, he ended up deciding that he'd be better off bringing some form of entertainment. He was right about to stow a chessboard into his bag when he heard a voice from the doorway.

"Are you seriously packing 'Wizards Chess'?" came an inquisitive drawl from James.

Albus looked up; his brother was leaning up against the doorway, arms crossed and looking aloof.

"Yeah, why not?" Albus asked, a little defensively.

"Oh, no reason," James started lightly, "I just thought that you were going over Mirra's, not Morrison's for a play date. Didn't realize-"

"I am going over Mirra's" Albus said testily, and James smirked.

"And you clearly have no idea how to act at a girlfriend's house, do you?"

"Oh and you do right?" Albus said, throwing socks into his bag. "You just bring your toothbrush and that's it, right?"

"Actually, I have a separate toothbrush at her flat" James said casually.

Albus blushed, feeling rather embarrassed at how novice he was with relationships. He simply continued packing, however, not caring for James' presence until his brother made another comment.

"Is that her Christmas present?" he asked, pointing at the locket, which had been so poorly wrapped that it was showing slightly. "Is that *jewelry*?" he added with a laugh. "Blimey, I knew this was serious but I didn't think you'd be getting down on one knee anytime soon-"

"Shut it!" Albus snapped. "It's not a ring it's- never mind, just get out-"

"No, here let me help you" James said seriously, and he brandished his wand. In a single second, the red wrapping paper had become immaculate, hiding the nature of the gift entirely. "And here, I'll help you pack-"

It was a bit of an odd moment, having his more experienced older brother help him out in such a delicate situation. It would have been rather tenderhearted had James not almost completely dumped out his bag and started over from scratch. What had once been a handful of clothes had turned into a closet condensed in a bag ("You were going to wear the same shirt twice? Are you crazy!") and the hygiene products had been amped up as well, including a bottle of James' own cologne.

"Don't you think this is going a bit too far?" Albus asked as the oddly shaped, tiny bottle of clear liquid was thrust into his hands. "I mean, what am I supposed to say-"

"Say nothing unless she asks" his brother replied intensely, as if this were an unspoken rule.

"There's a huge difference between 'Gee Mirra, don't I smell like an adult today?' and her asking 'What is that nice scent on you?' and you answering 'Oh that's nothing, that's just my cologne'."

When Albus continued to look anxious, James added on to it.

"Nothing ruins a romantic scene more than a bad odor," he told him pointedly, "and those are dad's words, not mine."

Albus nodded his head and packed the cologne, realizing that, given the circumstances, he was very fortunate to have James here. James, he was sure, had had his father help him out with all of this before.

The packing process ended with James telling him to keep Mirra's present in his pocket at all times, in case she accidentally spotted it in his bag. Albus thanked him weakly for his help-even though he'd ultimately decided to bring the chessboard with him anyway ("Just in case!", he'd argued)- but at the same time was now feeling a little bit overwhelmed. It was strange, as he had so much else on his mind-what with his agreement with Waddlesworth and his worry that Darvy could attack Azkaban at any moment-but he was extremely nervous about his visit with Mirra going well. Perhaps it was because his relationship with her was one of the few solid things he could cling to.

James' help had the unfortunate after-effect of turning what should have been pleasant impatience into full blown anxiety, so much so that by the next morning-the morning in which he would be going to his girlfriend's house-he was found pacing by the fireplace idly, several minutes before he was even supposed to go. His home was rather quiet, considering how early in the morning it was (he'd been unable to sleep) and so, a soft voice from not too far away was able to make him jump.

"Going to Mirra's now?" asked Rose, and Albus saw that she had silently curled herself up in a chair, a book in her hand.

"Huh? Oh yeah" he replied quickly, holding up his bag and the chessboard as evidence. An awkward minute followed this exchange, in which Rose peeled through the pages of her book, trying to find where she'd last left off. Albus could only stand there in anticipation for his mother to come down the stairs, as she would be the one seeing him off.

"Tell her I said hello" Rose commented absent-mindedly, not even looking over at him.

"Okay" responded Albus. He searched for something to add on to it, but found that it was futile; he didn't really have much to say to his cousin, especially since the last time that they'd spoken one on one, they'd argued.

When Rose opened her mouth again however-a few odd seconds later-she didn't sound argumentative at all.

"I want to say something to you" she declared, her head now turning toward him.

Albus clenched up slightly. Was this about Scorpius? He didn't want to have to deal with this now, minutes before he was supposed to see Mirra.

"I wanted to thank you" Rose said, and Albus coughed loudly to mask his exclamation of disbelief.

"Wh- thank me for what?" he managed to blurt out, despite his racing mind.

"I don't know what you did," Rose started, "but you did something that got Hugo out of the Protector's Club. I hadn't realized it until afterward but...it had really been getting into his head. I really hadn't known."

Albus blinked stupidly. What was it with people and showing signs of maturity this week? Eckley was one thing...but Rose? Really?

"Erm- no problem-" he started, but the sound of footsteps stopped him before he could continue. His mother was making her way downstairs, looking somewhat tired, with her red hair back in a ponytail and a bathrobe wrapped around her entire body.

"Good morning" she said to both of them.

"Good morning, Aunt Ginny" Rose said pleasantly, loud enough to cover Albus' own greeting.

"I see that you're all ready to go" Albus' mother said, nodding her head towards him.

Albus nodded, then smiled weakly. His mother approached him and gave him a kiss on the cheek-which Albus inexplicably found embarrassing, as it was in front of Rose-and then reached for the Floo Powder.

"Are you sure you've got everything packed?" she asked.

"Yes mum-"

"Socks and underw-"

"Yes mum!" Albus cut her off loudly.

"Okay" she replied, taking a pinch of the emerald powder in her hands and placing the jar back above the crackling fireplace. "And you're sure that you know her address exactly? If you pronounce it wrong-"

"I know" Albus cut her off again, and his mother stared at him. Something resembling worry was etched onto her tired face, but she didn't comment further on the topic.

"Well have a good time" she said calmly. "And try and write at least once, if only to let us know whether you'll be leaving for Hogwarts from there or not, so that we know to bring your things to the platform."

"I will" Albus told her with a smile.

"Okay...well have a good time" his mother reiterated, and Albus permitted her to give him another kiss on the cheek, with a hug as well. "And a happy Christmas" she added.

"You too, mum" Albus said, patting her on the back once before she relinquished her hold. He then turned to the fireplace, just as his mother was throwing in the powder. It turned a spectacular shade of emerald in an instant.

"Bye Al" Rose said, giving a weak wave, and he returned it back.

"Bye" he said simply, fastening his bag tightly around his shoulders. He turned to the fireplace, allowing excitement to overtake him.

"1502 Shinewell street" he cried, stepping into the emerald fire. In a single, swooping instant he had been propelled forward, his eyes jammed tightly shut as his body revolved. He clung to the straps of his bag as he tucked his elbows in, careful not to inhale the soot-

He arrived at his destination a second later, a pleasant, yet incomprehensible smell wafting into his nostrils first and foremost. He slowly opened his eyes next, and at once found himself face to face with Mirra.

"Hi!" she said loudly, beaming at him, and at the next moment, she'd captured him in a large hug.

"Hey" he replied back, taking in his surroundings.

Mirra's house had one of the most quaint feelings imaginable to it, and the fact that he could say this after only being there for ten seconds was a strong indication of such. It looked remarkably old fashioned, as though it had been built entirely from wood, but it was big enough to discount the idea that it was a cabin. Having stepped out of the fireplace, he could see rocking chairs set up throughout the sitting room, which had a circular, brown carpet in the middle. A low table sat on top of it, as did a few books, giving Albus the impression that he was in more of a study than anything else.

"Here, I'll take your things" Mirra said, distracting him. At the next moment, she'd given him an inquisitive look.

"You brought chess?" she asked.

"Huh?" Albus said, realizing that she'd removed it from his hands. His cheeks turned bright red.

"Erm-James said it would be a good idea to bring it" he lied.

"Well that was a good idea" she responded, turning and placing the board over on the small table.

Albus noticed at this point that Mirra was dressed in casual clothing, something which he had rarely seen in all of the years that he'd known her. There was nothing special about it however; she was simply wearing a t-shirt, with regular jeans on as well. Her dark hair was put back in a silky ponytail, as though she'd quickly found something to do with it. She looked extremely comfortable, and thus, Albus tried to carry himself in like manner.

"So you uh- you going to show me around-"

"Here, I'll give you a tour of the Tunnels house!" Mirra said, disregarding his fragment of a sentence entirely. She took him by the hand and led him through the room, Albus catching a glimpse outside the window as he did so. It was completely snowy, but there were no other houses in sight really, leading him to believe that it was a single residence, unlike houses like his Uncle Dudley's. She took him straight into the relatively small dining room, where he was caught off guard by the decor...or lack thereof.

The color brown was very prevalent, but he wasn't quite sure why. Every table, including the main table for eating, was covered with odd trinkets and moving photographs, and nothing else. Instead of aesthetics, the room was used for holding books. Lots of them. Stacked up on the floor, on a random table, on the alcove, it didn't matter; literature was everywhere, making Albus realize just why Mirra was so comfortable in the library.

This shocked him for a moment, before he remembered that this was not where Mirra had always lived. After the incarceration of her parents, she had been taken in by her grandparents, and this was thus *their* house, and all of their belongings.

Elderly people, it seemed, loved to read.

"And you've met them before," Mirra said, still leading him by the hand, "but these are my grandparents!"

She had led him into the kitchen, and Albus, having not expected to see anyone else so early, tripped over his own feet briefly, recovering just in time to pretend as though he hadn't. Mirra's grandparents were indeed sitting at the kitchen table, both of them holding, predictably, a book in each of their hands. Mirra had introduced them before, and Albus' immediate impression of them was the same as before; both gentle, but with her grandmother being more assertive, her grandfather more absent-minded than anything else. They were both stout and looked their proper age, with the thin grandfather balding somewhat, and wearing thick black spectacles, her rather plump grandmother with hair identical to her granddaughter's in color, but shorter and curly.

"Hello" Grandmother Tunnels said, her voice pleasant, but forceful.

"H- hello" Albus said, and his plan to be comfortable failed right here, at this very moment. It was replaced by apprehension.

Grandfather Tunnels waited until he finished his page to speak.

"Hello" he also said, pleasantly. Before Albus could respond, however, he caught notice of what he was using a bookmark; it was a white card handed out by the Ministry, to be used to elect a

candidate. And on this card, a name other than Waddlesworth's had already been highlighted gold.

Albus grinned before responding; his comfort had returned on the spot.

Chapter 17: The United Ministry

The next few days were among the most relaxing that Albus could have imagined having, considering his current state of mind. Christmas Eve had involved a delightful supper at his girlfriend's house, complete with a nightcap, as well as a lengthy talk with Mirra's grandfather about-surprisingly-Quidditch.

"I still remember when Darius Derwent-related to the very famous Dilys, who I'm sure you've heard of-leapt from his broom and caught the Snitch, falling through the air as he did so! It was magnificent! One of the greatest catches I'd ever seen!"

"Isn't that a penalty, though?" Albus had asked. "Purposefully leaving your broom?"

Grandfather Tunnels scoffed. "Back then Quidditch was a *real* sport, half of today's fouls didn't even exist-"

"Oh grandpa don't start-" Mirra had tried cutting him off.

Albus, as he'd expected, hadn't been allowed to sleep in the same room as his girlfriend, but had been given a very comfortable spare bedroom in which to reside, which he didn't mind in the slightest. Mirra's grandparents were very private people usually, and thus, Albus was almost always in the company of only his girlfriend. Strangely, this alone time manifested itself more into educational moments than anything else.

In his very first time in Mirra's bedroom, which was on Christmas Day, he had spent a full five minutes snooping around under her watchful eye. Her bedroom was a very bright shade of scarlet, with a sizeable bed and, of course, a few bookshelves. It had the usual makings of a girl's bedroom, including a table filled with beauty accessories and a mirror positioned up high; Albus knew this from having been in both Lily and Rose's rooms frequently. A desk positioned next to her bed had multiple drawers, of which Albus had, with permission, looked into eagerly.

"A diary?" he asked, removing the small, thick book.

"I haven't written in it in years" Mirra replied, sitting on her bed and giving a shrug. "But still, hand it over-"

"What are these?" Albus asked, passing the book along and instead focusing on scraps of parchment, all of which had colorful pictures drawn on them. "Did you draw these?" he asked, surprised, and cycling through them.

Mirra gave the tiniest of blushes. "They're just doodles" she said, but Albus had to disagree there. Though many of them didn't appear to be more than basic, if not still well-drawn items, ranging from trees to magical creatures, many of which they'd studied at school, others were far more intricate. An extremely noticeable one was a picture of a roaring lion, with a long, sleek serpent

coiled at its feet, as though preparing to protect it. It had been colored by magic, as evidenced by the fact that it was flashing.

"These are not 'doodles'" Albus commented, smiling at what he was sure was symbolism for the two of them. "Why didn't you tell me you liked to draw?"

"Because it's not that big of a deal" she said simply. "Lots of people draw pictures during class. You never have?"

Albus thought about it. "Me, Scorpius, and Morrison would play hangman in History of Magic every day for about- erm- three years" he said, trying to calculate it in his head. "That's kind of like drawing..."

He continued to pick up the scraps of paper, until, finally, his fingers skimmed across the smooth surface that was the bottom of the drawer. It seemed unnaturally smooth however-almost like velvet, in fact-and when Albus continued to pry, he saw that it was the back of a picture frame. He removed the picture and turned it around, realizing at once, from the dust and dirt on the glass, that it was extremely old. He wiped away at it with his wrist until the picture became clear-

It was Mirra's parents.

"Oh, don't worry about that" Mirra told him, extending her hand for it, as if she was ready to place it face down at the bottom of some other drawer.

Albus didn't hand it over though, he was too transfixed by it. It was not just any old photograph; it was from their wedding. Mirra's mother was instantly recognizable from behind her veil; long, dark hair that flowed over her shoulders, grey eyes that her daughter had inherited exactly. Her face was not all the way the same though. Her features were sharper, including a slightly longer nose and hollowed out cheeks. She was a very old fashioned kind of attractive, in Albus' opinion, but it was difficult to tell, considering her demeanor. Unlike in most magical pictures, there was no waving or smiling. Movement, perhaps, but only from her fidgeting and surly expressions. He was forcibly reminded of Blackwood, who also would be very beautiful, if only she had genuinely smiled more.

Mirra's father was not as attractive. He too had dark hair, but it was thinner, almost wispy looking in fact, and it sat on his head in a most peculiar fashion. His best physical trait had, however, been passed along to his daughter; it was his thin mouth, which, for some reason, just seemed more appropriate than having full lips. Albus noticed that he was shorter than his wife-or maybe it was simply because he was standing behind her-but he was also bulkier, with squared shoulders and a rather thick neck. He was more vibrant than his spouse as well. He wasn't waving, but he was at least wearing a tired, crooked smile, which was something.

"They uh- were they a pleasant bunch?" he asked stupidly, merely trying to break the silence.

Mirra took the picture from him, then quickly stashed it away underneath her bed. "Not really" she said dismissively, sounding very much as if she didn't want to comment further.

Albus dug his hands into his pockets; he supposed that he should respect her privacy, but at the same time, he'd recently learned that sometimes it was better to let things out. Who better for Mirra to do this to, than to her boyfriend?

"Erm," he started, bobbing up and down on the spot, "just out of curiosity-"

"My mom's entire family was- I don't know- part of a cult or something" she said quickly, before he could even ask. "All about Merlin, and all of that. Some truth to it, obviously" she added, somewhat ironically. "My dad knew about it when he married her, but he didn't think much of it. Guess he didn't realize how big it was. He eventually got sucked in though."

"Your grandparents," Albus started, "who you live with-"

"They're my dad's folks" she told him, smiling slightly as she did so. "And as you can expect they had nothing to do with it. My dad did separate himself from them, after a while though, of course. I actually had never met them before a few years ago, when my parents got- well- you know-"

Albus nodded solemnly. He remembered the events of his first year extremely well, and he most certainly hadn't forgotten the ultimate revelation that it had been Mirra's parents who had influenced her actions; they had been sentenced to Azkaban for a year afterward, though of course, this meant that they were out now.

"They were happy to take me in of course!" Mirra blurted out. "And I'm so glad really, they're both so nice..."

"Have you seen them since?" Albus asked her, now sitting down on her bed. "Your parents, I mean?"

She gave him a thoughtful look. "No" she said after a moment. "I haven't really wanted to..."

Albus considered this. He couldn't see his own father, no matter how bad he wanted to. Mirra could see her parents if she chose, but was unwilling, most likely because of the bad memories there. Were her parents really that bad? Had she longed to see them, when they were in Azkaban? Probably not...

He felt a rush of sympathy towards her, realizing how truly harrowing it must have been to have grown up in such an environment, and in a way so bad that she didn't even want to have any communication with her parents. He decided not to voice this however, understanding that Mirra would not want pity, or anything of the sort. Realizing that he'd taken the conversation too far, he tried veering off into another direction. Thankfully, he had the perfect way to do it.

"Presents!" he announced, and she looked up in surprise as he stood up again, hands now rifling through his pockets for the gift that he'd been told to always keep on him. "It's Christmas-"

"No!" Mirra shot out, holding out her hands to signal a halt.

Albus froze on the spot, confused, her gift still in his pocket. "What-"

"Not yet!" she breathed uneasily. "Your present isn't ready yet!"

She did something very odd at this point; she glanced at the window, as if the last requirement for his gift was going to fly through it any moment.

"Erm- well that's okay-"

"No!" she snapped, glowering. "Just wait a day or two, please?"

"Okay" he said, defeated, and slightly disappointed as well. There was an awkward moment following this exchange however, punctuated by his girlfriend's question.

"Want to play chess?"

Albus spent the next two days mostly trying to assimilate himself into the same lifestyle of Mirra and her grandparents. The first and most difficult thing for him to get used to, he was learning, was the food selection.

As it turned out, Mirra's good looks were not a result of mere genetics, or happenstance. She was *very* healthy, as were her grandparents, who undoubtedly were the ones who had introduced her to her diet.

"For- for breakfast?" Albus asked, staring down at his plate one morning. It consisted of an array of vegetables, as well as some cheeses that seemed thrown in to actually contribute flavor. He held up a carrot and examined it carefully, at which point Mirra's grandfather asked him a question.

"What do you normally eat for breakfast?" he asked, sounding interested.

Albus thought about it. He could remember maybe his last six or so morning meals at his house, and he was positive that at least half of them had involved bacon.

Sweet, delicious, fattening bacon. Not carrots.

"Same stuff mostly" he lied, taking a bite and cringing at the mush in his mouth. From across the table, Mirra was already done her plate.

Even though Mirra's grandparents rarely intruded on their privacy indoors, Albus didn't spend much time in the house, with large gaps of the day being spent outside instead. The watery sleet from days ago had vanished, replaced by a thick coat of fluffy snow, perfect for activities guaranteed to freeze their hands and cheeks.

In between building snowmen and taking long walks around the vast, expansive land that encircled Mirra's home, Albus was learning more about her than he'd ever thought imaginable. He felt somewhat guilty at this-she was his girlfriend, after all-but admittedly, they didn't usually have the luxury of speaking for hours on end, as they did now. They stayed away from topics that involved her parents, with most of the discussions pertaining to recent years; her summers in between Hogwarts in particular.

"I used to write back and forth with Rose every day" she told him. "Up until last summer, that is. You know we met the first day of school? She sat about two seats away from me at the opening feast."

"What was your impression of her?" Albus asked as they strolled around her home, gloved hands jammed in the pockets of their jackets.

"She seemed really nice" Mirra told him. "Honestly" she added, as though she'd expected him to disagree.

"I'm sure she was" Albus said with a mild chortle. "I always remember her being really nice too. I guess in a way she still is, somewhat. Just a bit- erm- "

"You can say it" Mirra told him, giving him a wry smile.

"Irritating" he finished, pleased that he'd found a nicer word to substitute for what he'd *really* been thinking.

"Well what about your best friends?" Mirra asked him casually. "I can't even remember when you weren't hanging around Morrison."

"I met him on the train" Albus said, grinning. He recalled it vividly-everything from Morrison's scraggly appearance to his bewilderment at whether or not 'Morrison' was his first or last name. "We've been friends ever since" he added.

"What about Scorpius?" she asked. "I think I started seeing him around...what, the end of your first year?"

"Closer to the middle" Albus acknowledged. "But I did first meet him at the feast. He seemed really- erm- a bit like a loner" he finished weakly. "I guess that changed a bit over time though..."

They continued their walk in silence, Albus realizing that he wanted to confide something to her.

"I was terrified of being sorted into Slytherin" he told her, laughing a bit. "Weird, huh?"

"Where did you want to go?" she asked him.

"Well Gryffindor was the idea" he admitted. "I mean...basically my entire family has been in there. But I just remember putting on the Sorting Hat and having it go over every house with me. I kind of realized that I liked the idea of going to Slytherin, where no one expected me to go."

"You wouldn't have done well in Gryffindor" Mirra told him, apparently to reassure him. He gave her a curious look however.

"And why's that?"

"You're not- well- you're not noble enough" she said blandly, giving him a weak smile.

"Thank you" Albus replied sarcastically. "That's really- er- nice-"

"I don't mean it like that!" she said, slapping him on the shoulder and getting snow flakes into his hair. "I just mean that- well- I think of like Donny and Charlie, and how they were. They were *so* adamant about being the 'good guys'. Loved it, actually. You...I don't know. You never really seemed like you cared whether you were portrayed in good light or not. I guess I've always kind of saw you as a bit- what's the word- *ambiguous*."

Albus considered it for a moment before responding.

"It's not that I don't care" he said. "It's just that, well, I don't really know which light I'm seen in."

Don't lie to yourself!

He stopped himself in mid-step, his eyes widening. There it was again, that chilly voice that sometimes crept into the back of his mind. It had been dormant for quite some time now-at least the entire duration of his winter holiday so far-but it had been as clear as day here, every bit as unnerving as it usually was.

For the first time ever, though, it sounded more than cold and strong. It sounded almost threatening. Like it was angry with him or something. There was definitely something abnormal about it...this voice, he was now completely sure, did not happen to everyone else.

"Are you okay?" Mirra asked him, looking generally bemused by his sudden halt and the expression on his face.

"Huh? Yeah, yeah I'm fine" he said casually, not wanting to inform her of the breakthrough that he'd just had.

She eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then seemed to get over it. Before the conversation could continue however, she'd begun to do something most strange; she was sniffing at the air.

"What are-" Albus started bizarrely, but he stopped himself. It dawned on him right as she started to speak.

"What's that smell?" she said, sounding pleasantly surprised as she looked at him.

"That- that's just- that's nothing" he stammered out, astounded. "Just my cologne" he added, smiling at something that had very little to do with his own scent.

"Well it's really nice" she told him, but before he could engage her further, she'd already looked up into the air, distracted by something. An owl was flying toward her home.

Mirra made an indiscernible noise and then led him by the hand through the snow, culminating in her bringing him through the door to her warm, cozy home.

"Wait here!" she hissed at him, storming up the stairs and leaving him in the downstairs area, where her grandparents were sitting near the fireplace in identical rocking chairs, each of their faces turned upwards from their books as they looked at him.

"She uh- she- she got an owl" he told them awkwardly, pointing up at the stairs.

Albus watched as they exchanged a look, simultaneously shrugged, and returned to their literature.

As it turned out, Albus was left waiting for quite some time. So long, in fact, that Mirra didn't even end up revealing to him the purpose of her abandonment of him, which had led to an extremely uncomfortable few hours of small talk with her grandparents. It was not until the next night, after a dinner consisting of a very vegetable heavy soup, that she brought him up to her room and sat him down on her bed.

"Okay, we can do presents now" she said, smiling.

Albus grinned as well, excited at the prospect of finally being able to give her what he'd bought in Hogsmeade. She sat down next to him, as if expecting him to go first, to which he obliged.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the perfectly wrapped present. He handed it over with a cheerful smile, realizing that he was going to burn this moment into his head; his first Christmas present to his girlfriend. He wondered, for a moment, whether or not Morrison and Scorpius had been successful with handing over their own gifts to their respective girlfriends, but was brought back to the moment by Mirra's exclamation of surprise as she tore into her gift.

"Oh Al!" she said breathlessly, holding the silver locket and letting it coil around her fingers. She appeared to be stymied, and upon seeing her reaction, Albus was sure that he couldn't have hoped for a better one. Eager to add to the effect, he revealed that there was more to it.

"Go on, open it" he told her.

She opened the silver locket excitedly, her face wild with anticipation as she did so. When she'd peered at what was inside, she didn't make any exclamations. She simply smiled; a wide, toothy smile.

It was a picture of the two of them. Albus was dressed in a green, muggle suit, Mirra in a fancy, sleek grey dress that matched her eyes perfectly. It was not an expertly posed picture, but rather one of them pressed close together, the angle of the photograph showing both of their relaxed, smiling faces as they danced at Lisa Vincent's wedding.

"There were only muggle photographers at the wedding" Albus told her. "But we don't really have any other pictures together...so I asked Morrison awhile ago if he could have some sent that had the two of us in it. I went through about twenty before I decided on this one."

Mirra gave him a watery smile, and he was pleased to see that the best part of the present for her was not the locket itself-which, for all that she knew, had been an exorbitant purchase-but rather, the picture itself, shrunk magically and placed inside as one of the few evidences of their relationship.

And then, suddenly, she broke into a laugh.

"What's funny?" he asked, surprised by this transition.

She wiped away at her face, giving another laugh as she did so. "I just can't believe..." she trailed off, and Albus gave her a confused look. Was something wrong?

"Can't believe what?" he asked, starting to feel somewhat worried.

Mirra reached behind her and withdrew a package seemingly from thin air. His gift was very rectangular, and a bit thin as well. It was wrapped in all white paper, and when Albus took it from her hands-still somewhat alarmed at the way that she was acting-he noticed that it didn't weigh very much either.

Having expected a book, he slowly began opening the present with intrigue, curious as to whether its contents corresponded with whatever it was his girlfriend was laughing at. After a second of fiddling around, he found himself holding an average sized picture frame.

The picture inside was also from the wedding that they'd attended the previous year, but Mirra wasn't even in it. Instead, it was a picture of Albus and his father.

He recognized the moment at once. He had sat down at a table and spoken to his father, with just the two of them there, and had discussed a variety of things, including the-ironically enough-mystery of who the Silver Wizard was. This particular shot had been snapped at a very lighthearted moment however, with Albus in the middle of speaking and his father smiling. It

was not the most photogenic of pictures, but it felt extremely natural, especially since, like the photograph he'd just given her, nothing was moving.

"I asked Morrison for a picture of you and your dad weeks ago" Mirra told him, still smiling.

"Well he kept that secret pretty well" Albus said, chuckling. "He never mentioned anything-"

"That's because he forgot" Mirra cut him off dryly. "That's why your present was late; I ended up having to write to him over break, and just got the picture yesterday."

Albus smiled and continued to examine his gift. The frame around the picture was most unique; it involved a hand-drawn pattern all the way around, a pattern comprised of, Albus saw, a lion with a snake coiled at its feet. The drawing that he'd seen had been very recent indeed; it'd been the design for his Christmas present for weeks.

And, Albus noticed, the lion and the serpent were not, as he'd initially conceived, he and Mirra. It was he and his father. The image traced itself all the way around the frame, the same each time, with the colors of the frame itself alternating between scarlet and emerald, colors that represented both the Hogwarts houses and the holiday itself...

He examined every inch of it as Mirra continued to elaborate on his gift.

"I know you probably have a lot of pictures of you and your dad" she admitted. "But I figured that you'd want a recent one. And I thought that it being a muggle picture was a nice touch, I don't know if you guys have many of those-"

"I love it" Albus told her, and he truly meant it. He could not explain in so many words why the present was so powerful to him, but it most certainly was. Perhaps it was because the thought that had went behind it extended passed the idea of a mere photograph. Albus could no longer see his father, and as far as Mirra knew, that would remain a fact for an indefinite amount of time. And so, she'd given him a picture to help him through it all, something to remember from not too long ago even, to maybe even remind him that everything was going to be okay with his father...

"There's something I have to tell you" he started briskly, placing the frame down delicately on the bed. Mirra tilted her head to the side.

"Wha-"

"I went to see Warren Waddlesworth in Hogsmeade" he blurted out.

Mirra's jaw dropped. "You- you wh- Waddles- *Albus*-"

"I had to" he told her firmly. "I had to, Waddlesworth is the only one that can get my dad out of Azkaban-"

"Get your dad out of Azkaban?" Mirra asked with a whimper. "What are you talking about?"

"Listen to me," he started, intent on explaining the expediency of his actions as quickly as possible, "something terrible is going to happen to Azkaban, and soon. Darvy is going to attack it, and that means that my dad is in danger. Waddlesworth can get him out of there before any of that stuff happens! I had to see him, to ask him-"

"Did- did- did it work?" Mirra stammered out, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief seeing that she didn't appear angry, but rather, somewhat hopeful.

"No, not exactly" he said, and she slowly closed her eyes and hung her head. "Not yet" he added, and she raised her head back up.

"What do you mean...?"

Albus hesitated for a small moment, then revealed the truth.

"Waddlesworth *can* do it. He just wants something in exchange, something that only I can give him."

"Wha-"

"Fairhart" Albus told her, before she could even ask.

Mirra gasped, then stood up, her expression accusatory.

"You said- you- you said you weren't leaving anywhere-" she stuttered, pointing a shaky finger at him.

"And I'm not!" he said, standing up as well. "I'm not, I'm just still- I'm still working on- on- on a plan- and I-"

"What plan could that *possibly* be?" she stressed. "And why you anyway? Why is it only you who can make this- this- this *ridiculous* exchange, and why- why does it even matter-"

Albus leaned in and kissed her, silencing her at once. He was not quite sure why he did it; it wasn't merely to shut her up, anyway, as he could have done that merely by speaking. Perhaps it had just seemed appropriate, that he kiss her in the middle of an argument, a powerful indication that he understood why she was upset, and that he appreciated it, and knew that few other people would be as worried-or irate-as she was-

But he didn't end the kiss, instead allowing it to develop on its own, transforming before his own, closed eyes, into a passionate frenzy of movement. His hands grabbed at the sides of her face, and only when he let go to breathe did he catch the expression on her face, which, for a single, outrageous moment, looked angry-

She threw her arms around him and pressed her warm lips up against his own again, and Albus, taken aback and caught up in the moment, fell onto the bed along with her, his hands rifling through her hair as her arms scratched at his back through his t-shirt. The cold voice in the back of his head was screaming something unintelligible, but Albus disregarded it immediately, instead allowing an even more primal instinct to take over as he ran his hands down the small of her back, eventually removing his mouth from her tender lips and automatically starting to kiss her neck-

There was a loud knock at the door of the bedroom, and Albus leapt so high from his position that his head collided with the ceiling, leaving small bursts of light to enter his field of vision. Without waiting for a response, the door opened, revealing Mirra's grandfather.

Albus tried to hide his rapid breathing, all the while hoping that the throbbing in his skull would leave soon as well. He quickly cast a sideways glance at Mirra, who was looking very disheveled, and somewhat frightened as well. Albus knew that she was thinking the same thing that he was. Just how loud had they been?

But Mirra's grandfather didn't appear to be knowledgeable of anything in particular, and was instead wearing a blank expression, his eyes unmoving behind his thick spectacles. After a moment, he gave them only a few words.

"Thought you two might want to hear this" he said, jerking his head out of the room.

Albus and Mirra stood up at once, both of them looking flustered. Mirra's grandfather turned away without comment however, leading them out of the bedroom and down the stairs, where his wife was sitting, a book closed over on her lap, a stony expression on her face. Next to her, on the small table in the sitting room, sat a small, blaring radio.

They had evidently been listening to the WWN (Wizards Wireless Network). It took Albus only a second to realize why. For all of the talk today about Waddlesworth, and Azkaban, and everything else, he'd forgotten the importance of this particular day. The Minister of Magic was being elected.

Applause blasted through the speakers of the radio, making Albus aware that they'd missed something rather important. It was Mirra who asked her grandparents the question that was on his mind.

"Is- is it over?" she asked them, standing with her shoulder pressed into Albus'. "The election?"

Her grandfather resumed sitting, and then, slowly, they both nodded.

Albus felt as though ice was melting in his hair. Chills went through his entire body as he keyed his attention solely on the small radio, where the applause was now joined by words. Someone with a deep, outgoing voice was speaking in an excited tone.

"And the new Minister of Magic is preparing to address the audience here!" said the voice.
"What will Warren Waddlesworth have to say about this historic moment?"

Albus felt Mirra's hand tighten around his own. The applause thinned out after another full minute or two, and Albus, though he had no idea what the scene of this speech was, could picture the entire thing in his head. A huge auditorium. A podium. Hundreds of mindless individuals waiting anxiously to hear their new minister speak. Waddlesworth, dressed in some obnoxious red suit, or purple, or yellow-

"Today, we embrace change" came the magnified version of the oily voice that Albus knew all too well. More concomitant clapping and shouting, and then, the people all fell silent. Waddlesworth must have done something to signal for quiet.

"There are many who do not understand change. Many who frown upon it, many who fear it. I understand this, and I acknowledge it. But I also, more than anything else, know that change must sometimes be welcomed. We are entering a new era, here. The Wizarding World that we are all a part of-we and our children, and their children as well-is a world that has been through much, and has survived through much. But survival is not enough. Survival is for those who wish to be *part* of the future. We must strive for more than that; we must strive to *shape* the future. Why merely survive, when we can flourish!"

More applause, and Albus shook his head in time with it. Waddlesworth cleared his throat and continued just as the clapping started to die down again.

"I stand here before you all today-before the entirety of the Wizarding World-humbled. I am not the brightest Minister of Magic that we have known, nor am I the most powerful. What I have instead, is the most determined people! Never before in history has the public been met with a task, and responded to it in the same ferocity in which they have today! For the first time ever, the Ministry is not in control of the people, and the people are not in control of the Ministry, for the first time ever, we have *joined together*. We have accepted that unity is the most powerful weapon imaginable, and are now starting to harness it! I am your leader, but you are *not* my followers!" he started powerfully, and yet again, applause blared from the radio, now blended in with Waddlesworth's next words. "You are my allies. My friends. *My fellow citizens!*" he finished dramatically, amidst the cheering and whistling.

"And I know, my friends, I know" he continued, and whether he was trying to quiet them or not, Albus didn't know; either way, it wasn't happening. "I know the circumstances of my rule here, I know that in a different time, in a different scenario, I am not standing here humbly before you. I know that you have elected me for a reason; you have elected me because we live in a dark and dangerous time, a time so familiar that it cannot be neglected, and you have elected me to provide you with both inspiration and action! I started my organization, Wands and Redemption, some twenty or so years ago, intent on protecting the people! And now today I look at all of you proudly, able to declare that now, you can protect yourselves!"

The frenzy in the audience was just starting to get of hand when Albus heard Waddlesworth spread the icing on the cake.

"That's right! You! And you, you there- and you- and you-"

Albus knew that he was pointing into random sections of the crowd as he spoke. Mirra was shaking next to him, her hand sweaty. Her grandparents were merely following along the broadcast, unmoving. Waddlesworth started the next phase of his speech in the same tone.

"And that is why, my friends and allies, I am here speaking to you to today. Why I am standing here, preparing to make my first announcement as your new Minister of Magic. Today I make the first change, in a series of many designed to improve our world. As your new Minister of Magic, I cannot allow the people and the government to be separated, not now, not when so much is dependent on our fellowship."

Albus felt his breathing quicken. This was it. It was going to happen just as his father said that it would...

"And so, I hereby declare that Wands and Redemption, of which so many of you are loyal, is not to be terminated by my place in office, but rather, to be absorbed. From today forth, the people and the Ministry are no longer separated. Wands and Redemption, and the Ministry, are no longer separated. I declare a merger of ideas and resources, a merger of thoughts and actions, I hereby declare that the Ministry of Magic that has failed you before is *gone*. Instead, I bring to you...the United Ministry!"

This was simply too much for the people listening. The raucous applause seemed to somehow be interfering with the broadcast itself, as it had started to weave in and out of cohesiveness, brief moments of static taking over. When the normal sound resumed, Albus could hear the crowd chanting Waddlesworth's name, as he finished his speech.

"Every day," he started, "Death's Right Hand tries to inspire just a little more fear in our hearts. The nuisance that is the Dark Alliance has lingered for far too long, and whereas your old Ministry of Magic would wait until the situation escalated further, your current, United Ministry, is intent on ending this threat once and for all! Sebastian Darvy-whose name I speak to you easily, as he is but a man-hopes to intimidate us, plans to declare war on us! But today I tell you that this is impossible. This is impossible, not because he is not so bold, but rather, because he has missed his chance. The Dark Alliance can not declare war on us, because as of this moment, we, the United Ministry, declare war on *them*!"

The ear-splitting shrieks of approval by the crowd did little to mask Waddlesworth's final, somewhat quieter statement.

"Let us test their terror...against our unity..."

The broadcast ended abruptly, the sounds of clapping and cheering evaporating on the spot. Albus could only stand there, head pointed at the floor, Mirra's fingers laced with his own as if afraid that, if they were separated, they might never meet again.

Chapter 18: Assault

Though it felt awful to admit it to himself, Albus' remaining few days with Mirra dragged on interminably, his mind plagued by the result of the election. It was not that he hadn't expected the results. It was not even that he was displeased with them; Waddlesworth needed to have as much power as he could in order for their arrangement to work. Instead, it was the examination of the entire scene that troubled him, the glance at it from a distance that alerted him to everything that would soon change.

The Ministry of Magic-or the 'United Ministry', as they were now called-had declared war on the Dark Alliance. While many may have cheered with enthusiasm at the idea, all that Albus saw was two separate and equally daunting acts. First, it seemed as though all of his father's predictions were coming true; Waddlesworth winning the election, then joining WAR and the Ministry together, then assembling his forces to attack Darvy. What would soon occur, then, was the battle itself. The battle between the United Ministry and the Dark Alliance.

But what his father had been unable to predict at the time, of course, was that the most likely location for that onslaught was the very prison that he was confined in. Two armies waging war on an island in the middle of the North Sea...what would happen to the prisoners?

And this meant that the second act that would soon have to occur, would be for Albus to get his father out of Azkaban. His plan to hand Fairhart over to WAR now had to be accelerated; he could no longer afford to waste time contemplating, and needed to perform. This most recent announcement from the new Minister of Magic had also alerted Albus to one indisputable fact: Waddlesworth was not going to wait around. The deal that they'd struck had never had a designated period of time in which it needed to be completed, and that meant that Waddlesworth was at perfect liberty to attack Azkaban whenever he wanted, the end result possibly including the death of his father. He wouldn't even have broken any promises, so long as Albus came short of his end of the bargain.

These thoughts sagged through his brain as Mirra's grandparents drove them both to King's Cross station, the old, rusted blue car puffing out smoke every few minutes and disturbing what would have otherwise been complete silence.

Mirra was sitting next to him, her head on his shoulder. He could just barely see the chain of her new locket dangling from her neck, which gave him the smallest of smiles as he leaned back in his own seat.

She had made no mention of what happened the night that they'd exchanged their presents, and Albus knew that this had less to do with their steamy, impromptu moment, and more to do with what they'd both listened to on the radio. Albus was well aware that she hadn't forgotten what he'd told her; all about Fairhart, and having seen Waddlesworth. But her silence on the matter seemed a result of disbelief more than leniency. Perhaps, he figured, Mirra didn't consider his

words realistic anymore, as he now seemed to be officially engaged in a private conspiracy with the new Minister of Magic. Or maybe, she reasoned the unlikelihood of anything happening now anyway, what with the creation of the United Ministry certainly putting a hold on any of Waddlesworth's other endeavors. Either way, Albus was pleased that she wasn't addressing the topic, but he also felt a little unsure as to what would happen when he inevitably did embark on his mission to apprehend Sancticus Fairhart.

"Nearly there" Mirra's grandfather said to them both, slowing down as pedestrians crossed in front of the car. "All of your bags will be waiting, right Albus?"

"Yes" Albus said. His mother would certainly be bringing his luggage along with Lily, and Albus was hoping very much to have a few minutes with her before boarding the train. He was very curious as to what she-and the rest of his family for that matter-thought about these new developments in the Wizarding World.

He glanced in the rearview mirror of the passenger's seat up front and saw that though his girlfriend had her head on his shoulder, her eyes were wide open, gazing aimlessly into nothingness. What was she thinking about?

"We're here" Mirra's grandmother said after a few more moments, and the car came to a complete stop. Mirra's head shot off of his shoulder at once as they both exited the car. A cloud of black smoke filled their lungs as they went to the back of the car, where Albus did the honor of lifting Mirra's bags.

"Thanks" she said lowly as he placed all of her luggage down on the floor.

"Got plenty of time" Mirra's grandfather said, staring up at the giant hanging clock and bobbing up and down on his stout feet.

They did indeed have half of an hour to spare, but Albus had the strange suspicion that his family would already be here. Lily was the easiest to move along in the mornings, and as she was the only Potter child that their mother needed to get out of the house, they'd probably made spectacular time.

Albus walked alongside his girlfriend as they headed toward the solid barrier in between platforms nine and ten. Mirra jerked her head towards it to indicate that he should go first, which he did, an ominous feeling settling itself in the pit of his stomach. Strangely, he felt chills as he passed through the barrier. Perhaps it was because of Mirra's attitude toward him.

The sight of the giant scarlet engine always brought a smile to his face, and this time was no different. Steam billowed from its top as familiar faces ran amok in front of him, including a few who even gave him small waves. Mirra joined him at his shoulder a second later, an indescribable look on her face.

"I'm going to go look around for Charlie" she said. "I'll catch up with you on the train, okay?"

Albus raised his eyebrows at her. "You aren't going to say goodbye to your grandparents with me?" he asked.

"Well if you're there" she said, looking back over her shoulder as she began walking.

Albus didn't respond, instead trying to shrug off his goose bumps. Whatever was going through Mirra's head, they'd have to work it out later. He had people to go and find.

As he knew that his family would all be clustered together in the same location, he instead searched for more individual faces, including those that belonged to Morrison and Scorpius. As he pushed his way through the crowd of people, however, he noticed that it had become extremely difficult to distinguish anyone. WAR T-shirts, which had been popular for quite some time already, now appeared to be sort of a dress code, as more than half of the people that he encountered were wearing them. On the plus side, once he managed to nudge his way through these groups of similar looking people, it became easier to spot those who weren't as public about their support.

Scorpius was standing next to his mother and his father, who was waving at students innocently as they passed by, a bored look on his face. Scorpius' mother was speaking to her son rapidly, and he appeared to simply be nodding his head in recognition. Albus waited until she looked finished before approaching.

"Hey" he said slowly, walking up to them all. Scorpius turned at once and grinned, and Albus decided to extend his greetings.

"Hello Mrs. Malfoy, Professor" he said, nodding to each of them in turn.

Mrs. Malfoy, who looked identical to how she always did-as dissimilar as possible from her son and husband, with her long, curly brown hair and chocolate eyes-gave him a large smile back and a hearty wave. His potions professor went a different route.

"Term has not yet resumed Albus" he said coyly. "You can address me as 'Mr. Malfoy'."

"Erm- okay-" Albus started, but Mr. Malfoy cut him off.

"Have you put any consideration into my offer before the winter holidays?" he asked, and Albus felt his stomach drop.

The truth was, he hadn't. He'd been much too preoccupied with everything else going on, and as he'd kind of considered it a pity offer anyway, he'd never even reasoned with himself on the matter. He decided to keep things vague until he could arrive to a legitimate conclusion.

"I'm- I'm still thinking about it, actually."

"I see" Scorpius' father responded, his expression most ambiguous.

"We're going to go look for Morrison" Scorpius interjected. "Dad I'll see you on the train...mum I'll stop by before I go."

His mother waved to them both as they took off in the opposite direction, their pace quickening as they began speaking.

"So how was your break?" Albus asked his friend. "What happened with Ana-"

"I'll explain on the train" Scorpius said, glancing in various directions and looking for their tallest friend. "How was Christmas with Mirra?"

"I'll explain on the train" Albus responded dryly.

"Fair enough" Scorpius said. "I take it you heard about the election?" he asked, and this seemed to be the thing that he was most interested in discussing.

"Yeah, but let's wait for Morrison" Albus told him, he too keeping a lookout.

They didn't have to wait long before finding him, as only a few minutes later he was seen separating himself from a liplock with Melonie, who Albus noticed was wearing her Christmas present. She then left him alone near a group of first year students-all of whom were adorned in WAR clothes-presumably to find Denise Toils. As soon as Morrison had turned around, he spotted them, then waved them over.

"How was your break?" they both asked him once close enough, and he gave a shrug.

"I'll explain it on the train" he said blandly. "Did Waddlesworth win the election by the way?" he asked seriously. "I'm seeing these shirts everywhere..."

Scorpius brought his palm to his face with so much force that he nearly staggered backward. Albus chortled as he gave Morrison a clap on the back.

"Come on," he said, giving a rare grin, "I need to go find my family."

The three of them walked together slowly, Albus and Scorpius doing their best to fill Morrison in on all that he'd missed when blatantly ignoring the rest of the world over his break. When they reached the part about the United Ministry, Morrison gave a nod of acknowledgement.

"Yeah, I figured something like that had happened" he said. "Seeing as there's about five times as many WAR guards around, and since their outfits are different too."

"Wait what?" Albus asked him, bewildered at this news. "What do you-"

"Have a look!" Morrison said, pointing randomly.

Fully focused on on the people at the station now, Albus noticed that there were indeed many adults littering the platform, all of them wearing black uniforms with the golden letters "U.M." emblazoned on them. He even recognized a few of them as the security from Hogwarts, including, astonishingly, Larson.

"Is the Protector's Club here?" he asked no one in particular. It was Scorpius who answered, however.

"Looks like it" he said. "With WAR and the Ministry merged together, there's probably an abundance of people who can act as security. I wouldn't be surprised if there's three times as many people patrolling around Hogwarts once we get back."

Albus narrowed his eyes as he zoned in on a few of the other adults typically present at the club meetings. Had they been demoted to train security, in light of Waddlesworth's recent political victory? Were stronger and more capable wizards now stationed at Hogwarts?

Before he could raise these questions to his friends, he found himself occupied by the sight of several more than familiar faces. His mother was waiting by the barrier, along with Lily and, most surprisingly, James. Only a few feet away were Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, waiting with Rose. Hugo, it seemed, had already run off to find his friends.

Rose caught sight of them first, and she gave an uneasy smile their way. This confused Albus at first, until he saw, from the corner of his eye, that Scorpius was giving her a mild wave, his own timid expression clear on his face.

"Care to fill us in?" Morrison muttered to him.

"I sent Rose a letter over break" Scorpius replied, his gaze not leaving Albus' cousin.

Albus shot him an alarmed look. "You-"

"It's not what you think" Scorpius said at once. "I just- I explained some stuff to her. Tell you on the train..."

This cryptic message was left hanging in the air as Albus strode towards his family. Aunt Hermione gave him a wide smile, as did Uncle Ron, who seemed to have sobered up a bit. Rose too gave him a polite greeting, but it was James who actually engaged him first.

"So how far did you get?"

"James!" his mother shouted at him, the reprimand in her tone more than enough to silence him. She turned to Albus as though nothing had happened. "How was your break?"

"It was good" Albus told her, not even sure if he was lying or not. There had been far too many ups and downs to accurately label it. "What's he doing here?" he asked, indicating James. From

next to him, Morrison had started speaking to Uncle Ron, while Scorpius hung back suspiciously.

"No work today" James responded. "So I figured I'd see you guys off. And by the way, here's your stuff, I got it all packed for you" he said, and from behind him he pulled over a trunk filled with all of Albus' belongings. Albus was right about to thank him when he added a few more words.

"And by the way, mind if I talk to you real quick?" his brother asked, his face oddly twisted. "Over there?"

Albus gave his mother and sister a bemused look, but they both merely shrugged cluelessly.

"Erm- sure" he said, and he allowed his brother to lead him several feet away, at least to the point where they were obscured by a group of third years.

"What's this about?" Albus asked, generally curious. His first and immediate thought was that it involved something with Waddlesworth, and the situation with their father and Azkaban as a whole. He was most surprised then, when his brother's words ended up having nothing to do with any of it.

"So...Mirra's a nice girl" he said lamely, once they'd stopped to face one another.

Albus rolled his eyes. "James, I'm not telling you anything, not that anything-"

"You're not listening to me" James said, his expression darkening. His voice now sounded more strict. "Mirra's a nice girl."

Albus scratched at his head. "What are you on about?"

"Look mate, I know that this sounds hypocritical coming from me," his brother started, his voice low, "but I never messed around with more than one girl if I was *in a* relationship. It's just something you don't do-"

"*What?*" Albus said, flustered. "What are you-"

James reached into his pocket, then removed something; a small silver ring.

"I don't know who this 'Sam' girl is, but you either need to stop with her or tell Mirra upright that-"

"Where did you get that?" Albus said, rage boiling inside of him. "Did you go through- did you go through my stuff?" he asked, offended.

"Of course I did" James said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "After seeing the way that you packed to go over Mirra's? I needed to make sure that you weren't bringing diapers to Hogw- hey!"

Albus snatched Fairhart's ring from his brother's grasp, then pocketed it immediately. Agitated, and in no mood to explain the history of the item, he kept his explanation short.

"That isn't mine you git!" he snapped. "It says it's from someone named *San*, if you didn't notice, and I don't even know the girl it's fo- just never mind" he said, and he stalked off irritably, over into the direction of his family once more.

"I'll be boarding soon" he said to his mother once he'd returned, a shifty looking James following along behind him.

"Okay, well give me a hug" his mother said, and as she did so she clutched him tightly and pulled him in close. "Have a good rest of the year, okay? And try and write once or twice...it can't hurt."

"I will mum" Albus said, just as she was letting go. He then walked over to his aunt and uncle, who gave him a hug and a clap on the back, respectively.

"Take care Al" Uncle Ron said, giving him a sheepish grin.

"I always do" he replied weakly, and he then turned to face his brother.

"Have a good rest of the year!" his brother said cheerily.

"Yeah yeah" Albus replied dryly, still somewhat upset with him.

"Get over it...stop being a baby..." his brother muttered, clapping him on the shoulder.

Albus pushed his trunk away and over to Scorpius, Morrison by his side as Lily started saying her own good-byes.

"Just saw my folks again" Scorpius told them both. "We can board now..."

"What did your brother want?" Morrison asked Albus, but he shook his head disdainfully.

"Nothing" he replied. "Just something stupid" he added, feeling Fairhart's silver ring in his pocket and making a mental note to put it back in his bag once on the train.

They boarded the scarlet engine with quite a few minutes to spare, eager to have the opportunity to pick a compartment of their choice. It was actually more difficult than they'd previously anticipated however; some of the compartments were already full, and not with students. It was instead the highly official looking members of the United Ministry who occupied them.

"Here's one in the back" Scorpius said, and he slid the compartment door over for them, allowing all three to have access.

"Where are the girls at?" Morrison asked.

"They'll show up" Scorpius said, but Albus said nothing. For some reason, he had the feeling that Mirra wasn't in the mood to be around him right now.

He instead leaned back casually, his two friends sitting across from him.

"So how'd the gift-giving go?" he asked them both.

"Stupendously!" Morrison said at once, relaxing himself and cracking his knuckles. "Mel loved it! She's wearing it now."

"Scorpius?" Albus asked.

"Not bad" his friend replied, but he didn't elaborate. Instead, he asked the same of Albus.

"Did Mirra like her locket?"

"Yeah, she did" Albus responded, but his expression darkened after he said it. He *thought* that she liked it. It certainly seemed like it...

Morrison looked back and forth between them, apparently taken aback at the gloomy mystery that they were emitting.

"Am I only the one who had a Christmas?" he asked. "Ha!"

"Shut it" Scorpius said. "Mine wasn't bad..."

"What did Mel get you?" Albus asked Morrison, and at once, the grin on his face faltered.

"Oh yeah" he said, rolling his eyes in an extremely slow manner. "Check this out..."

He opened his bag, removing from it a tiny black book. "A homework planner" he explained, and both Albus and Scorpius roared with laughter at the futility of the gift. "I mean seriously, the nerve on her!"

"It's the thought that counts" Albus said, clutching at his ribs.

"I wouldn't give this to my *enemy*" Morrison stressed. "But anyway, she felt pretty guilty when she saw the bracelet I got her. But I don't mind, it's still neat that she thinks so highly of me. She actually thinks that I mean to do homework, but just forget. It's sweet..."

"So what did Mirra get you, Al?" Scorpius asked.

"A hand-made picture frame with a picture of me and my dad in it" Albus responded, and the compartment went silent at once.

"Damn" Scorpius said after a moment. "Thoughtful..."

"I kind of already figured that out" Morrison chimed in. "Seeing as how I supplied the picture...sorry if it came late by the way, I kind of forgot..."

"Should've written it in your planner" Scorpius said smugly.

"Hahaha...shut it..."

"What did Anastasia get you?" Albus asked Scorpius, and his friend gave him a wry smile

"Nothing" he said.

"Oh come on, you can tell us" Morrison said. "Melonie got me a *homework pla-*"

"No, I mean *literally* nothing" Scorpius said, holding out an empty hand as if to demonstrate his lack of gift.

Albus and Morrison both stared at him.

"Are you serious?" Albus asked him, and his friend shrugged.

"She didn't really think that we'd be exchanging presents this year" Scorpius said. "Haven't been together that long after all..."

"But she accepted your present?" Morrison asked, looking horrified.

Scorpius gave a shaky laugh. "Look, I know what you guys are thinking...but it all kind of worked out for the best. Just drop it for now."

Morrison shook his head with his mouth wide open, but Albus did nothing. He had the distinct feeling that Scorpius was dropping some subtle clues here. Apparently everything had worked out... and he'd sent Rose a letter over the holiday as well. It appeared as though Scorpius had made good on his word to make a decision once the winter holiday was over. But Albus still wasn't quite sure what that decision was.

He looked out the window of the compartment and saw, to his astonishment, that they'd already begun moving. Snow was still on the ground outside, but the actual snowfall itself had subsided the previous day. As the train sped away, however, the clear white sheets of it made the scenery all look like one, giant extended picture. He watched it with interest before Morrison spoke up.

"So we had my brother-in-law over for Christmas" he said. "Wait until you hear this story...nice guy, but such a moron..."

Albus kept silent for a considerable chunk of the train ride, mostly listening to Morrison's stories. Melonie popped in briefly soon after the lady with the trolley did as well, but only to reveal that she would be sitting with Denise Toils, as well as to comment on the growing presence of the United Ministry on the train.

"There's so many of them!" she said, standing in the doorway of their compartment, her new bracelet shining obviously on her wrist. "There's even some where the professors are!"

"What teachers are even on the train?" Morrison asked, and Albus had the feeling that he was mostly curious about Scorpius' father, and whether or not he was getting along with Larson in some cramped up compartment.

"Well Scorpius' dad" Melonie said. "And Professor Handit and Professor Longbottom. Oh, and Professor Flitwick too!" she said, ticking them off of her fingers before leaving.

"Blimey that's a cramped compartment" Scorpius commented.

Albus nodded in agreement, privately wishing that their own compartment was a bit more full as well. Mirra had still not stopped by. She'd definitely gotten on the train okay...perhaps she would just stop in with Eckley later.

And so, he was forced to cling to this thought as the sky outside began to darken slightly, simultaneously wondering where his sister and the Weasley children were, including whether or not Hugo would be spending time with his younger cousins or with his friends of the same age. Morrison and Scorpius had struck up a conversation about Quidditch, leaving Albus-remarkably, as he was captain of the Slytherin team-out of the loop completely.

He instead used his absence from the conversation to dwell even further on the tasks that he had in front of him. Every part of him knew that getting his father out of Azkaban was of great and immediate importance. And yet, here he was, on the train to Hogwarts, just a few hours away from his own impenetrable fortress...

He crossed his arms over and exhaled deeply at this thought, not caring to focus on the conversation going on around him until something of interest was brought up.

"So who *did* you pick?" Morrison asked, and Scorpius blushed.

"It's not as easy as just picking someone" he responded. "But I did have a really busy holiday, I'll say that much."

"I noticed that Anastasia hasn't come looking for you" Albus said, a small grin forming on his face.

"Yeah" Scorpius said. "She hasn't. But don't read too much into that."

"Oh come, just tell us!" Morrison blurted out, aggravated.

"Alright, well basically-"

Albus felt himself thrust forward unwillingly, his head nearly colliding with Scorpius. There was a rumbling noise like thunder at the same time, making him instinctively look out the window into the snowy plains outside. Scorpius and Morrison had both been knocked over as well, and indeed, there were muffled noises of intrigue all throughout the train.

"What was that?" Albus asked his friends, trying to sit back down.

"I dunno" Scorpius said, rubbing his shoulder, which had collided with Morrison's. "We can't be there already...we're an hour away from Hogsmeade stati-"

There was another powerful thrust, and Albus lurched forward once more, Morrison dodging just in time to avoid cracking skulls with him. The lights flickered once or twice, and this time, he was sure, the train had started to slow down...

A wave of panic washed through him as distant banging sounds were made, and eventually, the sound of compartment doors sliding open as students funneled out and into the aisle of the train, confused and frightened.

Albus slid the door to his own compartment open at once, recognizing that the train had definitely stopped completely. He and his two friends pushed themselves into the line of students and adults alike, all of whom were muttering anxiously.

"Nobody move!" ordered the soft, but loud voice of Larson. Albus could feel a second year girl shaking from next to him as the entire group of students went silent, all of their faces turned towards the back end of the train.

Albus removed his wand, then traded a look of determination with Scorpius and Morrison. His mind nearly blank from what was going on, he forced himself to adapt to the moment. The train had stopped. The United Ministry was taking charge. That could only mean one thing...

There was another loud noise, and then-

A tremendous tumult greeted their ears as a gigantic hole was blown into the back of the train from the outside, smoke and cold air entering the Hogwarts Express mixed together, the outline of a person standing in it, their wand raised. The red mask that they adorned was only visible for a second-

"*Stupefy!*" someone cried loudly from behind him, and he recognized the voice, surprisingly, as Eckley's.

The stream of red light soared over Albus' head as it snaked its way toward the figure, who deflected the spell easily, knocking it back against a third year student who fell to the floor in a crumpled heap at once.

"Everyone get down!" came a voice from behind Albus, and he recognized it as Neville's.

The students who comprehended what was going on fast enough dropped to the floor at once, the ones left standing behind drug down by their friends. Albus glanced behind him and saw that United Ministry members and the professors had assembled themselves at the front portion of the section that Albus was in, and the Dark Alliance members were now entering the train from the back, wands raised as well.

An eruption of different colors began cascading back and forth between the two groups, and after the first signs of green, Albus heard an explosion from behind him, followed by the feeling of cold air rushing over the back of his neck.

"Off the train!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, who'd evidently blown a portion of the train open.

The professors were firing large shield charms at every available moment, with the United Ministry members taking the offensive route. In small groups the students all ran through the hole in the side of the train, all of them screaming in terror, the younger ones even crying-

Albus leapt upward, and felt his two friends do the same.

"*Stupefy!*" he yelled, and he heard Scorpius and Morrison do the same. The three bolts of red light easily shattered the shield created by a lowly Dark Alliance member, who was blown back into his accomplice. Albus could hear Eckley and a few other students firing spells as well, but it was against the wishes of the adults.

"Get off the train!" Professor Handit barked.

"If you're going to fight, do it out there!" Scorpius' father bellowed, and Albus understood at once; they were cornered, and needed to enter the open for more flexibility.

Albus leapt backwards, firing a stunning spell over his head as he ran for the hole in the train. He jumped through it and out into the cold winter air, his mind racing, in complete shock of what was going on and yet somehow knowing that he needed to focus-

"No..." he said as his feet landed in the snow. The students had unwillingly become involved in the battle, and it was clear now that they'd been ambushed by not just a few Dark Alliance members, but by nearly all those who hadn't accompanied Darvy to Azkaban. He could already see a few bodies on the floor, unmoving, and a few of them were even relatively small...

He entered the fray boldly, nonverbally firing a a disarming spell at a Dark Alliance member, one of two who was double teaming a thick, hard-faced United Ministry member. Just in time he saw a fiery orange spell thrown his way, and he raised his wand in a swiping motion, concentrating hard on creating a proper shield-

The spell rebounded, but in a different direction than intended. Still, it hit a different red masked foe, who fell to the ground growling in pain. Albus turned and saw that nearly all of the students had evacuated the train now, though the main battle itself still seemed to be going on within the train. Albus caught a single glimpse of the scene as he spun around wildly, and saw the motionless Hogwarts Express resting on the train track, its back and part of the middle blown open, looking as though it were a giant, scarlet, injured serpent laying in a massive field of snow.

"If you can Apparate get the younger students out!" screamed a voice that Albus recognized as belonging to the Head Boy. "And get help!"

Albus ducked just as a green spell flew over his head. Heart pounding, he aimed his wand wildly in the direction that the curse had been fired.

"*Crescendium!*" he yelled, and a strong, clear blast collided with the Dark Alliance member in question, who doubled over gasping. "*Stupefy!*" he added, and a jet of red light soared over the wheezing man's head, nearly making contact with another red masked enemy, who deflected the spell to his left, where it collided with-

"Molly!" he yelled out, and his red haired cousin fell into the snow face first.

Albus swiped his wand through the air without even concentrating on a spell in particular, instead allowing his anger to channel itself. Whatever came from it, it did enough damage to the send the Dark Alliance member to the floor.

Taking a moment to regain his composure as the flurries of jinxes and hexes soared by his head, he gazed around the open area, looking for loved ones. He had seen Morrison and Scorpius on the train, but what of Lily, and Mirra?

He ran over to Molly, scooping her up just as cracking noises began sounding around him. Whether it was of more Dark Alliance members arriving or students successfully fleeing he didn't know, all that he knew was that he was not gifted at the act himself, and thus needed help.

"Give her to me!" yelled someone from next to him, and he turned and saw Donovan Hornsbrook, who was already holding the hand of a third year Gryffindor.

Albus passed her along to him, then watched as he turned on the spot, vanishing confidently with a cracking noise. He then returned his attention to the battle, where he saw, to his wonder, that there were many students still fighting. And more than that, they were winning.

It was mostly the older ones, and Albus knew this because he recognized nearly all of them from the Protector's Club meetings. He watched as the boy that he knew, Leonard, ducked from a icy blue curse and struck his wand through the air at the legs of a Dark Alliance members, who fell to the floor at once. Leonard then ran over to his adversary, who was laying on the floor, and aimed his wand at him. A stunning spell halted his squirming.

At the same time, the battle from the train seemed to have finally worked its way down into the snowy arena, as Scorpius' father was dueling two Dark Alliance members simultaneously, spending the bulk of the time defending. A few feet away, tiny Professor Flitwick was whipping his wand through the air with such expertise it was literally unbelievable; nearly every Dark Alliance member in the vicinity had fallen to the floor helplessly, unable to contend with the skilled Charms professor. Just next to him was another student that he recognized from the Protector's Club, and Albus recognized her as having once dueled-

"Hugo" he said under his breath, realizing that his younger cousin would definitely be participating in the fight. As if on cue, he caught sight of him several yards away, and he was not looking nearly as formidable in an actual battling session. He was backing up a few steps every second, trembling as his wand shook violently in his hand...

Albus ran for him, ducking underneath a canary colored curse as he did so. While sliding on the snow he fired a quick stunning spell at a Dark Alliance member who was aiming at a Hufflepuff girl on the floor, watching with satisfaction as they fell to the floor, caught completely off guard. He was nearing his cousin now-

Albus watched as from the side of Hugo a Dark Alliance member approached, waving their wand viciously. He watched as the ominous Killing Curse was fired-

"No!" Albus roared, and he propelled himself into the air with the most powerful jump that he could muster, tackling his unsuspecting cousin to the ground just as the spell soared over their heads. He heard Hugo give a whimper as his own face collided with the freezing snow, stinging it, then felt his body slide along the ground, Hugo still caught in between his arms.

He looked up, dazed, then registered that the same Dark Alliance member was approaching them, wand raised again-

There was a flash of green light, and the figure fell to the floor dead. From behind him stood Larson, a gash on his face and his wand outstretched.

"Can you Apparate?" he asked, and Albus shook his head.

"Not really, n-"

Larson snatched Hugo from his grip and disappeared quickly. Five seconds later, he'd reappeared, empty handed.

"Go back to back with me!" he demanded, and Albus followed the order dutifully, standing up and spinning around so that his back was pressed up against Larson's. He could still hear cracking noises, and he saw, with a jolt, that a few more Dark Alliance members had arrived.

It was not all bad though. Many of the younger students were gone from the fray entirely, and it was easy to see why. He spotted Morrison in the midst of the battle, crouched down so that younger students could climb on to his considerably tall body as though he were a tree. When he stood up with a struggle, Albus could see no less than six first years attached to him; one around each of his legs, dangling from each of his arms, one on his back and one around his middle. He turned sharply with a slight wobble, then disappeared expertly, returning a few seconds later and calling for more younger students to cling to him.

Albus saw a red mask emerge from out of the corner of his eye, and fired an *Impedimenta* jinx instinctively, forcing the attacker to a halt. He then revolved with Larson in a circular motion, who was not as innocuous with his spellwork. There was another flash of green, and the slowed down Dark Alliance member had turned into a victim.

"Are you too weak or too scared!" yelled Larson, and it took Albus a moment to notice, as their backs were pressed up against one another's, that the question was directed at him.

"Wha-"

"To kill!" he hollered, and Albus felt his body go cold, knowing that it had nothing to do with the cold wind or the snow.

"I-"

We're neither.

He felt something surge through him unexpectedly, and quite suddenly, he felt stronger; empowered. He raised his wand up dangerously, anticipating the next attacker.

In the distance, however, he saw two familiar figures that needed his help. Mirra and Rose had managed to successfully double team a Dark Alliance member, but were now facing off against two. Without even alerting his partner, he removed himself from Larson's presence and headed straight for them, his wand raised-

Something collided with him, and it wasn't even a spell. He felt a fist smack into his face, felt his jaw loosen and salty blood spurt onto his lips and he went down into the snow, his wand slipping from his fingers as he did so. He looked up at the hazy image and saw that it was a Dark Alliance member who had done it, who had punched him square in the face due to the close contact. Half of his mask was hanging off, revealing a wizard with fat cheeks and a pig like nose, who was smiling with large teeth. He aimed his wand downward, and Albus, defenseless himself, gave a

roar of rage and leapt upwards, grabbing at the man's collar and forcing his own body forward, intent on doing something that he'd only ever seen James do before.

He head butted him, as hard as he could, the top of his forehead making contact with the man's fat nose, and he could feel the warm blood squirt onto his own face as the man gave a howl of rage and clutched his bleeding nostrils. The man-who Albus now saw was uncannily boisterous-turned around in agony and was met with a blue spell to the face, which sent him to the floor at once.

"You're bleeding" said Eckley, who was lowering his wand and who looked as though he himself was injured; he was clutching his arm anyway.

"I'm fine" Albus choked out, and indeed, he could feel drops of blood slip from his mouth. "Go-go help them-" he said, still disoriented, and he jerked his head towards the direction that he knew Mirra was in. Eckley took off without another word, leaving Albus to scoop up his wand with frigid fingers and survey the now quieter scene.

The battle was not quite over, but it was ending. He spotted only a few bodies of students on the floor, understanding at once that many-whether unconscious, injured, or worse-had been Apparated away. The snow was instead littered with adults; numerous United Ministry members could be seen, but it paled in comparison to the defeated red masked enemies scattered across the snow, the incapacitated ones no doubt a result of the students, the deceased ones a product of the United Ministry; whether the professors had killed or not, he wasn't sure. Many of those still fighting the Dark Alliance were older members of the Protector's Club, nearly all of whom looked rather healthy; their extensive training had paid off.

He glanced again in Mirra's direction, and saw with relief that her portion of the battle had been cleared. She was limping, and Rose was clutching her cheek, but Eckley was escorting them over to-

The carriages! Hogwarts had heard word. Carriages were now arriving, all of them pulled by ferocious looking Thestrals, and Albus knew that more professors must have arrived with them, and that the carriages were here to scoop up stragglers, people who had been unable to Apparate and had stayed behind to fight. He could get out of here now, as the battle was dying down-

Now is your chance!

Albus stood in the snow, warm blood-both his own and from his enemy-trickling down his face and off of his chin, turning the white fluff below him a dark red. He began shaking with intensity, but then allowed the quickly formed plan in his head to evaporate. No, not now. Fairhart wasn't coming, he'd have already showed up.

Wait! He'll come! He always does, just give him time...

"No!" Albus declared out loud to himself. This entire situation, this dreadful attack, may indeed have been ostensibly fortuitous, but leaving with Fairhart didn't matter now. Fairhart hadn't shown anyway, and he had friends and family to tend to...

But the carriages were already here. The battle was wearing down, he could even see Professor Bellinger, who must have just arrived, taking down a Dark Alliance member with a sharp slash of her wand.

He stayed motionless, mulling over the situation in his head. As terrible as this entire thing was—as outrageous and unexpected as it was, and as little as he'd wanted it to occur—this was still what he needed. He would not get another chance to leave. If Fairhart was coming...and if he was still here when Fairhart arrived, in the midst of the chaos...

"Can you walk?"

Albus raised his head up, the sticky blood cracking on his neck. Eckley had returned.

"I-"

"Here I'll help you-"

But Albus had backed up. "Go- go on without me-" he said stupidly, and Eckley eyed him with bewilderment, his straw colored hair wet from snow and plastered over his full face.

"*What?*"

"Go on!" Albus said, wiping at the blood around his lips, his body now shivering. "I- I'm staying behind-"

"They're already safe!" Eckley told him boldly, waving his one, good arm toward the carriages. "I got Mirra in a carriage, I promise-"

"Thank you" Albus said, his voice hollow and scratchy. "But I- I need to- I need to stay beh- I'm waiting for someone..."

Eckley ogled him for a moment, and then, as if accepting his obstinacy, raised his wand.

"I'm getting you back to Hogwarts whether you like or not!"

"No, you don't understand-"

Eckley fired a stunning spell his way, and he ducked just in time to avoid it. He raised his own wand as his knees hit the snow, firing a stunner of his own, which Eckley deflected back perfectly with a well placed Shield Charm.

Albus struck his wand through the air in a perfect imitation, and his own Shield Charm rebounded the spell in a volley like fashion. He followed the stunner up by concentrating fiercely on the Disarming Spell however, and though Eckley managed to dodge the stunner, he was not so fortunate with the follow-up, and his wand was knocked out of his hand-

And caught. By Scorpius.

Albus' blonde haired friend was looking in perfect health, if not shaken by the battle. He was staring at both Albus and Eckley, looking between them in shock.

"What- what the-"

"Albus is refusing to come back to the castle!" Eckley roared, and Scorpius turned to him for confirmation, his blonde hair messy and his cheeks pink.

"Al what-"

"I can't" Albus said. "Not- not yet."

"Your face-"

"Not yet!" Albus barked, and Scorpius tossed Eckley his wand back.

"Let's make this quick" he said, and Albus watched as they stood side by side, the unlikeliest of teammates, both of them raising their wands.

Albus raised his own defiantly, knowing that he couldn't blame them, but also wishing that Scorpius at least would have respected his decision, would have understood that he would not be doing such a thing if he didn't have a perfectly logical, if not desperate reason for doing so-

Both Scorpius and Eckley fired their spells at the same time, and Albus was forced to duck one and dodge the other. He fell on to his side, his bloody head nearly colliding with the snow once more, and raised his wand up diagonally.

"*Reducto!*" he cried, and his spell blasted Eckley's legs out from underneath, sending him into the snow with a growl.

Scorpius raised his wand to attack as well but then another distraction arrived, this one hobbling over to them frantically.

"Stop!" Mirra was yelling, her black hair tangled and in front of her face, her gait seriously impaired. Professor Longbottom was chasing after her; it appeared as though she'd left the carriage at the sight of their duel.

"Stop! Stop it-"

Albus heard a flurry of cracking noises, and his heart missed a beat as twenty more Dark Alliance members arrived, their red masks not even visible for a single moment before they all raised their wands. The reinforcements collectively started attacking everyone still standing, and Albus saw a purple hex hit Mirra in the stomach, knocking her to the floor.

"No!" Albus gasped, but he couldn't even get up, his body was frozen solid from the cold, exhaustion, and even fear. "No-"

That's it-

He felt a powerful vibration in the back of his skull, followed immediately by a strange, but familiar buzzing. His mind started sifting in and out of coherent thoughts, words of objection in his head melting into indiscernible bleats. His vision became coated in an ominous shade of gold, and then, though he knew that he'd lost his sense of touch, he felt his body rise up from the floor and straighten itself-

The world turned vertical again as his feet left the ground, and the scene grew smaller and smaller in front of him as his body raised itself into the air. A group of red faces firing spells. Left over United Minsitry members putting up a final defence. A girl laying on the ground, just on the outskirts of the battle.

He watched as his own arm was raised in front of him, a wand clutched tightly in his grip. The wand, though extremely familiar, was not his own, but it would do. He waved it through the air sharply, and the scarlet, twisted train below began to raise itself up menacingly. All faces turned to the train as it began to levitate higher and higher, and he felt power course through his veins as the engine straightened itself out, looking like a giant missile, which is exactly what it was.

He raised it higher and higher...

No! You'll kill them!

But it was just Dark Alliance scum anyway. He prepared to wave his wand again-

Our friends are down there too! She's down there too!

The wizards were starting to scatter, apparently now aware of the blow that was about to be delivered. It was now or never-

I said NO!

Something broke within him. He heard the buzzing noise mute itself, watched as the golden sky turned a dark blue, and the next thing that he knew, he was falling through the sky quickly. He landed in the snow, his head barely cushioned by it, then felt his body drain itself of energy just as he heard a crash in a distance. The train had fallen back onto the track, rather than at its intended target.

He gave a groan, unable to lift a single muscle; for some reason, he felt completely catatonic. He could hear yelling as he stared up into the sky, hear the battle resume, and then he heard another *crack!*, this one right by his ear.

"You!" screamed someone-Scorpius maybe, apparently at whoever had just Apparated by his head.

Albus felt someone grab on to him tightly, and he'd just started to slip into blissful unconsciousness when he heard the cracking sound again, this time, his body spinning through space along with it.

Chapter 19: The Trace

Albus was crawling through the snow. Shivering and licking at his numb lips, he lifted his head up from the cold, wet ground and glanced around, seeing a scene void of anyone or anything. Only the whistling of the wind could be heard, that and the sounds of his knees as they slid along the icy ground, sleet drenching the insides of his pants. His arms, buried underneath his chest, were struggling to break free, desperate to claw at the ground and pull himself forward just a few more inches. He could barely lift his body. He felt his face drop into the snow.

Get up.

The voice was strange; eerie. Rather than cold and assertive, as he was used to, this one was more seductive. It seemed to generally want him to get up, to stand upright in the snow. But he couldn't.

Get up. You can do this.

Was that Mirra's voice? He perked his ears-

"GET UP!"

Albus jolted upright, the snow, the cold, all of it vanishing on the spot. The voice had molded itself back into the aggressive, fierce tone that it usually was, but before he could even focus on it, he clutched at his head. It felt stiff. He tried twisting his neck and found that it was difficult, as though he hadn't moved it in hours. His vision, which had been blurry immediately upon waking, was now becoming more focused, allowing him to get a better grasp of his surroundings.

The first thing that he noticed was that he was warm, and indeed, the barely audible crackling of a fireplace explained why. He twisted his head slowly, determined to assess his environment completely before guessing as to where he was, and for a moment, considered whether or not he was in Hagrid's cabin.

It was most certainly a cabin that he was in, but it was much bigger than the one that belonged to the gamekeeper. The room, which looked to be made entirely of rotting wood, was expansive, but the emptiness of it may have served as a placebo of sorts here. He realized that he was laying on a moth-eaten, brown couch, a woolly, archaic looking blanket tossed over him. Next to him was a small, square table, and in the corner of the room, a shelf that had all sorts of mysterious books in it, all of them apparently unorganized. Just to the right of the shelf was the fireplace that he'd heard earlier. There was one thing of note in the room however, and though his brain was still fuzzy from confusion, he managed to register its importance somewhat. An old Pensieve, on top of the bookshelf. Connections started going off in his head-

"Good, you're awake" came a voice from thin air. "I was worried there."

Albus turned his neck so hard that he felt it snap. Ignoring the pain, he took in the appearance of Sancticus Fairhart.

The real Silver Wizard was no longer dressed in silver. He'd swapped those clothes for the familiar, tattered black that he'd worn while as a professor at Hogwarts, and this was not the only thing familiar about him. His black, filthy hair had gotten just a bit longer, twisting itself all the way down the sides of his face, just barely obscuring his eyes, but nothing else. Half of his face was still appalling, still extremely unpleasant to look at, with its gaping dents and protruding bumps, the skin stretched tightly to make half of his mouth almost invisible. But it was the other half of his face-the normal half-that sent Albus into a frenzy. It looked concerned.

Without even thinking, he dove his hands downwards under the blanket, preparing to search his pockets for his wand, but Fairhart saved him the trouble.

"Your wand's on the table" he told him plainly.

Albus glanced at the square table, astonished that he'd missed this fact before. He grabbed his wand in a single swipe, then made to stand up, but he found himself unable to. Though he could feel his legs fine, they didn't seem to want to cooperate.

"Calm down, you need your rest" Fairhart said. "For some reason your body shut itself down"

Albus gave a growl as he threw the blanket off of him, his mind racing. Fairhart...Fairhart was right next to him. He tried remembering the events that had directly led to him ending up in this cabin, which was probably in the middle of nowhere, and found it difficult to piece things together chronologically. He'd been waiting in the snow...the train had been attacked...had he been up in the air? And at least at one point, he knew, he'd dueled Scorpius...

"What did you do to them!" Albus barked, teeth bared, and he realized that his mouth was fine now. He rolled himself off of the couch stupidly, his head nearly smacking against the edge of the table, then aimed his wand from the floor, his feet tangled in the warm blanket.

"Do to who?" Fairhart asked, sounding intrigued, and he took a step forward casually.

"My- my- my frien-"

But wait, that wasn't right. He needed to slow down and retrace his steps. The train had definitely been attacked first...everything else couldn't have happened without this taking place. Then there was the battle, and him diving to protect Hugo, and then getting hit in the face. Then the battle had slowed down...but he'd stayed behind. He'd stayed behind, and faced off against both Eckley and Scorpius, because he didn't want to go back to Hogwarts, because he needed to be rescued instead, rescued by-

He lowered his wand foolishly. His plan, it seemed, had worked.

"Where- where- when am- where are my-"

"You are not anywhere you've ever heard of it, I can promise you that" Fairhart said, and he took Albus' place on the couch. "But you are still in Great Britain" he added thoughtfully.

"My- Scor- and Mirra was-"

"I believe that your friends are fine" Fairhart said coyly. "Those who I know you are close with were not listed."

"Not- not listed?" Albus asked, confused, and now, just at this very moment, did he realize that he was conversing with the man who had murdered Janine Fischer just a few months ago, and who was all but completely responsible for his father's incarceration. He was conversing with the man who Waddlesworth needed dead.

"You've been out for a day" Fairhart told him. "A day and a half, actually."

Albus sprung himself up, surprised at his own sudden burst of energy. He felt his legs wobble underneath him, and was forced to balance himself by leaning over onto the table. "A- a day? What happened?"

Fairhart looked at him intensely, and when their eyes met, Albus felt a powerful wave of foreboding. Faces now only a few feet apart, Fairhart began speaking in a monotonous voice.

"When I arrived at the scene of the battle you were on the floor. Dark Alliance members were fighting those who had not yet been retrieved by the Hogwarts staff, but a certain amount of attention was still being paid to your near lifeless body. From what I gathered in only a few seconds of listening, you had somehow levitated yourself into the sky, and had prepared to chuck a train at a few very unfortunate individuals."

Albus felt his breathing slow as he tried to materialize this last scene in his mind. It was extremely hazy, however, far more difficult to sort out in his head than any other sequence of events. All that he could remember, for some reason, was arguing, and a feeling of intense panic. But yes, a train had definitely been in the air...it was too difficult to forget something like that.

"The school" Albus blurted out, and he was now managing to hold himself steady without support. "The- is everyone-"

"The battle is over, Albus" Fairhart said, a hint of assurance in his voice. "The surviving students are now held up in an extremely fortified castle."

"Sur- surviving..."

Albus felt his entire body go numb, and he was dangerously close to falling over once more when he managed to fight through his light-headedness. "Who..."

Fairhart snapped his fingers nonchalantly, and from a doorway that Albus had not even seen before, a newspaper flew in on its own, landing perfectly folded over in his hands. He handed the paper out simply, and Albus, after a slight moment of hesitation, snatched it in the hand that wasn't holding his wand. The style of the paper told him at once that it was not *WAR Weekly*, but rather, the *Daily Prophet*. He held the paper up close to his face, seeing two different lists, which were about equal in length.

"The column on the right is students" Fairhart told him. "On the left, United Ministry members."

Albus scanned both columns tensely. No names bore immediate recognition to him on the students list, and he felt the knot in his chest loosen when he saw that there no Weasleys, or Lily, among them. Listed alphabetically, he had a mini-panic attack every time he focused on a particular chunk of names, immense relief overtaking him when he realized that Scorpius, Mirra, and Morrison were all vacant from the list.

Some names though, sadly, he did recognize. From Slytherin he knew Dante Haug, and cringed inwardly at the fact. Evey Zabini, whose existence he'd just learned of recently, had perished as well. He didn't immediately connect any other names on the list however, and this was probably because he only really would have known those in his own house or in his own year. At the same time, he reflected sadly, this meant that many of the students had been younger...

He didn't do a full count, but was sure that it was somewhere between fifteen and twenty. The list of United Ministry members was much longer, though Albus knew that he wouldn't have recognized any of those names anyway. He scanned it briefly for "Larson", who he now remembered with a jolt had saved his life, and found nothing. He felt sharp twinges of guilt as he examined the list. He'd been so abrasive towards these people...these people who he'd considered nothing more than Waddlesworth's walking propaganda. And yet, here they were. Dying for the children, just as advertised.

"There is no list of Dark Alliance members" Fairhart told him. "And the professor who died isn't listed either. The next page details that."

Albus felt a lump rise in his throat. His hands began shaking as he glanced back up at Fairhart, his nerves wracked. A professor...his mind flew to Hagrid, who might have shown up late. To Neville, who'd been on the train, along with Scorpius' father-

"Who- who- who..." Albus asked, not sure if he could turn over the paper and see the picture for himself.

"Hugh Handit, from the Defence Against the Dark Arts post" Fairhart said solemnly, and Albus felt his heart sink. "Killed early in the battle, ushering the students off of the train and shielding them from harm. To be awarded Order of Merlin, First Class, I've read-"

"No" Albus said quietly, backing up slightly and dropping the paper, his mind blank.

"No...no...no..."

"I was very upset at the news" Fairhart said seriously. "Professor Handit had been most gracious towards me during my brief lodgings in the castle, and I know that the students will-"

"No!" Albus lashed out, and he felt himself fighting back tears now. Why this most recent news had done it, he didn't know. It was the strangest mix of emotions, hearing about such an atrocity. Sweet relief at his closest loved ones still being safe. Terrible sadness at the news of who had not been so fortunate. Unbelievable guilt at the acknowledgement that the two groups had not been switched, when so many others probably would have made the swap in an instant...

"I- I don't understand" Albus said, revealing, to both himself and to Fairhart, the true nature of why he was both so stunned and disheartened. "I mean, this attack- what- what was it? Were they- were they-"

He couldn't bring himself to say it; couldn't bring himself to administer himself even more guilt already.

"Were they after you?" Fairhart said, completing his question. "No, they weren't" he told him after a moment.

Albus nodded his head, still letting the surrealism of the situation dance around in his thoughts. He was standing next to Sancticus Fairhart, a man who he'd respected for two years, thought of as dead for the next, and basically hated for the past several months now, intent on bringing him to justice. The last time that he'd seen Fairhart, the discovery of his survival had been overshadowed by the gruesome deaths of Ida Blackwood and Janine Fischer. The murder of the latter made Albus tense up slightly. Fairhart had been vicious and cold-blooded the last time that he'd seen him. He appeared to be exponentially more calm now, but then again, he'd also appeared to be deceased for several months...

"They weren't after anyone" Fairhart said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Then what was the point?" Albus asked, his voice slightly more steady now. "Then why attack-"

"Retaliation" Fairhart answered him easily. "For a very powerfully dealt blow by Warren Waddlesworth."

"What are you-"

"Did you happen to catch wind of Waddlesworth's speech, after he became our new Minister of Magic?" Fairhart asked lightly, sounding generally curious. Albus nodded silently.

"Then you'll have heard his declaration of war against Darvy and his minions. Darvy has spent years trying to avoid the shadow of his more talented brother, and he's put a gratuitous amount of

effort into ensuring that his name is synonymous with fear and terror; hence his new moniker. Though there's been attacks before, Darvy was definitely waiting for the big reveal of his army before announcing that he was not willing to, but *actually going to* launch war on the people and the Ministry. Waddlesworth then tactfully decided to steal Darvy's thunder; to initiate the first attack. A personal swipe at Darvy's confidence and sense of grandeur."

"And it backfired" Albus said bitterly, inwardly wondering how in the world he could have ever come to an agreement with the new Minister of Magic. Then he remembered his father, held up in a cell somewhere surrounded by ferocious Silhouettes, and cringed sadly.

"Yes, it did" Fairhart replied automatically. "It is never wise to attempt to psychologically attack a man who is, by all accounts, already insane. Waddlesworth may have believed that this declaration of war would deter Darvy, but the sad truth is, it instead most likely made him eager to counter-attack. And the perfect way to do so, of course, it to attack Waddlesworth's credibility. All of his preaching about protecting the children has been thrown into the fire, as it was his own megalomaniacal actions that endangered-and ultimately killed-so many of them."

"But Waddlesworth must have planned for it, at least a bit" Albus reasoned, now no longer so sure that Waddlesworth should be taking as much blame on the matter as Darvy was. "That train was flooded with Ministry people."

"Yes, it was" Fairhart said, nodding his head. "But then again, it has always been the front of Warren Waddlesworth to issue protection from matters that he himself has created. I highly doubt that our new Minister anticipated an attack, but he was at least reasonably prepared for one. And so on one end, we are very fortunate that the United Ministry was there. But on the other...if the United Ministry didn't exist, the attack wouldn't even have happened."

Albus said nothing, still soaking in this information. There was still so much more that he needed to know, so much more that he needed to carefully extract from the dangerous Renegade in front of him, but he wanted the details of the ambush on the Hogwarts Express fully fleshed out first.

"So Darvy...Darvy just told his men to attack the students?" Albus asked.

"The exact numbers of the Dark Alliance aren't known, but I'd estimate that a little more than half of them were designated for this assault, which was meant to not only inflict damage, but to frighten and cause panic. Whether those in the Dark Alliance were aware that they'd be attacking a train full of skilled Ministry wizards or not, I have no idea, but they at least underestimated the battle. Apparently, their reinforcements didn't arrive until the end of fight, indicating that they had not counted on so many of them being harmed. The real story here though-and the one in all of the papers-is the heroism of the students. Not since the Battle of Hogwarts more than twenty years ago have so many underage wizards and witches chosen to outright defend and protect, as opposed to merely dying in the act of elusion. Though things are undoubtedly grim at Hogwarts

right now, I would be very surprised if there weren't a few smiles directed the way of those who were both courageous and, interestingly enough, talented enough to fight back."

For the first time in the conversation, Albus allowed himself to do something that bore a passing resemblance to a smile. Though Fairhart had no way of knowing, this dramatic shift in the battle had been the result of the Protector's Club, and Albus had even seen this firsthand. And several more people had joined the club after the interference of Scorpius' father, brought on by Albus. He'd considered it a small, meaningless triumph at the time. Had it ended up saving lives?

"So when did the battle end?" Albus asked.

"According to the newspapers, " Fairhart started, "not too long at all after I arrived. By the time I had you settled back here, the carriages had already departed, and the remaining Dark Alliance members had vanished. The school was put on a permanent lockdown, and it remains this way even now."

Albus nodded, but something was nagging at the back of his head. Small, poorly detailed visions were coursing through his mind; the cloudy memories of what immediately preceded his revitalization here were now clearing somewhat. He'd been the air. He'd been frantic due to something. Someone had ran out into the midst of the battle. Mirra. She was safe now, her absence in the obituaries confirmed it...but had Fairhart not stuck around long enough to interfere with the battle himself?

"You- you came and got me" Albus stated outwardly. "Right?"

"That is correct" Fairhart said, standing up.

"And you- you just left? Even though the battle was still going on?"

Fairhart gave him a look that suggested more than curiosity. "Yes" he said slowly.

"Why didn't you stay!" Albus demanded, knowing that his voice sounded extremely accusatory.

Fairhart scratched at his chin, as though aware that he'd have to present a very good answer for this question. He failed anyway, though.

"The battle was nearly finished by the time of my arrival" he said. "And I confess, I was unaware of what I was walking in to. I saw you on the floor, and acted with instinct."

"Then why not go back!" Albus shouted at him.

Fairhart sighed. "My presence in the battle would not have been beneficial-"

"How can you say that-"

"Albus, there were few threats left by that time. I was only risking my own life-"

Albus felt himself seethe. Here it was, that one characteristic of Fairhart that Albus loathed more than any other; his selfishness. Just as had been the case with Janine Fischer's murder months ago, Fairhart was more concerned about his own personal well being than of the repercussions to any of his actions, including the unlawful imprisonment of his father, which in so many ways had directly led them all to the situation that they were all in now-

Unable to contain himself, Albus dropped his wand and cocked his fist back barbarically, then swung his arm forward with all of the strength that he could muster-

Fairhart snatched his hand a second before it had reached his face, then made a powerful yet agile twisting motion. The resounding snap only served to warn Albus of the terrible pain that immediately followed this act. He felt concentrated anguish surge up his entire arm as he sank to his knees, letting loose an irritable growl as he did so.

"Let go of me!" he roared, and Fairhart did so at once, giving him a slight push so that he stumbled back and fell down completely.

Albus began nursing his feeble wrist at once, massaging at it gently with gritted teeth. When he looked up at the domineering image of Fairhart, he saw that his former professor did not look angry, or even surprised. On the contrary, he seemed content on finishing his reasoning. He tone, however, was more severe.

"Listen to me," he started seriously, "The Dark Alliance had already lost the fight by the time that I'd arrived. The vast majority of the tumult involved the security of the students-which was being very well handled-and the continued ferocity of the United Ministry. Warren Waddlesworth wants me dead, Albus. Had I lingered any further, I can assure you, my participation in the battle would have been predominantly focused on protecting myself from them. What good am I dead, Albus?"

Albus continued to cling to his sore wrist, picking himself up as he did so. Inwardly, he realized that he had a few very good answers to this question. Fairhart's corpse alone would most likely suffice for Waddlesworth, which would then in turn result in the release of his father from Azkaban. And really, as if that alone wasn't enough, didn't it do more for the world as a whole? All the good that his father could do in a time like this...that he'd been on the verge of doing, before his imprisonment.

And he imagined, for the first time, the after-effects of his father's death. The result of him rotting away in Azkaban, or being killed by Darvy. The funeral would be massive. Whether known as a murderer or not, he was still, perhaps unequivocally, the greatest hero that the Wizarding World had ever known. But what of Fairhart? Would anyone *really* care if he died? Would anyone even attend such a funeral? Would there even be one?

He thought of what else Fairhart had just said-about how much good he could possibly be if he was dead. But what good was he doing now? The only remotely benevolent act that he'd committed as of late was having rescued him from the snow.

His anger minimized momentarily, as a question popped into his head.

"Why are you following me?" he asked, and Fairhart gave him a blank look.

"What do you mean?"

"You're following me!" Albus said, agitated at this response. "You showed up at that wedding last year, when I was in danger. Showed up at- at your old flat. Then again here-"

"I'm not following you, Albus," Fairhart said blandly, and when Albus made to object, he continued, "but I am *tracking* you."

Albus furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you-"

Fairhart slowly lowered his hand into his robes, then removed one of the most interesting items that Albus had ever seen. Shaped like a miniature glass pyramid, the item sparkled in Fairhart's hand, different colors twinkling in the mostly oblique model, what looked like arbitrary numbers popping up every so often at each of the four sides.

"What- what is that?" Albus asked, bewildered.

"It's your Trace" Fairhart replied simply.

"My- my Trace?"

Fairhart nodded, then delved into an explanation.

"You may have heard of the Trace before, but I will explain the complexities of it for the sake of clarity. Every child born is magically registered and linked to a Trace-one of these triangular items here. Some other countries may do it differently, but in all those that I've been too, anyway, this is the method used. When a child uses magic, these objects here detect it, providing coordinates to where it occurred, as well as a handful of other seemingly irrelevant-but actually quite important-details, including whether or not there were muggles present and the like. Children who are not born with magical abilities-muggles, that is-have their Traces automatically destroyed once their trace fails to register for a set period of time, in most areas, eleven years. When the Trace *does* register magical activity, however, it stays functioning until the individual is of seventeen years of age, at which point it destroys itself, much like it does with muggles."

Albus stared at the small pyramid, his mouth agape. When he failed to speak, Fairhart continued.

"The Trace is not always effective though. Because it only provides location, it is sometimes difficult to determine *which* underage wizard is performing magic in a specified area, and what's

more, it has no way of discerning whether or not said magic was consciously performed or not. Beyond this, Traces are only effective in unauthorized magical locations, that is to say, places where magic should never be used. I first learned this two years ago, during the Hogsmeade Massacre. Though I'd kept a steady eye on your Trace, it didn't register as magic being performed, because Hogsmeade is authorized to have magic performed anyway; if a Trace went off every time a young wizard was around magic in Hogsmeade, the Ministry would be *extremely* overworked. Thus, I didn't learn until afterward the danger that you'd been in. With the wedding, and obviously, the muggle residence in question, your Trace activated at once, as no magic-especially underage magic-should have been used in those places. The same holds true for the random plain that I found you on when the Hogwarts Express was attacked."

Albus cleared his throat slightly, trying to absorb this information slowly, so as to determine which of his hundred questions was most important. He finally settled on one that simply could not go unanswered any further.

"Why the *hell* do you have my Trace? And how did you get it?"

"I stole it" Fairhart said, as if astonished that Albus hadn't come to this conclusion himself.

"You- you stole...?"

"Yes" Fairhart repeated. "Shortly before I was forced to disappear, I realized that I would be unable to keep an eye on you afterward, outside of the castle at least. So I removed your Trace from the room in which they're all kept-quite simple really, it's only down the hall from the Auror office-and have kept it this entire time. This tactic is not uncommon amongst those who had been rather high up in Wands and Redemption. Back when I served as one of Waddlesworth's main trackers, I would sometimes have a Ministry contact give me the Trace to a target's child."

He said this last bit in a very uneasy manner, as if it pained him to acknowledge that his days in WAR had actually helped him here.

"So then- then- then I have no Trace there?" Albus asked, confused. "There's just an empty shelf in the middle of a whole bunch of other crystal triangles-"

"No, there is a Trace there" Fairhart said, but he then made a gesture with his hand that indicated that this was not entirely true. "Or at least, it *resembles* a Trace. I couldn't create an exact replica, but I managed to create what I believe is a reasonably well designed substitute. It functions anyway, even if it probably takes a bit to register. The Co-Head Auror managed to find you a few months ago, after all, but I'd imagine that she'd have been somewhat late."

Albus cringed at Fairhart's nonchalance. He had literally just mentioned Janine Fischer, but had done so without the slightest mention of his murder of her. Did he honestly believe that his actions were justified?

There was a brief silence following this very technical explanation, but the first part of Albus' question had still gone unanswered. Intent on learning as much as he could, Albus asked it again.

"But why? Why have you been tracking me?"

Fairhart hesitated briefly, then spoke with his eyes, strangely enough, pointed downward.

"I have my reasons" he said icily.

Albus said nothing, instead racking his brain for a coherent memory. It was actually a memory of a memory that he was working for, the memory in which Blackwood and Fairhart had arranged to stage his death. Blackwood too had asked why Fairhart was so intent on keeping Albus alive, and Fairhart had listed, if Albus recalled correctly, more than one reason. The only one that he could really remember, however, was Fairhart's insistence that they were friends...and look how that one had turned out.

Fairhart stashed the Trace back inside of his robes, signaling that he was no longer going to discuss this particular topic anymore. Albus merely stared at him, still trying to gather his thoughts. He'd planned on this, after all, to some degree. Not on the train being attacked of course, but of eventually being in Fairhart's presence. And here he was, right at the step that he was supposed to be at, unable to do anything more than ask questions that didn't even begin to fill in half of the blanks. What was he supposed to do now?

"What- what does- what does everyone know?" Albus asked awkwardly, and Fairhart tilted his head to show that he hadn't made sense of this mess of words. Albus organized his thoughts before trying again.

"People saw you take me, right? So everyone knows you're alive, then? And where do people think that I am?"

"Yes, people saw me take you" Fairhart answered him. "But to be honest, this does little to change my current situation. Most who saw me weren't aware that I was supposed to be dead, and those who did know, also knew that I was alive. Do not forget that Warren Waddlesworth is the Minister of Magic now. His personal protectors are undoubtedly instructed to keep a look out for me at all times."

"And as for my status...?"

"I'd imagine that your family and friends are very worried about you" Fairhart told him. "But they've probably at least figured that you're alive."

Albus groaned. He thought of his mother crying loudly, and pictured the blank looks on the faces of his brother and sister. He imagined the look on Mirra's face, and tried to reason that Morrison would be trying to be optimistic of the situation...optimism that Scorpous would definitely crush with his tactless realism...

Choosing to temporarily put these thoughts from his head until he could find an adequate solution to them, he referenced what else Fairhart had said.

"Aren't- aren't you curious as to how Waddlesworth knows that you're alive?" Albus asked, surprised that this hadn't already been mentioned. He had just learned of Waddlesworth's awareness a month ago, after all.

Fairhart, however, gave a surprising shrug. "Warren is no fool" he admitted. "The specifics of his deductive reasoning, I don't know, but I caught on to the very clear warning that he gave me."

"Warning?" Albus asked, not sure in the slightest what Fairhart was talking about.

"You didn't see it?" Fairhart asked. "It was all over the newspapers, especially that vile *WAR Weekly* that he's having published now."

And then it clicked.

"The- the assassination attempt?" Albus asked curiously, and Fairhart nodded.

"There was obviously no real attack on his life" Fairhart said lamely. "I mean really, the details were so vague...and the odds so improbable. Warren may have twisted it to the public as an attack on Darvy's credibility, but make no mistake, he wanted everyone, and I mean *everyone*, to know just how fruitless an attempt on his life would be. That article was aimed at those who might have been considering such an act, and in case you hadn't figured it out, I'm one of those people."

"So- so are you?" Albus asked tensely.

Fairhart seemed to consider it for a moment, before finally settling on an answer.

"No" he said. "I have no intention of killing Warren Waddlesworth, partially because I think that it would only serve to strengthen his reputation with the people, which, even post-mortem, could be disastrous. And also, because I don't consider him a legitimate threat. I was the best tracker that Warren had, he'd never be able to find me, let alone have me killed."

Albus froze. Waddlesworth *had* found a way to do this. Indeed, this tactic was standing across from Fairhart right now...

"So you- you don't- you don't want revenge on Waddlesworth?" Albus asked weakly.

Fairhart sighed. "Warren will destroy himself" he said. "He's already started to."

Albus gave him a stunned look. "What do you mean? Because of this declaration of war against Darvy? And the train attack?"

"Yes," Fairhart started, "but even more so, because of all that it will soon amount to. For the first time that I can remember, Warren is not being seen in an overly positive light by the people. Children were killed in that attack, as were parents. The public, though usually collectively blind on these matters, can not ignore that Warren's brash announcement served as the catalyst for this destruction. It's the quintessential hindsight bias, actually. When he first announces that the United Ministry is ready to engage the Dark Alliance, people rave about his courage and his strong will. When it results in lives being lost, they outrageously claim that it had been a foolish decision all along; that Warren should have planned better. From here, it's easy to see how the situation will escalate. Warren needs to regain the trust of the people, and to do that, he'll have to launch a very strong counter attack on Darvy."

Albus swallowed a lump on his throat. All of the thoughts that had passed through his head so far, since he'd woken up in this unexpected place, and found himself face to face with this unexpected result, had vanished on the spot. The train being attacked, students dead, Professor Handit dead, the tiny glass pyramid that was the Trace, the images of his loved ones, all of it had been replaced by a dawning, miserable thought.

Waddlesworth was going to have to attack Azkaban.

"What are you thinking?" Fairhart said, and Albus found himself unable to reply at first; he was too numb.

"Albus?"

Albus looked up. "Waddlesworth is going to attack the Dark Alliance, right? And that means- that means Azkaban-"

Fairhart made a tense noise, one that suggested knowledge that Albus was not aware of.

"What? What!" Albus demanded, and Fairhart exhaled deeply.

"I'm afraid, Albus, that in your day or so of unconsciousness, you missed more than just the public outcry against Warren Waddlesworth."

Albus watched as Fairhart bent down and scooped up the dusty issue of the *Daily Prophet*. He handed it over slowly, and Albus took it delicately, realizing that, as he'd only looked at the list of deceased victims, he'd never actually looked at the front page.

"It's already happened, hasn't it?" Albus asked, but Fairhart shook his head.

"No" he said. "Something- something else."

Slowly, Albus flipped the newspaper over, gasping loudly at what he saw.

Ministry Loses Control of Azkaban; Dark Alliance Penetrates Prison

Chapter 20: Three Evils

The newspaper slid from Albus' hands as he fell backward. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Fairhart make a complicated movement with his hand, and just in the nick of time too; he collapsed into the chair breathlessly.

It was a rocking chair, a very stupid choice, as the slow, swaying movement started to make him queasy. His mind-which had been racing nonstop recently-had now went completely blank, nothing but thoughts of dread and emptiness filling him.

"Albus?"

Albus gave Fairhart no reply. His anger from earlier was now returning, but he was unable to even move. He simply let his shaking body add to the momentum of the rocking chair, his teeth gritted tightly as his eyes began to tear.

"Albus?" Fairhart repeated.

"My dad" Albus choked out. "My dad..."

"Albus listen to me-"

"You killed him!" Albus blurted out, standing up so quickly and with such force that the chair fell over. "This is your fault! Yours!" he growled, spit flying from his mouth.

"You are not thinking clearly-"

"You're the reason!" Albus said pathetically, pointing a shaky finger at the disfigured man in front of him. "You- you- you-"

"I did not ask your father to falsely admit to my actions-"

"He had too!" Albus screamed, his throat becoming hoarse. "To keep me in Hogwarts-"

"I did not ask you to leave the castle either" Fairhart said boldly, his face hardening.

Albus shook his head back and forth. He was not going to do this, not now. He was not going to search for the correct sequence of blame that had led to the situation he was now in. There was no point; he'd spent all this time registering Fairhart as the source of despair in his life, why should he stop now?

"Your father is not dead, Albus."

Albus still continued to shake his head, not allowing this sentence to amount to anything in his head. After a moment, however, he realized the seriousness in Fairhart's tone; he sounded extremely confident.

"What are you talking about?" Albus snapped, dropping his hand. "Darvy attacked Azkaban, he's breached the prison! That's where my dad is, remember! Because of *you*-"

"If your father was dead, everyone would know it" Fairhart said. "The news of Darvy taking over Azkaban hit right around the same time that the train was attacked. It was a simultaneous event, designed to create as much chaos as possible. There has been plenty of time for Darvy to announce triumphantly that he'd murdered Harry Potter; to provide evidence of it as well. But there hasn't been."

"What makes you so sure that Darvy would alert people of every little thing he did?" Albus asked menacingly. "How do *you* know-"

"Little thing?" Fairhart said incredulously. "Albus, whether your father is regarded as a murderer now or not is irrelevant, he is still considered the ultimate symbol of victory against the Dark Arts. His death would signify the end of such a victory, as well as the return of panic and destruction so often connected to the war that he stopped. Your father is not dead *yet*, Albus. But when he is, Darvy will make sure that the entire world knows."

"So why is he waiting?" Albus forcefully, refusing to give in to such an explanation.

"There could be several reasons" Fairhart admitted. "But to be honest, I can think of only one that is immediately indicative of something that a tyrant such as Darvy would do. It involves information."

"Information?"

Fairhart nodded. "Darvy is about to wage war with the United Ministry. He will need as much information on the Ministry as possible, and though your father was part of a very different government, he is still one of the few who can supply Darvy with such knowledge. It is very unlikely that any other prisoner in Azkaban has ever been as high up as he was."

"But what if there is?" Albus asked tensely.

"Then as I mentioned before," Fairhart started darkly, "the world would already be aware of your father's death. I have considered that perhaps Fango Wilde would be able to fill this role, as he has already proven himself to be a Ministry informant, but his department-the Department of Magical Transportation-will not be nearly as beneficial to Darvy as what your father can provide."

Albus gave a sigh indicative of something in between relief and uncertainty. Only when he tried going over Fairhart's words in his head did he reach another painful conclusion.

"He's getting tortured!" he shouted, his lips quivering. "Darvy's torturing him!"

"Probably" Fairhart said with a frown, and Albus inhaled deeply.

"And you-"

"Would you rather I lie?"

"I- you- no!" Albus yelled out bitterly, and then, he added, "but what do you know! You know what, knowing my dad, he- he- he probably didn't give Darvy any information anyway-"

"You're right, he probably didn't" Fairhart said. "But as I've mentioned before, your father *is* still alive, this I truly do believe; there is really nothing to suggest otherwise apart from the fear that's captured you now. So I must also deduce that your father has found some way to cooperate with Darvy, even if it is twisted. I know your father a bit too, Al. Something tells me that he's probably feeding Darvy false information right now..."

Albus said nothing, but he did mull over this idea in his head. What Fairhart was saying had changed his attitude a bit; his feelings of futility and failure had reverted back to mere desperation. But if what he was saying really was true...then that desperation was warranted. Maybe, just maybe, his father could still be saved. But it would once again involve the help of Waddlesworth. He'd have to act now. He'd have to attack Fairhart, hope for the best, and if he managed to subdue the uncommonly skilled wizard, find a way to hand him over to Waddlesworth, who would then hopefully keep his deal intact and find a way to rescue his father before attacking the prison. It was not the original arrangement, true, but hadn't Waddlesworth simplified things for him? Fairhart's life for his father's. That's all that there really was to it.

His slowly allowed his hand to raise, clutching his wand tightly as it did so. Maybe he could catch him off guard-

"We have much to discuss" Fairhart said pointedly, taking Albus by surprise. "I'll show you around the cabin."

Fairhart turned sharply, then headed for the doorway. Albus blinked stupidly, realizing that Fairhart's back was now turned, and that now was the best chance that he was going to have to make something happen-

But his curiosity got the better of him. Much to discuss? Albus had more questions, yes, but what could Fairhart want to talk about? Slowly, he followed Fairhart out of the room and into the next one.

It was even more vacant than the one that they'd just left, although, admittedly, the few things in it were more surprising. The first thing that Albus noticed was a small table riddled with burns, no doubt a result of the dusty, empty cauldron that sat on top of it. A small, silver box was placed up against the wall opposite the cauldron, looking as though it were a safe of some sort, and right above it, interestingly enough was what looked like a portrait-or some sort of large picture frame, that had been covered by black cloth. At the very edge of the room, where there was yet another doorway, a cupboard also stood, looking as decayed and unused as the rest of the things in the

cabin. Albus walked across the wooden floor with caution, as it creaked with every step, and tucked his wand away in his pocket momentarily, sure that it would look suspicious if he continued to carry it around.

He felt as though a bolt of lightning had hit him. As he'd reached his hand into his pocket, something small and cold had bounced off of his fingers. It was Fairhart's ring, stowed away after having been snatched from James and never tossed into his luggage. Trying to regain his composure, he asked a question.

"What is this place?" he asked. "Erm- this part of the cabin, I mean."

"This, Albus," Fairhart started, and he raised his hands up as if to mockingly suggest grandeur, "is my headquarters. Where I get my research and planning done. Do you like it? It's quaint, but roomy."

Albus said nothing. He was sure that Fairhart was trying to be funny here, or at least feebly lighthearted, but it was difficult to accept this. He'd already forgotten the Fairhart from years ago, the Fairhart who he'd idolized for being a guardian, and an advocate of his father. The only Fairhart that he knew now was the cold-blooded killer from months ago, who, for some reason (or possibly several) was intent on keeping him alive.

"What do you mean your 'headquarters'?" Albus asked shakily, confused.

"What do you think I've been doing since I faked my death, Albus? Knocking back Butterbeers and enjoying the quiet?"

"You were the Silver Wizard" Albus argued at once.

"Yes, I was" Fairhart said. "And remember what the Silver Wizard was, Albus, what it was designed to be. It was my way of contributing to this war, of which I still plan to do. Though I no longer dispose of Dark Alliance members and those associated with Waddlesworth, my initial goal has not changed. It has only grown larger. I plan on stopping Darvy."

Albus snorted. It was a very difficult thing to do, as this reaction was unexpected even to him, but he just couldn't help it. The boldness and simplicity of Fairhart's claim...it sounded like something that Waddlesworth would say to appease an audience.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Albus said, not even thinking. "The United Ministry is struggling to stop the Dark Alliance! What are you supposed to do, huh? You can take on a few wizards, yeah, but have you ever seen the army that Darvy has? Have you ever squared off against a few hundred of those Silhouette-"

"I didn't say anything about stopping the Dark Alliance, or this army that is undoubtedly nearing completion. I said I planned on stopping *Darvy*. And if, by extension, everything else just so happens to fall apart-"

"That's equally dumb-"

"The United Ministry has no chance of defeating Darvy, or his army" Fairhart said matter-of-factly. "On one end, it's because they underestimate him, and just how unpredictable he is, but deeper than that, it's because they aren't aware of what his biggest threats are anyway. Why *is* Sebastian Darvy such a legitimate threat?"

Albus raised his shoulders. "I don't know exactly, I don't really care-"

"Is he powerful?" Fairhart asked.

"He- I mean-"

"Is he as powerful as Ares was?"

"I guess not" Albus said, having no idea where this was going.

"Is he as smart as Waddlesworth?" Fairhart went on.

"He- no-"

"Does he have the same allure that other wizards did, before him? Does he have support like how Voldemort did, or-"

"No" Albus said sharply, and when he went to speak again, Fairhart cut him off.

"It is his *possessions*, Albus! Yes, Darvy is insane, and yes, he's inherited some followers that other, more capable wizards had amassed, but that's it! What really makes Darvy such a problem is what he owns, what he has that he's never really worked for. What does Darvy have, Albus?"

"The Dragonfang Wand" Albus said at once, cringing.

"And what else?"

"The- the Executioner's Veil!" Albus said loudly, somewhat annoyed that Fairhart was playing instructor again; he hadn't been a professor in years, after all.

"That's right, he does, I saw that one be taken" Fairhart said. "And what else?"

Albus scratched at his head, searching for something that Darvy could have that was as instrumental to his power as the Wand or the Veil. There was one thing, but Fairhart couldn't be serious...

"The- the Foulest Book?" he practically asked, and Fairhart nodded.

"Correct" he said. "Darvy has the three necessities of tyranny. And to be honest, he hasn't really rightfully obtained any of them, as far as I know. Ares had at least the Book first, and I'm

guessing that it was he who knew of the Wand as well. Even the Veil, Darvy only managed to obtain by sending his men in to get it for him, in the middle of a battle."

Albus didn't register the last half of what Fairhart had said, he was still trying to analyze his usage of the term 'necessities of tyranny'.

"What makes these three things so necessary?" Albus asked. "Plenty of dark wizards have done a fair amount of damage without-"

"Don't misunderstand these items, by only viewing them physically" Fairhart said, his voice sounding a little too wise for Albus' liking. When Albus failed to respond to this, Fairhart did something that he was completely unprepared for.

He removed his wand from his robes and flicked it. At once, a medium sized chalkboard appeared out of thin air, identical to what Albus was used to seeing at Hogwarts, apart from the fact that it was a bit smaller.

"Take a seat" Fairhart said pleasantly, and Albus looked behind him, finding, again to his surprise, that the rocking chair from the other room had been magicked into this one. He did so obediently, but only because he wanted to hear this explanation as soon as possible.

Fairhart made a few quick movements with his wand, and images began forming on the board, three of them, in fact. The first was a rather crudely drawn image of the Executioner's Veil. The second, drawn just underneath it, was a regular wand-Fairhart had clearly never gotten a good look at the Dragonfang Wand-and beneath that, a book that was obviously supposed to be the Foulest Book, but it simply appeared as large and shaded in.

"My apologies for my lack of artistic skills" Fairhart said. "You were curious as to what research I could possibly be doing, as to why I needed a place to permanently reside. My research, Albus, pertained to these three objects. That bookshelf in there," he said, indicating the other room, "and remind me to move that in here later, actually, as I've been meaning to get around to it, that bookshelf in there, Albus, is all of the information that I've accumulated since I left the Ministry of Magic. I have the handwritten journals of Herpo the Foul, stolen from a magical museum in Greece; don't tell anyone, by the way. I have numerous books about Necromancy, some of which even originate from ancient Egypt, where communicating with the dead was depicted even in hieroglyphics. I have texts from even before then, from the ancient Sumerian wizards -"

"Okay I get it" Albus said, wanting to be spared the history lesson. "What does this-"

"The Executioner's Veil" Fairhart said swiftly, pointing his wand at the corresponding picture. "Created by the Grand Architect long ago, in a time when proper names were obviously not even prevalent. Meant to serve as a portal between this world and the world of the dead. No spell can raise the dead, but theoretically, the dead can indeed exist here, void of life, and with the proper catalyst, this Veil can be used to accomplish just that.

"The Foulest Book" he said next, lowering his wand a few inches or so. "Created by Herpo the Foul at an unspecified time hundreds of years ago. The first widely recognized object created with Necromancy, the Book is meant to serve a powerful form of communication, in which case minds from the realm of the dead can be manifested here. So long as an individual has a soul, they can be contacted, though of course, it requires a spirit object."

Albus nodded his head, remembering this fact from back in his third year, when Scorpius had explained the way this worked. Fairhart went on without pausing.

"The Dragonfang Wand" he said softly, lowering his wand again. "Creating within the same century as the Foulest Book, by Vesnovitch the Sixth, a wandmaker who had been trying to properly replicate the effects of a powerful wand from wizarding lore; I will not bore you with the details here. Unable to properly create the wand by regular means, Vesnovitch dabbled in Necromancy, the end result being a wand that seems capable of, to some degree, controlling those whose minds and souls still linger here.

"These three items, created by three different individuals, in three different times, for three completely different reasons, have all resurfaced here, and now, under the ownership of one of the many people that can manipulate them effectively. I have heard that Reginald Areas was a powerful believer in fate. Whether or not he distilled this same belief in his brother I do not know, but I think that regardless, Darvy now sees himself as even more important than he really is, most likely having understood that he is setting a precedence in the Wizarding World. But these three items-these three evils-what are they, actually? A veil, a book, and a wand?"

Albus said nothing, as his only answer was to agree. That *is* what they were.

Fairhart cleared his throat, then tapped his wand back up at the Veil.

"Power" he said. He tapped the Foulest Book. "Knowledge." He tapped the Dragonfang Wand. "Control."

Albus raised his eyebrows, sure that Fairhart was over thinking things. Rather than saying this, however, he allowed him to continue.

"These three things: power, knowledge, and control. They are the foundation to any form of oppression. With these three things...Darvy truly is all but unbeatable."

"So what, you want to destroy them?" Albus asked, at once understanding the futility of this idea.

"Ideally" Fairhart said. "But separating them from him should be sufficient. Only one do I think needs to actually be destroyed."

"The Wand" Albus said at once.

"No."

"The Veil then-"

"No" Fairhart repeated firmly. "The Foulest Book is easily the most dangerous of the three."

"What?"

"Don't underestimate what the Foulest Book is capable of" Fairhart told him coolly. "Let's just say that the Veil and the Wand are destroyed. What's stopping Darvy from just trying again? There are numerous artifacts in the history of the Wizarding World that are as or possibly even more dangerous than what Darvy possesses now. We are talking about *limitless* knowledge of these things. The Wand and the Veil are one time terrors. The Foulest Book is perpetual. Should *any* wizard with nefarious intentions find it-"

"Okay I get it" Albus said lowly. "But if you're only worried about the Book, then shouldn't the Book be the only thing worth taking from Darvy? Once he no longer has all three-"

Fairhart made a noise as if to cut him off, and Albus threw up his arms.

"You know what, this is nonsense anyway!" he barked.

"Just listen to me" Fairhart said coyly. "Separating Darvy from all three of these items is unlikely-"

"Getting *any* from him is unlik-"

"Listen to me" Fairhart repeated, his voice stern. "Though I acknowledge that the task seems insurmountable any way that you consider it, I believe that any tyrant only really needs *two* of what I listed previously. Think of Reginald Ares. Back when he was alive, he went after the Book first, as he considered knowledge the greatest asset to his cause. When he failed to get it, he opted for control instead, and then went for knowledge once more. Your father entrusted the Executioner's Veil to me only as a precaution. Obviously, Ares never even attempted to obtain it; he considered it unnecessary, as he already had the Wand and the Book. Only Darvy, in all of his greed, thirsted after the power that the Veil could give him. We take *two* of these items from Darvy, and, so long as one of them is the Book, he becomes considerably weaker, but in terms of actual power and his capacity to expand. His army is built by the Veil, his followers-and that includes those creatures that emerge from the Veil-would not be by his side without the Wand, and his future is dependent on the Book. Limit him to just one of these things, and his entire situation crumbles. Everything he has is dependent on something else. When he only has one left, that dependency will show itself. "

Albus merely sat there in a daze, in complete and utter disbelief that he was even having this discussion. The shock of being in Fairhart's presence had worn off at this point, and his focus now was on whatever message it was that Fairhart was trying to get across to him. What was the

point of all of this theorizing? Did it even hold any stock to it? He imagined Fairhart sitting in this dilapidated cabin, void of reason for living, desperately trying to piece together some excuse to research random objects and pass his acquired information off as relevant...

"Why?" Albus asked after a moment, turning to look at the Renegade. "You said you want to contribute to this war, to stop Darvy, but why? What are you even fighting for? Why put all of this effort-"

"Because someone has to" Fairhart cut him off plainly. "And because in some ways, I'm meant to. Those who can protect should protect, those who can teach should imbue their knowledge in others. And those who are skilled at taking down dark wizards...should take down dark wizards. I've been a fighter almost all of my life, Albus. I played vigilante for Waddlesworth, I played enforcer of the law for the Ministry...it's what I'm good at. And the set of requirements needed to think in such a way is an interesting one. To truly be able to stop Darvy, you'd need to know about what he has at his disposal. You'd need to have the training necessary to perform the task. And you'd have to be willing to die in the process."

Albus said nothing, allowing these words to soak in. He still couldn't imagine anyone caring if Fairhart died, not with all that he'd lost. But he at least understood why Fairhart couldn't allow *himself* to think in such a way. He grimaced inwardly though. At some point, it would have to happen. Albus needed to hand Fairhart over to Waddlesworth...

He couldn't bring himself to continue the current conversation, so he instead rose from his chair and turned his head, eager to discuss something else.

"What's with the cauldron?" he asked, nodding his head toward it.

"A recent pick-up" Fairhart said. "My research suggests that if these items are to be destroyed, the best bet would be some sort of potion. Specific forms of magic like Necromancy have few weaknesses in their designs, but some of the ancient writings that I've found indicate that some *extremely* complex concoctions can be vital to combating it. I also picked up a variety of ingredients," he said, waving his hand toward the dusty cupboard, "but that's as far as I've went. I'd rather actually have the objects in question here before I begin that process."

"Well the Veil's at Azkaban" Albus said, tossing his arms up in the air. "And the Wand- the Wand too probably...so..."

"And I'd be willing to bet that the Foulest Book is there as well" Fairhart commented. "Though I don't believe that it would be in Darvy's direct possession, as the Wand would be. I doubt whether he's even used it yet or not. But you are forgetting, Albus, about what is else is at Azkaban."

"I thought there was only three-"

"Your *father*" Fairhart stressed.

"Oh" Albus said, frowning. "Nearly forgot" he said sarcastically, tapping at his head with his pointer finger. "Thanks though, for the reminder, really-"

"You don't see what I'm saying, do you?"

Albus said nothing. His failure to respond resulted in yet another question from Fairhart.

"Tell me Albus, what do you know of Azkaban?"

Albus raised his eyebrows curiously. "I- I've heard it's almost impossible to break out of" he said.

"Indeed. But what do you know of breaking *in*?"

A previously unnoticeable silence filled the room, eventually punctuated by the most hollow and cold laugh that Albus had ever mustered.

"You're kidding, right?" he said, somewhat disturbed at how easily he could laugh considering all that had just happened in his life. "I mentioned that you're crazy right? I mean-"

"I am not kidding" Fairhart said, and much to Albus' chagrin, he did indeed sound rather serious. "I intend on infiltrating Azkaban."

"Good luck" Albus said mockingly, forgetting momentarily everything else that had just been on his mind. "Send me a postcard-"

"I'm glad that you find this humorous" Fairhart said dryly. "But I must ask, if this idea is so outlandish, what is *your* plan?"

"I- what?" Albus asked, though he did so almost dismissively. "I never said that I had a plan-"

"So then what do you expect to happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where is the world, this time next year, Albus?"

Albus said nothing. The truth was, the only plan that he had ever had did little to effect the war itself. His plan to aid in capturing Fairhart had only been to get his father out of Azkaban.

"It's not up to me to have a plan" Albus finally said. "Alright? There. I don't know what's going to happen-"

"Do you think that Waddlesworth is going to win this war?" Fairhart asked casually. "Do you think that his 'unity' will prevail over Darvy's massive army of incomprehensible power and danger?"

"I- no- probably not-"

"So then your plan then," Fairhart started, "is to wait around and watch your friends and family be mercilessly slaughtered by Darvy's Dark Alliance."

Albus said nothing, but he was now definitely no longer laughing.

"And *I'm* the crazy one?" Fairhart asked, his insult stabbing the air.

Albus felt his cheeks redden. Disgusted with his inability to argue back, he waved his hand through the air, annoyed.

"Fine, go ahead" he said. "Break into Azkaban, or try. I really am pulling for you, I want-"

"You are not quite catching on to the nature of this conversation, Albus" said Fairhart mysteriously. "I will attempt to breach the island of Azkaban alone if I must...but I believe that success is more probable with a partner."

Albus' jaw dropped at once.

"You- you want me- you want- me and you-"

"Your father's imprisonment, though unfortunate, is not on my immediate agenda to be rectified. Come with me, however, and we can help one another reach our goals. I want to stop Darvy by putting a powerful dent in his means of activity. You want to get your father out of Azkaban. Together, we can accomplish this."

"Why do you want my help!" Albus asked, horror-struck at the suggestion. "I'm sixteen, what am I supposed to do, fire a Jelly-Legs Jinx at an army of Silhouettes-"

"I plan on infiltrating Azkaban, not storming it" Fairhart said. "And incidentally, you are more of an asset than you think, Albus. You are a gifted wizard, and more so than that, you are intuitive; strategic. I have seen it for myself."

"That's not true at all-"

"For all of the dilemmas that you bring upon yourself, I have seen you flourish in times of need. You are bold, intelligent, and daring, yes, but you are also cunning, perhaps more so than any other trait. You do not attempt to overpower your adversaries, you attempt to outthink them. I saw this personally just months ago when you dueled alongside me. Do not underestimate your own capabilities, just because you are not as powerful with a wand as some others. The peers who surpass you may be more talented, or stronger, but these attributes are not invariably telling of who the most accomplished wizard is. What books do you know of that can teach courage, or resilience, or empathy? *These* are characteristics that make an individual truly powerful!"

Albus said nothing, and Fairhart used this moment to add to his words.

"I am asking for your aid here, Albus, because I have faith in you, and because I truly do believe that we can accomplish this task together. It is the only way that you'll get your father out of Azkaban-

"No it's not!" Albus barked, but he stopped here. He was not going to include that there was another way, and that it involved everything that they were discussing here being thrown out of the window. Fairhart said nothing, however, and was merely looking at him with an expression of interest.

"You really meant it, didn't you?" Albus asked him. "About how you're willing to die for this?"

Fairhart nodded. "I did. You're not?"

Albus said nothing at first, instead trying to formulate some sort of half-answer.

"I-" he started, not knowing where it would finish, but Fairhart cut him off.

"Are you afraid of death?"

Albus again had no answer that he was willing to give. Fairhart seemed to understand his lack of speech, though.

"There is nothing wrong with fearing death, Albus. It is human. But equally human is to consider the terrible alternatives. Death lurks behind every corner in the times that we live in. What is preferable to you, Albus? Dying here, today, trying to make a difference for your loved ones, or dying in a few years, alone and huddled in a corner, mourning your friends and family, all who died frightened and miserable, just as you soon would?"

Albus looked up at him, his throat suddenly sore, his head burning.

"So many people, Albus" Fairhart said quietly. "So many people die, and have their names drawn in the sand by someone else, to be blown away by the wind. Only a very fortunate few are presented the great privilege of carving their names in the stone instead, where their actions and their ideas linger as a constant reminder of their existence here. What a blessing it must be, to be able to die for something or someone. A far greater blessing than living with no purpose but to wait."

Albus swallowed, in complete and utter disbelief that he was even torn on this idea. Two days ago he'd been on the train, searching for a way to locate Fairhart so as to betray him over to WAR and free his father. And now here he was...in the middle of nowhere with Fairhart, possibly preparing to not just free his father from Azkaban, but to stop Darvy as well...

"What are my options here, really?" Albus asked, his body shaking.

"Well basically, there are two" Fairhart said simply. "You are no prisoner here, Albus. If you'd like, I can Apparate you to just outside the grounds of Hogwarts. I can send a Patronus to alert the castle, then disappear, and you can be safe and sound within your dormitory within the hour, surrounded by the comfort of your friends and waiting to hear news of what's going on in the outside world."

"Or?" Albus asked, cringing.

"You can do something that matters."

Albus ran his hands through his hair, then sat back down, his eyes finding, for a brief moment, the poorly drawn images on the board. Azkaban. Now the very fortress that his father had successfully predicted months ago. The odds of he and Fairhart being able to even reach the surrounding island were probably extremely low, let alone getting into the prison itself, freeing his father, and accomplishing the other daunting tasks Fairhart had designated. And then there was Hogwarts. He thought of Scorpius and Morrison, and his sister and his cousins. Even outside of the castle, he thought of his mother, stricken with grief, his aunts and uncles trying to console her to no avail as she cried over her missing son. He thought of Mirra, who was probably curled up in a ball on her bed right now, wearing his locket. He thought of how he'd give anything to be able to lay there next to her, and tell her that everything was going to be okay.

He thought of how much he'd die inside if something terrible happened to her. If something happened to any of them...

"How do we get there?" he croaked, looking up. "And when?"

Fairhart's face instantly became twice as hideous; he had smiled.

"Well we do nothing right away" he said. "First, we train you up a bit."

"What?" Albus asked, surprised. "Train me into what?"

Fairhart tilted his head to the side somewhat as he answered him.

"Into a Renegade, of course."

Chapter 21: Caleb Fairhart

Albus spent the next few days in a dream-like state, sometimes unable to fully understand how or why he was in the situation that he was in. What had been the primordial event that had led him to where he was now? A little more than a week ago he'd been exchanging Christmas presents with Mirra. Now he was adjusting to the living requirements of Sancticus Fairhart, all the while being prepared to infiltrate what was possibly the most feared and dangerous location in the world.

Though, as he quickly realized, he would not have had it any other way. Fairhart was certainly not unfair in their negotiations, as made evident by his constant questions as to whether or not Albus was sure that he wanted to go through with their plan, but Albus was always adamantly against this.

"I'm not backing out" he said through gritted teeth one day. "If I didn't think that I was up for this, I wouldn't have agreed in the first place."

"Then stop complaining about the antiseptic" Fairhart said dryly, lightly pointing toward the bar of soap in Albus' hand.

Albus narrowed his eyes, but said nothing as he slouched himself up near the fireplace, then proceeded to wash his arms manually with a rag, water, and the soap.

The first two days in Fairhart's care had been primarily about exploring his surroundings and learning about just how they were going to survive while he was here. As he found out on the very first day, Fairhart's cabin was in a relatively secluded area, with trees encircling all but a small dirt road-covered in snow by the season-that led back to a small wizarding town, of which Fairhart frequently visited for things like food and cleaning supplies.

"And why can't I just clean myself with magic again?" Albus asked the Renegade, who was staring out of a window idly.

"The Trace that the United Ministry has may be nothing more than a replica, but I made it capable enough to detect some things. I can use magic around you without anything registering, but it will be a stronger indication of your whereabouts if you are using magic directly. And besides, even if you could use magic, I wouldn't recommend it. Your wand can clean things on the surface, but there are chemicals and bacteria that you can't possibly eradicate. You still bathe when you're at home, don't you?"

Albus didn't answer this last part of the question, but as he tossed his shirt back over his head, he did have a few of his own now.

"So if I can't do magic on my own, how are you supposed to train me?"

"Eventually, we will simply have to progress through it. It is possible to weaken the Trace on an underage wizard, but I don't feel especially comfortable performing magic on you now, not until I'm positive that I can use it around you without setting anything off. If the United Ministry doesn't show up in the next few days or so, then we'll begin actual magic."

"And if they *do* show up?" Albus asked.

Fairhart turned. "Then you're free to use magic. You'd might as well. Or, of course, you could always simply choose to go with them. The offer still stands-

"I'm staying" Albus said darkly, somewhat annoyed at his constant insistence of this now. If Fairhart was so comfortable with doing everything alone, then why had he practically preached to him for help? "But aren't you worried I'd tell people where you are, if I did go back?" he added.

Fairhart gave a light smile, the result being, as usual, twisted skin on half of his face. "You wouldn't be giving up much, there is more than one place I can stay, Albus. This one is just my favorite. And besides that, I'm not worried. I trust you. Your feelings may be ambiguous at best about me, and I cannot blame you there, but something tells me you're not very fond of the United Ministry either. You'd have no reason to side with them here."

Albus said nothing.

Albus spent his nights on the same couch that he'd first woken up on, having no idea where it was that Fairhart had chosen to sleep. Having anticipated nightmares that involved a vicious double of himself attacking him, he was surprised to find that his nights were plagued more by the typical terrors of the night, the same ones, in fact, that bothered him throughout the day.

"Is something troubling you, Albus?" Fairhart asked him as they sat across one another by the fire. "You haven't touched your loaf of bread..."

Albus held the crusty loaf up, frowning. "You get your food from a town right? Not far from here?"

Fairhart nodded, then took a bite from his own piece of bread. "Yes, but I'm afraid that they don't have much better than this. You will see the town soon. I plan on having us stop by for a brief, but necessary visit before our planned departure for Azkaban."

"And people just...ignore you there?" Albus asked casually.

"My name does not resonate with others as much as it would your crowd. Only a few people know that I was supposed to be dead anyway. Apart from my face, there is nothing of interest

about me when I enter public places. Only under Waddlesworth's new regime must I be more vigilant, but we are on the outskirts of civilization here."

Now it was Albus' turn to nod. He ripped his own chunk of dry bread with his teeth, chewing it fiercely and painfully.

"But that can't be all that was on your mind" Fairhart said, and Albus swallowed, then nodded.

"I've just been thinking about my family. And my friends. What they're thinking right now."

"It is not too late to-"

"Shut it" Albus said, the warning in his voice matching the expression on his face.

Fairhart scowled, making one of the ugly bumps on his face protrude even further than usual, before speaking.

"Well Albus, the best way to think about it is that your family is only worrying about you, not grieving for you. They are confused, of course...but they also have hope to cling to. I don't know whether or not the United Ministry has informed them that you were last seen being taken away by someone who they consider to be the enemy, but as neither us have been seen since, they at least figure that you're alive."

Albus said nothing, realizing that the situation that he'd presented his loved ones now was uncannily similar to one that they'd been dealing with for so long now anyway. Albus' own father was out of contact, with no guarantee that he'd ever be seen again. He had clung to hope that he would be reunited with his father one day soon. How terrible it must be for his mother, now having yet another reunion to hope for...

"We start your training tomorrow" Fairhart said, and Albus returned his attention to him.

"I can finally start learning some powerful magic?" he asked hopefully.

"Not quite" Fairhart told him. "There is more to being a capable wizard than merely memorizing powerful spells. You need to learn technique, and skill. You will see tomorrow. For now, I recommend that you get some sleep."

He extinguished the fire with a wave of his wand, leaving Albus alone in the darkness. Feeling his way around to crawl onto the uncomfortable couch, he tucked himself under the loose blanket, somewhat excited for whatever this training could be. It was strange, really, that he should be excited for something that pertained to the outlandish task that he'd set for himself. Especially since the possible outcomes of this task mostly fell in between disappointment and untimely death. But there was something about knowing that he was doing something-anything, really-other than waiting around for information, that made it very hard for him to wander off. Not that he'd need to, of course, as non-magical training could hardly be difficult...

As he found out only five or six hours later, however, at the crack of dawn, his most recent night of sleep should have been coveted rather than dismissed.

"You want me to climb that?" Albus asked, pointing upwards at a massive tree that was coated in wet and sloppy snow.

"Yes" Fairhart said.

Albus stared at him. "You want me to climb this giant tree? May I ask why?"

"We are going to an *island*, Albus. There will be an abundance of trees there, and though it is unlikely that any of them will have snow coating them, this is an excellent opportunity to learn the essentials."

"Yeah, but *why*-"

"Having a considerable height advantage can result in both aerial attacks, as well as an extremely useful vantage point. In the former, you can expect to use such an attack when taking one or more opponents by surprise, which can quickly turn the tide of the confrontation in your favor. In the latter, you will be able to scour an environment safely. Likewise, it is an excellent way to hide yourself, even from location spells like *Homenum Revelalo*, which will be able to discern that there is a human present, but can still not possibly indicate that the said individual is above someone."

Albus gawked at him, then shook his head, agitated. "And how many times have you used a tree to attack people, huh?" he asked sarcastically.

"Nine" Fairhart said automatically, and Albus groaned. "Now get climbing."

Albus begrudgingly hooked his hand around the icy branch nearest the base of the tree, heaving himself upwards as he did so. The cold snow froze his hand and made it difficult to grasp at other parts of the tree, but it was not until he was more than half way to the top that things became truly ominous. Placing his foot down firmly on a branch, he heard a quick, loud snap that told him that any more pressure would result in a very unfortunate accident.

"Some of these branches are pretty brittle!" Albus called down the tree.

"Yup" Fairhart responded.

"So do I keep climbing?" Albus hollered, annoyed.

"No point now, as soon as you made that noise you died; gave up your location. So come on down and then try again. *Quietly* this time."

It took three more tries for Albus to be able to climb down the tree as stealthily as Fairhart required, nearly injuring himself in all attempts but the last. As he climbed his way down the

bottommost branches, relieved, he felt his pants snag themselves on a claw-like protrusion from the withered tree. As he went to pull himself away, he felt a tiny bump in his pocket that made him go still.

He still had not returned Fairhart's ring to him. Perhaps it was because there was no right time for it, or because, like with James, he didn't want to retell the convoluted tale of how it had come into his possession, especially the part about having once offered it to Blackwood. But then there was a small part of him—a part that he tried very hard to ignore, but simply couldn't—that told him that Fairhart didn't deserve it. He had had the ring on him back in that destroyed muggle house on 2791 Woodlard Way, after all, and had been given the opportunity to hand the ring over then, but had decided not to. He'd been too repulsed by Fairhart's actions.

Fairhart was different now, on the surface at least. Albus had not noticed any powerful aggression, nor had he seen any of the violent tendencies that he definitely would have associated with the Fairhart that he'd seen months ago. But he also reasoned that this was because nothing had set his former professor off. It had been Blackwood's death that had resulted in the monster that he'd witnessed, and there was no telling whether or not that part of Fairhart was close to coming out again...

"Something on your mind?"

Albus shook his head. "Leg just got caught—"

He pried himself free and dropped down at Fairhart's side, shivering somewhat from the snow that had accumulated on his clothes.

"What next?" he said.

"I thought we'd do a little tracking experiment" Fairhart told him plainly. "Close your eyes now."

"Oh come on..."

He did as he was told however, and after waiting a full minute for a response that didn't come, he opened them to find a trail of footprints left behind in the snow.

"Really?" he asked himself out loud, and he slowly began following the trail of footprints, which had twisted and turned all throughout the wooded area it seemed.

After about two minutes of this, he came to a stop. The footprints had led him into a relatively large clearing, but had then disappeared. He looked around the clearing, scouring for more of them—

Something fell on top of him, making his face fall flat into the snow. He groaned as he hoisted himself up, the heavy object now standing next to him.

"Why didn't you check up in the tree?" Fairhart said condescendingly, pointing vertically toward a tree that had snowflakes falling due to his leap.

"Following footprints?" Albus asked, rubbing his back and ignoring Fairhart's question. "A bit elementary-"

"You'd be astonished at how many wizards and witches leave behind footprints, when unaware that they are being tracked. Following these small clues can again lead to a surprise attack. At the same time though, if a trail suddenly ends with no immediate explanation, it does you well do duck or dodge. You've probably fallen for a trap."

"Well I'll remember that the next time I'm following someone around in the snow" Albus said coldly.

"Snow is not the only thing on this planet that creates tracks when walked through. You'll find that things like mud and dirt can be equally effective. But beyond this, try and obtain some symbolism from this idea. When trying to locate someone, you must follow them every step of the way. In the case of doing it so physically, you are looking for visual cues. If you're trying to find someone Apparating around the world, however, you'll need to treat each area as its own footprint."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked.

"Well, if you are tracking someone around different areas, then obviously, you need a bit of information about them. Where are they likely to be going? Deductive reasoning will handle the first part for you. Once you've found out where they'd been once, you must simply follow the trail by examining each place they go next. If you were tracking me for instance, you would come to this cabin. You would see my many books about powerful Necromancy objects like the Dragonfang Wand, and from there, right away, know that I am attempting to do something with it. Assuming that you already know that Darvy has it...you could also assume that I planned on going to Azkaban, where sure enough, I hope to be somewhat soon."

"Why are you telling me this?" Albus asked. "I don't plan on scouring the world for someone-"

"Maybe not, but I'm telling you how to do more than track here; I'm telling you how a tracker thinks. Everything that you do is a footprint Albus. And so, you must exercise extreme caution when moving. Always wipe your footprints, whether they be in the snow or in the entirety of your actions. To demonstrate, I plan on hiding those books and other valuable, but telling information that I've accumulated in a few weeks, once we are ready to leave for Az-"

"Wait what?" Albus asked, caught off guard. "Few weeks? What are you- we can't wait a few weeks to go to Azkaban!"

Fairhart frowned at him, but Albus was too angry to acknowledge this displeasure. For Fairhart, waiting around did little, as the chances were that the objects that he wanted to destroy weren't going anywhere. But there was a powerful timetable that Albus needed to work with now, if he wanted to save his father. Darvy could kill him at any minute...or Waddlesworth could attack the prison. It was one thing to count on the postponement of one of these things, but to bank on *both*?

"I know what you are thinking, Albus-"

"Then you know why we can't spend weeks preparing!" Albus shot out. "I get that you want me to be able to watch your back, I want to be able to do that too, but my dad-"

"We will have time to train-"

"You don't know that!" Albus yelled; this is it, this was why he wasn't going to give him his precious ring back. He was too selfish. "You don't know that, you don't know when Darvy will be done with my dad, you don't know when Waddlesworth-"

"Educated guessing is the root of this plan" Fairhart cut him off sternly. "And it is again being used here. Darvy executing your father and Warren attacking the prison are not two entirely unrelated things, Albus; one is all but dependent on the other. Darvy needs people like your father alive to extract information about the Ministry. He will need to keep this up *at least* until Warren attacks the island of Azkaban. Confident in his army though he might be, Darvy is not going to give Warren the chance to outsmart him. And likewise, though he may be belligerent due to the unforeseen attack on the Hogwarts Express, Warren will not allow this to outweigh his propensity for meticulous planning. He is still new to the Ministry. He will wait until he knows Azkaban inside out before doing anything, and will make sure that he is more than prepared to launch a full blown assault against the Dark Alliance. All things considered, I'd say that we have about a month before anything actually happens."

Albus stood there in the snow, fuming. Whatever his explanations, it was all still-as Fairhart had even admitted-guesswork. Before he could say anything, however, Fairhart had added to it all.

"I understand your hurry Albus, but to be fair, this all depends more on you than me. The quicker you show yourself to be someone capable of helping me infiltrate Azkaban, the sooner we can actually make our attempt."

Albus scoffed, knowing full well that Fairhart was only trying to motivate him; to put the onus of the timetable on himself, as a means of improving work ethic. Fairhart's next words, however, had a hint of sympathy in them.

"Perhaps we can start a bit earlier than previously anticipated," he said. "Tomorrow...tomorrow we can start learning some magic."

Albus perked his ears up a bit. "What kind of magic?" he asked, distracted. He was thinking of the spells that he'd seen Fairhart perform as the Silver Wizard; the complex shields and rapid stunners that had all followed their targets-

But something far more interesting had been suggested.

"I was thinking that we'd get a bit started on Legilimancy."

It took nearly twenty minutes of standing still before Albus was ready to use magic the next day. Intent on making sure that his wandwork would not be detected, Fairhart had ordered him not to move a muscle as he swiped his wand back and forth in front of his motionless body, muttering under his breath and leaving Albus to see for himself just how effective his new mentor of sorts was being. Only when Fairhart gave him the say-so did he permit himself to scratch a terrible itch on the back of the neck.

"So I can use magic now?" Albus asked, moving away a bit from the fireplace; they would be having this particular lesson indoors.

"I would think so" Fairhart said, scratching at his chin. "A normal Trace probably wouldn't be fooled, but seeing as how I wasn't exactly expertise with the substitute that I made, we should be okay. Now, back up a bit."

Albus did as he was told, removing his wand from his pocket as he did so. He glanced around the room anxiously, realizing that the only two real pieces of furniture in it; the couch that he slept on and the table next to it, had been pushed aside to the edge of the room.

"Why do we have such a large space?" Albus asked.

"We are practicing magic" Fairhart responded simply. "And though this particular branch of magic does not usually have any physical aspects to it, there is always the slight chance that something will go awry; having a reasonable space to perform magic is a basic and important rule when learning something."

Albus nodded, but before he could do anything else, Fairhart had already asked him an unusual question.

"You are sixteen, correct?"

"Yes" Albus replied.

"Have you already been instructed-if only marginally-in the usage of nonverbal spells?"

"Yes" Albus answered again. "We actually started a bit in my fifth year, and now in my sixth-"

"Good" Fairhart said approvingly. "Good...what about Apparition?"

Albus tensed up a bit, suddenly uncomfortable. "We're learning it" he said blandly. "But I'm not particularly- erm- "

"You don't need to be skilled" Fairhart said quickly. "So long as you understand. The reason I ask is because Legilimancy is largely a nonverbal magical art. Yes, there is an incantation, but like with all spells, this incantation is simply a mnemonic device used to help someone who is not yet familiar enough, or struggles with, the actual methodology behind a spell. With Legilimancy-and other magical arts that pertain almost solely to the mind-you'll find that the method is far more imperative to success than any associated wandwork. Much like with Apparition, where you must focus and perform mental tasks, rather than memorizing a particular wand movement or reciting a certain incantation.

"We will, of course, be starting with the incantation, which I will tell you in a moment. A skilled Legilimens, and one who is learned, will typically not need the magical advantage of a wand or words to utilize it; thus making Legilimancy that much more effective, as it can catch someone quite off guard. The best Legilimens will even sometimes be able to simply use the skill without thinking; a skilled practitioner may, for instance, be able to tell when someone is lying to them without even needing to do anything. Unless of course that person is skilled in Occlumency, but that's an entirely different discussion."

"Can you do Occlumency?" Albus asked. "I actually think I may have asked you before-"

"I am capable, but not as accomplished. Occlumency is, at least as far as I am concerned, much more difficult than its companion art. That being said, I don't think that I will need to teach you Occlumency anyway. It is highly unlikely that you will need to defend your mind against anyone who we encounter, as I'm not entirely sure how many people in Darvy's group could perform the feat. Legilimency, however, is an excellent magical tool to possess, hence why I think some tutelage here would not go amiss."

Albus nodded again, feeling himself grow a bit restless as he did so. He'd never really put much thought into Legilimancy, but now that he was on the verge of learning it, he couldn't help but feel privileged; it was supposed to be a rare skill after all. But then another, terrible thought struck him. What if he was terrible at it, like he was with Apparition, and basically everything else?

"The mindset of someone using Legilimency is what is most important" Fairhart said, and Albus saw that he was pacing slightly now, almost revolving on the spot fifteen feet or so away from him. "As human beings, we naturally want to pry. We thirst for information, even if that information is deliberately kept secret, and Legilimency helps us accomplish this task. We also, however, normally do very little to obtain such sought-after information. We consider it as overstepping our boundaries. As being morally wrong. As being sinister.

"This cannot be the case if you want to use Legilimancy. You must show blatant disregard for the wishes of others, and the secrets that they want to keep. Much like how an Unforgivable Curse requires someone to truly desire the intended effect, you will find that a Legilimens who does not wish to penetrate the mind of another will find that they are unable to. And thus I must ask Albus, that if you have any reservations of delving into my mind, you make them clear to me here, so that I may explain something before it is seen."

Albus felt sweat roll down his cheek. There were a lot of things that he didn't really want to know or see, Fairhart's entire time with WAR, actually, but as there wasn't anything in particular, he shook his head.

"I'm ready" he said.

Fairhart nodded. "When I count to three, I want you to point your wand at me and utter the incantation, *Legilimens*. Remember the thought process necessary. You must *want* to invade my mind, to peruse my thoughts and memories. Make sure that my struggle is but an obstacle that you must overcome, and nothing more. Understand?"

Albus nodded, raising his wand in preparation, his heart beating a bit quicker than he'd thought that it would.

"Do not be deterred if you are not immediately successful" Fairhart warned him. "It takes great skill and practice. On three now...one...two...three!"

"*Legilimens!*" Albus bellowed, stabbing his wand forward into the air.

The effect was instantaneous. A scene of sorts-an image of colors and sounds-began to connect inside of his head, but what was most peculiar was that he was still very aware of what he was doing. With his physical eyes he could see his outstretched wand, and could see Fairhart standing still, his eyes closed as he cringed. But in the back of his head he was viewing-no, *experiencing*-things that were part of his own experiences.

He was crawling on his knees through splintered wood and other forms of wreckage. It was dark out, but he could still see his shaking, childish hands as he clawed through metal and wood, the green light of a giant skull in the sky hanging over his head, serving to illuminate the search for his parents-

The scene had switched as quickly as it'd arrived. Now he was sitting across from a beautiful woman. Her usually sharp and cold features were oddly relaxed, her long, golden hair curling her shoulders as she flashed him a warm smile. A youthful Ida Blackwood was leaning in to kiss him, but he was pushing her away gently, not because he didn't find her attractive, not even because he didn't love her, but because it just felt wrong-

The scene stopped, and Albus, feeling quite drained, felt himself buckle, his palms meeting the dusty floor.

"Are you okay?" Fairhart asked him.

Albus' response had nothing to do with Fairhart's question.

"I just- did I- did I just do it?"

He looked up and saw that Fairhart was nodding.

Albus felt his stomach turn hollow for a moment. "Did you- did you see what I saw?"

"No" answered Fairhart. "More accurately, what *I* was seeing was what *you* saw. Though only nanoseconds were the difference, I registered a thought first, and you invaded it."

"But I *was* you" Albus said hurriedly, getting to his feet.

"You saw things through my eyes. Flashes of memory. You were able to perceive them as me because we briefly shared an emotional link. Quite fascinating, actually. Anatomically speaking, the amygdala-"

"I did it" Albus said under his breath, surprised. "You said that- said that- that it would be really difficult-"

"It usually is" Fairhart said. "But our own predisposition does account for quite a bit in terms of magical talent. Perhaps it is simply beginner's luck, but maybe your constant desire to snoop through the business of others is actually manifesting itself positively here."

Albus saw him give a weak smile, which he did not return.

"I apologize; I am understating my awe here. What you just did is actually very impressive, Albus. Far beyond N.E.W.T standard, I am sure. Take pride in it. And now, let's try again..."

"Again?" Albus said, feeling himself shake a bit. Whatever he'd told himself before, he did not like being in Fairhart's head. "I- I kind of saw-"

"I should have been more select in what I was letting you view" Fairhart admitted, and then he muttered something else under his breath that Albus didn't quite catch. "In fact," he started, louder, "let us halt our lesson for a moment."

Albus watched as he strode over to the corner of the room, where the dusty bookshelf was. On top of the shelf was the archaic Pensieve that Albus had used before, the last time, in fact, occurring a few months ago when he'd viewed memories in Fairhart's old home. Fairhart must have later returned to the scene and retrieved it...

Albus watched as Fairhart silently placed his wand to his forehead, extracting strings of translucent material and siphoning them into the bowl. For half of a minute Albus watched as Fairhart did this, until finally, they'd returned to facing each other from a few feet away.

"What was that all about?" Albus asked.

"Though memories can never truly be *removed*, placing the records of them away somewhere will minimize the chances of them cropping up during Legilimancy. Normally I'd use glass vials, but they can stay in the Pensieve for now."

"What- what don't you want me to see?" Albus asked, a little perturbed.

Fairhart's face darkened. "There is nothing that I don't want *you* to see, Albus. Now, let's get ready again..."

Albus nodded, unsure of what to make of Fairhart's cryptic answer. Still, he raised his wand once more, but this time only did so half-heartedly. Whatever he may have said before, the thought of being inside of Fairhart's mind unnerved him now, and he was not looking forward to seeing such private things. He could only secretly hope that Fairhart had removed such sensitive memories.

"On three" Fairhart said briskly. "One...two...three!"

"*Legilimens!*" Albus cried, and he braced himself-

For nothing. Nothing happened, no momentary visions, no struggle from Fairhart, nothing. Albus stood frozen on the spot, his arm extended, until after a moment, Fairhart addressed him.

"Quite alright" he said. "Let's give it another go. It is only natural that it be a bit sporadic at first. You can do it though, as we just learned, remember that. Now, one...two...three!"

"*Legilimens!*"

Again, nothing happened. Albus repeated this three more times before Fairhart finally approached him, clapping his hands on his shoulders in a fatherly manner as he did so.

"I think that's enough for today" he said.

"I can do it!" Albus said at once. "I can-"

"I know you can" Fairhart told him. "But you don't have to do it again right now. Despite only one successful attempt, you are still miles ahead of where I would have hoped to be after a first lesson. Legilimency is an uncomfortable skill to wield; there is nothing wrong with taking some time to adjust to it."

Albus frowned, but knew that there was no point in arguing. Though Fairhart wasn't going to directly say it, it was painfully obvious to both of them the reason why Albus' later attempts had proven fruitless. Actually doing the deed had reduced his will to do it once more.

"It's getting late" Fairhart said placidly. "Get some sleep. We have a lot to do in the morning; I want to tackle confrontational spells as well."

Albus nodded, sitting down on the dirty couch loosely. Fairhart almost made to say something to him, but then seemed to change his mind.

"Just extinguish the fire when you're ready to sleep" he said, waving his hand toward the fireplace. And without another word, he exited the room, probably not to return until the next morning.

Albus didn't even bother laying down however; he was filled with too much adrenaline. The thoughts of his worried family were still creeping up in the back of his head, but for all of the uneasiness that these images brought him, he felt himself grow more determined in what he was doing. Training alongside Fairhart was mentally taxing, yes, but it was the only thing that he could consider worth doing at this point. If it got him a step closer to freeing his father from Azkaban, then it had to be the right thing to do...

But then again, of course, there was the more simple alternative. He could still perhaps find a way to contact WAR. Assuming that Waddlesworth was still willing to exchange favors, this idea was much safer for himself, and almost certainly had a greater chance of success when it came to freeing his father. It would completely eradicate Fairhart's plans to deal a blow to Darvy, of course, but what were the odds of that happening anyway, really? Fairhart himself was uncertain, hence why he'd even asked for help...

His indecisiveness oozing through his thoughts once more, he waved his wand without thinking, and the fireplace went dark at once. Albus was momentarily impressed with his own magic-he hadn't even said an incantation in his head, after all-but he was distracted by something else. Despite the absence of fire in the room, there was still a faint glow providing light; a silvery glow that seemed to bounce off of the ceiling more than any other place in the room. He felt his heart miss a beat as he realized that it was Fairhart's Pensieve, still containing the memories that he'd selectively removed.

Why had he left it in the room? Had he forgotten that the records of his memories were out in the open? Or had he been unwilling to return them to his immediate thoughts? Whatever memories they were, they could not be anything good. Albus felt himself rise from the couch with curiosity, but he sat himself back down at once, shaking his head. Tomorrow was more training, and it would probably be more eventful and tiring. He needed to get some sleep.

But there was no way that he'd be able to sleep now, not with his interest piqued...

Slowly, he rose from his seat and tip-toed his way over to the bookshelf, his head just barely on level with the nearly flat bowl of memories. He felt a twinge of both guilt and worry as he peered into it. In all of the times that he'd used Fairhart's Pensieve, he'd never done it when the Renegade was nearby; the closest having been in his third year, but even then, it had been his father's memories that he was viewing.

He hesitated for a second, making sure that he wanted to do this. Why he was drawn to Fairhart's past he didn't quite know; hadn't he just shown that he was unwilling to learn such mysteries? And yet, his head was exploding with wonder at what he might see...

He glanced both ways secretively, unsure of what the odds were that Fairhart would return. Would he remember that he'd left his memories in the Pensieve? Or, was Albus' other theory correct, and was Fairhart most likely willing to leave them in there for as long as possible?

Slowly, he lifted the full Pensieve from the top of the shelf and placed it down on the dusty floor, sinking to his knees along with it. The silvery glow blinded him slightly as he peered into the device, the physical nature of its contents as much a mystery to him now as it always was. He knew that his impromptu mischief was highly immoral, but he'd deal with those ramifications after he'd learned a bit more about the vagabond who'd riddled his thoughts for the last few years now...

In a single, sharp movement, he lowered his head into the bowl, and at once he found himself swirling around, his knees already in pain from the pressure he was putting on the hard floor, the darkness of the room being replaced by a magnificent light-

When his feet finally hit solid ground, he felt his jaw drop.

He was on a hill top; a luscious green hill top that seemed to tower over the sprawling image of a suburb below it. He could almost feel the delicate breeze graze his cheeks, and could almost smell the captivating scent of the few scattered flowers in the area, which provided further evidence of just how serene the locale was. He spun around in a circle, mesmerized by what it was he was a part of. Down the steep slope from the hill was a suburb, yes, but behind the hill there were fresh, grassy plains that seemed to extend for miles...

The beautiful scene was accompanied by very little human life, only two people, actually. Albus had to do a double-take when he saw the woman sitting on the hill; for a brief, wild moment, he'd thought that it was Mirra.

As he inspected her more closely, however, he realized that the few similarities between this woman and his girlfriend were outweighed heavily by the smaller traits. They both had long black hair that went down passed their shoulders, and they both had pale skin that seemed to gleam in the sunlight, but this woman's features were much more prominent. Her lips were full, her smile perfectly centered. Her eyes were rather big, but this only heightened their appeal, as

they were a spectacular shade of green that he couldn't quite label. Her utter beauty seemed to be matched by her attire; she was wearing a long dress with a floral pattern on it, reflecting the scene around her, and she looked extremely comfortable with her sleek legs resting on what looked like a checkered blanket.

Her partner in the picnic, as Albus could have predicted easily, was Fairhart. But it was not the Fairhart that he knew now, nor was it the Fairhart that he'd known years ago. Just as he'd seen in photographs before, his face was void of any scarring or disturbance, instead fresh and full, his own features prominent, even if they were partially hidden by his own black hair, which hung loosely down over his eyes. He was very handsome, but as in other cases where Albus had seen him youthful, it was his toothy smile that really made him so appealing.

If Albus' deductions were correct (and he was almost positive that they were) this young woman was named Samantha, and she was a muggle. One look at her hands told him that she was not yet quite as close to Fairhart as she was in other pictures, however. There was no ring on her finger, anyway.

Instead they seemed to be merely enjoying the company of one another, a picnic basket in between them, a bottle of what looked like wine only serving to complete the picture ripped right from a storybook. The genuine feeling of elation in the scene was almost more than Albus could handle, but only because he knew that this moment of happiness was not a sign of things to come. Whatever happened to Samantha, he didn't know, but he knew for sure that Fairhart was going to end up living in a cabin with half of a face...

Fairhart spoke up, his tone one of mock sophistication.

"More wine, my love?" he asked, taking her glass with an expression of humor on his face, and Albus was forcibly reminded of Morrison.

"Mmm, very good sir" Samantha replied, her voice airy and equally jocular.

Albus watched as Fairhart poured the bottle of clear liquid into two glasses, both her's and his own. Handing it back to her, he pointed out to the city below them.

"So where do you want to live?" he asked her, his voice returning to normal.

Samantha smiled at him. "Nowhere down there" she said. "I'd rather live privately."

"What, no friends? Or communic-"

"Well of course those things" she answered, taking a sip from her glass. "But I don't like the hustle and bustle down there. I mean, I don't *dislike* it, but it's not ideal. I want to live somewhere where we can have peace and quiet whenever we want."

"When do you want to go?" Fairhart asked her automatically, but she chortled.

"Not until I'm ready to settle down a bit" she said. "I love teaching, I love the atmosphere here, now. Just not later. You know...when children of my own are in the picture."

Fairhart nodded, his gaze not moving from the buildings and streets below him.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked suddenly, and she turned to him, looking amused.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what is it that we need? Money, or what?"

"I want to have a future, before I start one" she answered him. "You're always in such a hurry, San. There's nothing wrong with moving slowly and enjoying life."

Fairhart said nothing, but Albus noticed that his face suddenly looked a bit anxious. He scratched briefly at his nose, and then, in a swift movement, took her hands in his.

"What are you-" she started, but it was too late; Fairhart had already lowered his head, bringing her fingers to his lips in a sweet kiss.

Samantha rolled her eyes as he lifted his face back up. "You're so lame, San, honest- oh!"

Gazing down at her fingers, she saw that something unusual had happened. Right where his lips had been, there was now a silver ring, fit perfectly around her finger, sparkling pristinely in the sunlight.

"How- how did- how did you-"

"Magic" Fairhart said slowly, her hands still resting over his. She mouthed at him, stunned, but before she could say anything else, he'd already made a powerful implication.

"So?" he asked. "Do you...?"

"Of course!" she said, sounding as the breath had been wiped from her. "Of course I do!" she repeated, and she flung her arms around his neck, their lips meeting-

Albus felt his stomach churn slightly, suddenly feeling as though he was intruding on something very personal. This feeling was only heightened when Fairhart laid her down on the blanket, engrossed in the moment, and Albus was forced to close his eyes before things really got out of hand-

But the scene had already started to vanish. The light had slowly disappeared, replaced instead by complete and total darkness, as the memory shifted. The rest of that particular memory, it seemed, Fairhart had left in his head, and a new scene was swirling now, around Albus' feet. Colors began merging as voices became clear-

He was now standing in a vaguely familiar place, immediately recognizable due to the fact that he was facing a large, ancient looking grandfather clock. He was standing in the sitting room of 2791 Woodlard Way, and based off of the general lack of furniture and half-painted walls, it seemed like it was just days away from becoming a home.

Fairhart was standing next to him, eyeing the clock idly, his face identical to how it had been in the last memory, his attire now consisting of worn jeans and a loose fitting T-shirt.

"What d'you think?" he asked out loud.

"I love it" said a voice from behind him, and both Albus and Fairhart turned slightly, seeing Samantha pace around the almost empty room, a smile on her face. She was walking around in her own plain outfit, her arms crossed over as she examined every nook and cranny of the room.

"Plenty of open space, we can put the couch right there-"

"No, I mean the *clock*" Fairhart said, pointing at it, and she made a huffing noise.

"It's tacky" she said, approaching him.

"I like it!" Fairhart argued playfully. "It makes the house seem wise" he said, tossing his arm around her. "And it's sturdy; looks like it endures. A symbol of our love" he added cheekily.

"It's tacky" she said at once, and Fairhart laughed. "What do you think, Fango?"

She turned her head as she said it, and Albus did the same, so fast that he nearly toppled over.

A young Fango Wilde was standing in the doorway, looking somehow both relaxed and uptight as he surveyed the scene silently. Unlike Fairhart, whose youth was noticeable, Wilde looked very much like he had the last time that Albus had seen him, only a few years ago. He had among the plainest of faces imaginable, nothing about him standing out at all, except maybe a somewhat flat nose. His dull brown hair was as dull and brown as ever, only in this memory, it had been combed back stupidly, as if he'd tried to look sophisticated for some reason, but had ultimately failed.

"I- I agree with San" Wilde said airily, nodding his head toward him. "It makes the place look more comfortable."

Fairhart made a pumping motion with his fist, as if to declare victory. Sam rolled her eyes however.

"How'd I know you were going to side with him" she said with a slight chortle, but Wilde had missed the joke it seemed, for he was suddenly looking marginally disgruntled...

The scene began fading away again, darkness returning to engulf his surroundings. What happened next was a bit unusual; the darkness stayed, but blurred and garbled sounds were

entering his ears, as though several scenes were being merged into one. Albus caught noises of surprise and worry, with the occasional stray phrase like "Ministry of Magic" or "Wizard"...

The noises disappeared, leaving the darkness by itself for a moment. Having apparently cycled through several different memories at once, the next one appeared to be a stand alone, as light emerged from the darkness all around him...

"Take a picture, Fango!" came a girlish voice, and the first thing that Albus saw was Fairhart and Samantha, standing next to each other comfortably and looking elated. They were outside somewhere, possibly just outside of the house, but the importance of the moment was clear. Samantha's belly was larger; she was pregnant.

Albus had seen this image before; he'd seen a dusty old photograph of it years ago, in Fairhart's office, the day when he'd left Hogwarts. He had not known at the time, however, who had been the one to take the picture. He turned and watched as Fango Wilde held up the camera, a flash of light blasting from it at once. Fairhart leaned in to kiss his fiancé, but Wilde was looking, unbeknownst to his two friends, murderous, his lips curled in a twisted, almost salacious way...

The scene began to evaporate once more, and Albus felt his stomach turn. He did not want to view these memories anymore. He wanted to leave, right now, but he'd never figured out how to operate a Pensieve correctly, and besides, a new scene was already forming, a new memory, and this one placed him in one of the strangest settings imaginable.

He was in a white room. The walls were almost entirely blank, but there was a desk that had odd looking devices on it, as well as a few chairs, two of which were occupied. Fairhart was sitting in one of them, looking close to tears, his arms wrapped around Samantha in the chair next to him. Her eyes were leaking obviously, her face resting in her hands as she hunched her body over.

There was a third person in the room as well, and though Albus had only ever really seen pictures of it in his Muggle Studies textbook, he knew from the white lab coat and the pens poking out of the elderly man's front pocket that he was a Muggle doctor. He was holding what looked like a cream colored folder, and his expression was grim...

Albus turned his attention back to the crying woman next to him, who had reclined back further into Fairhart's arms. He gasped at once, his body going cold; she no longer appeared to be carrying a child.

The scene began to disappear, though Albus barely took notice of it. He should have expected what he'd just seen, really. He had found the lopsided crib months ago, and it had looked unused. He'd never heard of Fairhart having any children. But it still shocked him, seeing a distraught Fairhart try and console his fiancé like that, the most stark contrast possible to the memory on the hill top...

He was distracted by more noises. No images appeared, as, once again, there was no single memory to speak of. Instead it was a blur of sounds, only this time the words that he'd heard were shouted; angry yells, and recognizable sobbing. He could hear Fairhart roaring, his voice choking up on his words. He could hear Samantha yelling back, her shrill voice identical in volume and anger. Albus realized that he was literally *listening* to a relationship die.

The noises stopped, and for a moment, it seemed like there was a memory to be viewed. The world around Albus was completely dark however, or at least, it had seemed so at first. He now saw that he was in the presence of a single instrument of light; a candle, resting atop a small wooden table shrouded in darkness. He could just make out Fairhart standing there, holding up a long piece of parchment and reading it by the candlelight.

Albus could only guess that they were in a study of sorts, but before he could feel his way around for anything else, he heard a door open. Fango Wilde appeared from almost nowhere, the sound of a door closing accompanying his presence.

"San?" he asked, sounding timid. "San, what are you read-"

Albus watched as Fairhart's fist collided with Wilde's face. He cringed inwardly as the Renegade dropped the piece of parchment onto the table, one hand wrapped around Wilde's collar, the other curled into a fist that was ready to strike him again.

"What are you doing!" Wilde said, his nose bleeding badly and looking swollen already. "Let- let go of me-"

"What did you tell her!" Fairhart bellowed into his face, his nostrils flaring. He seemed to have Wilde pinned up against some sort of invisible wall.

"I- I don't- what are you-"

"She left!" Fairhart barked menacingly. "Where did she go! And why! What did you tell her!"

"I didn't tell her anything!" Wilde pleaded.

"LIAR!" Fairhart screamed, and Wilde reached his hand into his pocket-

Fairhart was quicker. With the hand not pinning Wilde he drew his own wand, striking it through the air mightily. Albus heard a powerful bang, and the next thing that he knew Wilde had slid downwards in a daze of sorts, looking as though he was staring at millions of twinkling stars.

"It says it right here" Fairhart practically whispered, and he snatched the piece of parchment up without even looking at the table. " 'Having spoken to Fango I've come to realize'" he quoted. "What does that mean! What did you say to her!"

Wilde still seemed to be recovering. His normally plain and bored face looked filled with worry, the only thing noteworthy about it apart from the dark red blood leaking down over his lips. It couldn't have been more different from Fairhart's, whose handsome face had twisted itself into the epitome of ferocity.

"I didn't tell her anything-" Wilde started.

"Liar!" Fairhart said again, sounding close to tears now. "You knew what she thought of magic! You knew she was afraid of it, didn't understand it! Did you tell her it was my fault!" he growled, his lips quivering. "Did you- did you tell her it was because of me-"

"I am sorry about what happened to your son, Sancticus" Wilde cut him off. "But I told her noth-

"

"Stop lying!" Fairhart shouted. "You're not sorry! You think I'm a fool? You think I didn't see the way you looked at her-the way-the way you-"

He couldn't even seem to finish his sentence. Wilde was staring back up at him blankly, denying nothing this time, but not confirming anything either.

Fairhart aimed his wand at Wilde's neck, his arm steady.

"You going to kill me?" Wilde choked out, a note of disbelief in his voice. "Are you going to kill me, San?"

Fairhart stared down at him with hatred. After a moment, however, he lowered his wand.

"You're not worth it" he said menacingly. "You're not worth anything" he added, the abhorrence in his voice very clear. "I know it, and she knew it too."

He went to stow his wand away as though the confrontation was over, but Albus saw the look on Wilde's face and knew otherwise. This last insult had riled him up from his stupor, and in a single moment he'd whipped his wand upward, just as Fairhart was putting his away-

Albus screamed out a warning, despite knowing full well that Fairhart couldn't see or hear him. He watched everything happen next as though it were in slow motion. Wilde had given a roar of rage, and a flash of light had burst from his wand just as the tip of it had made contact with Fairhart's cheek. The powerful curse seemed to explode onto the left side of Fairhart's face, and he fell to the ground at once, clutching at it, hollering in agony and writhing on the floor-

Fango stood up, his face still leaking blood. He took one look at the twisted image of his former friend on the ground, and then, his expression blank, he made a run for it-

Albus felt someone clasp him around the shoulder tightly, and the next thing that he knew, he was spinning upwards, the scene going dark for one last time-

He removed his face from the Pensieve gasping for air, as though he'd been unable to breathe the entire time. Turning quickly, the first thing that he saw in the light from the Pensieve was the present-day Fairhart's face.

"I- I-"

He couldn't quite figure out what to say, but he was taken aback by the look that Fairhart was wearing. He did not seem angry, or even upset. He instead looked calm; almost stoic.

Without saying a word, his former professor lifted up the Pensieve from the floor and walked it over to the shelf, where he returned it to its rightful place. This darkened the room a bit, as the only source of light was elevated once more, but Fairhart quickly flicked his wand through the air, and the fireplace began glowing at once.

"I-I'm sorry" Albus stammered out, pushing himself back up against the dusty couch, his knees up to his chin. "I was just- I-"

"I understand" Fairhart said slowly. "It was foolish of me to leave the Pensieve out like that. No matter, however; I don't mind that you used it."

Albus tensed up a bit before speaking.

"You- you don't? Then why bother removing the memories when we were practicing Legil-"

"Because *I* didn't want to see them, Albus" Fairhart said, and, surprisingly, he proceeded to sit down on the couch, just a few feet away from him.

Albus said nothing, instead lowering his head solemnly. After an extremely uncomfortable moment, he decided to ask about what he'd seen. He started simple, with things that he already knew.

"That woman" he said. "Samantha" he added stupidly. "She...she was a muggle right?"

Fairhart nodded slowly. "A schoolteacher, actually" he said. "She taught science classes" he added with a shadow of a nostalgic smile.

"And she didn't know anything about- about you? At first?"

"That is correct" Fairhart answered him. "I did not tell her until after I'd already proposed marriage."

"How did- how did that go?" Albus asked foolishly, more than anything to have an excuse to not bring up Fairhart's child.

"Not as good or as bad as one could expect" Fairhart told him mysteriously, without even looking at him. The firelight crackled as he began to go into detail. "She was a muggle, Albus, and like all muggles, she naturally feared what she could not explain."

"She was afraid of you?" Albus asked, surprised.

"No, not of me" Fairhart said, shaking his head. "But of our world. Of the idea behind us. To her, the thought of a secret government regulating the breeding of species like dragons was as terrifying as it was fascinating. The thought that with a wave of a wand, a person could kill you, or take control of you, did little to help her sleep at night. She was afraid Albus, not of wizards and witches, or any particular individual, but of the Wizarding World as a whole. The world that she could not be a part of, but that she would always have a part in.

"It is not an uncommon fear for muggles whose children are born with wizarding abilities, or others who marry into wizarding families. She actually handled it remarkably well, all things considered. Don't forget that it was an extremely difficult time for wizardkind, back then. I could not lie to her and tell her that the Wizarding World was a safe, wonderful place. The times greatly influenced her thoughts on the matter."

"But you guys- you stayed together" Albus said lamely.

"Of course" Fairhart replied easily. "We were in love."

This sentence made Albus cringe slightly, and in order to avoid any more elaboration on that particular part, he instead asked something else that was nagging his mind.

"You and Fango Wilde were friends" he said. "And she was friends with him too."

"I told you that before" Fairhart said, nodding. "Don't you remember?"

"I do" Albus replied at once. "I just didn't realize it was- it was so long ago."

"I met Fango Wilde shortly after the death of my parents. He too had a family ravaged by the war against Voldemort. He never knew his mother, but his father and sister were killed when he was very young. He barely managed to escape himself. For those of us young wizards who had no families to speak of, when we found one another, near inseperable bonds were created almost on principle alone."

"I had no idea" Albus said truthfully. "You guys have known each other so long..."

There was another silence following this, one in which he did his best to avoid Fairhart's eyes. The Renegade seemed to be lost in his own world however; he was staring absently into the fire, a vacant expression on his disfigured face, which Albus knew was the product of one of Fairhart's oldest friends...

"I'm so sorry" Albus said darkly. "About- about your- your son."

Another brief silence. And then-

"Thank you" came a reply that sounded slightly watery.

"What- what happened?" Albus asked, feeling as though he was treading on dangerous waters. But he had to know. He'd learned so much already, and there was no point in saving the rest of it for a later day.

"Complications during pregnancy" Fairhart said, turning to him, and a few tears had quietly leaked their way down the normal side of his face. "Not terribly infrequent, actually. Sometimes it just...happens."

He buried his face in his hands, and Albus, not knowing what to do, could only sit back and watch, transfixed and helpless, the magnitude of the moment weighing in his head. How long had it been since Fairhart had discussed this with someone? Or had he never even done so?

"And what happened to her?" Albus asked, feeling teary himself. "I didn't- I don't-"

"Losing a child, Albus," Fairhart started, picking his head up, "is the most powerful feeling of grief that I believe conceivable. It changes lives so suddenly, and with so little effort. Conversations thinned. Laughter ceased. At night we slept back to back, our bodies not touching, unable to face one another, personally invested in our own depression..."

"And then-"

"-she left" Fairhart whispered.

"But why?" Albus asked, angry. For some reason- and he knew it was wrong of him to be so judgmental-he didn't like this woman Samantha all that much. "Why would she leave?"

"She hated me" Fairhart said with a tremor in his voice, his eyes closing slowly as he spoke. "There was so much resentment. We never even bothered to attempt a marriage; such a joyous occasion would have been marred drastically. I still remember the date that we had set for the wedding. It was the fourth of May" he added reminiscently.

"But why! Why would she blame you-"

But Albus stopped right there. Because he knew that he was missing something, and he knew that in the back of his head, he'd found it. The missing piece, hidden in the last memory that he'd seen.

"Wilde" he muttered.

"In our stretch of sadness and distance, Fango proved to be excellent at consoling her. It is a most curious thing, the trust that he managed to obtain from her. I would sometimes try and hide the nature of magic from her; try and hide things that I thought would frighten her. But Fango was always quick to capitalize on this; he had no problem informing her of what it was our kind could do. She found him very trustworthy, and you can rest assured that this would play a factor into her leaving."

"What did Wilde tell her?" Albus asked, his entire body numb.

"I don't know" Fairhart said. "Perhaps he told her that I was responsible for what happened to our son-"

"But how could she believe that!" Albus argued. "Wizards and muggles have children all the time, there's half-bloods-"

"You must find a way to see things from her perspective, Albus. She did not understand, and was partially afraid, of magic. She was not going to ask *me* how often muggles bred with magical individuals. It would have been quite easy for Fango to tell her that it was me being a wizard that was responsible. Or maybe not even; I sometimes wonder if maybe he went a different route. Perhaps he told her that I, with my abilities, could have saved the baby."

"Could you have?" Albus asked, and he regretted his question at once.

Fairhart turned to him, the tears on his face no longer falling, but still glistening in the light of the fire.

"I don't know" he said mildly, sounding close to crying once more.

"He was in love with her" Albus said at once. "Wilde. That's why, right? Why he would do-"

"Whether Fango Wilde was in love with her, I do not know" Fairhart said, his voice returning to normal. "But he was certainly infatuated, and for more than just her looks or personality. For many wizards and witches at the time, the life of a muggle was preferable. Muggle-born wizards and witches were a frequent target of the Death Eaters, but muggles themselves were only really in danger if it was by happenstance. For someone like Fango-and someone like me as well-that nearly safe, almost sheltered life had a powerful allure to it. Fango wanted more than to be with my fiancé; he wanted my life as a whole. The death of my unborn son was, to him I believe, rather fortuitous. It ultimately helped him to sever a cord that was already close to failing. Indeed, sometimes I even wonder if..."

He trailed off here, looking uneasy; it was as though he couldn't even bring himself to utter just what it was he frequently wondered. Albus said nothing, instead staring into the fire, just as Fairhart had. Something else was nagging him...

"After- after what happened between you and Wilde," he said shakily, "did you ever manage to find her? Sam?"

"I didn't look" Fairhart said with a sigh.

"Why not?" Albus asked, astonished.

"I didn't want her to see me" he said darkly, and Albus' jaw dropped.

"What, because of your *face*? Couldn't you heal it? Do you really think-"

"Not just my face, Albus, my entire identity" Fairhart said, his tone almost acidic. "And incidentally, cursed wounds are very hard to heal if not treated immediately, which I didn't even bother with...but in terms of what I really didn't want her to see, it was my disposition. I was filled with anger, with confusion, even with guilt. I hated who I was after she left. I had went from having everything to having nothing. A son. A lover. A friend. I propelled myself downwards..."

"You joined WAR" Albus said, understanding the chronology of events at once, and shaking his head sadly.

"Yes" Fairhart said. "I had so much aggression...so much rage. I needed to channel it. I wanted to hurt others. I became a terrible, terrible person, immersed in my own self-loathing. WAR wasn't about redemption for me, that was just my excuse. The fact was, I had no purpose. But I wanted to fight, to fuel my life. And the only way to justify these actions was by performing them against people as bad as me. And besides, there was some personal satisfaction to it. Every time I killed a Death Eater, there was a chance I was avenging my parents, after all..."

"You should have went after her" Albus said. "Instead of joining WAR. You should- wait!"

He picked himself up and sat down on the couch, something oddly close to excitement flooding through him.

"You still can!" he continued immaturely, and Fairhart turned to him, looking amused. "You can still find her, no one's better at finding people than you-"

"I eventually did try" Fairhart told him, and Albus' smile sunk at once. "About four years ago."

"Four years..."

"Over time, I began reverting back into my old life" Fairhart said. "The pain of losing my son, and my life, faded. Not the wound," he added, and Albus knew that he wasn't speaking about the scar covering half of his face, "never the wound. But the pain. I left WAR. Eventually joined the Ministry. Prepared to get my life back on track."

"I tried finding her, and came very close actually, but it was ultimately unsuccessful. For about a month in the summer I searched, but it was to no avail."

Albus wracked his brain, something about this sounding vaguely familiar. Four years ago, during the summer...that would have been the summer before his second year. And that, he realized, was actually the first time that he'd ever met Fairhart. And Wilde! Only Fairhart had been missing from the Ministry for a while, according to his father...

And where have you been these many weeks? The office was getting boring without you.

And what had Fairhart replied?

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

Albus felt his heart beat quicken as the memory surged into his head. He remembered thinking, months later, that Fairhart had been very suspicious, as had his absence. He'd thought that perhaps Fairhart was a leak in the Ministry, but the leak had later turned out to be Wilde...

But wait...there was more to it. Albus hadn't just seen Fairhart and Wilde that one day, when he'd went to visit the Ministry with his father. He'd seen the two of them interact quietly in a corner. He'd even thought that maybe they'd been arguing lowly...

"I saw you!" Albus blurted out. "The day you came back from looking for her! You were arguing with Fango Wilde!"

Fairhart nodded, and strangely enough, a slight smile had formed on his face.

"You have a very wandering eye, Albus. Fango and I hadn't spoken in years, not since the memory that you saw, in which he cursed my face. In an attempt to overcome my feelings of distress over my former life, I acted civil around him when I joined the Ministry; he'd already worked there before me, in a different department. That one day-that one argument that you saw-was the first time that I'd spoken to him in several years."

"Why were you arguing with him?" Albus asked. "Because you couldn't find her?"

Fairhart nodded. "I don't know if Fango knew where she was, but I was certain that if he did, he would have done everything in his power to prevent me from finding her. He maintained his innocence, however, outright claiming that he didn't know where she was, and didn't know why I couldn't find her."

"Are you ever going to look again?" Albus asked, his tone hopeful.

Fairhart gave him a weak smile. "Maybe" he said. "But first, I have work to do here, in case you'd forgotten."

Albus felt his skin crawl. He'd almost-somehow-forgotten about their plan to break into Azkaban. But beyond even that, he'd forgotten about the alternate plan that he'd been struggling with; the plan to hand Fairhart over to WAR. In that sequence of events, he'd almost certainly never be able to find Samantha...

"Which brings me to the reason I'm sitting next to you now" Fairhart said, and he actually stood up. "You need your sleep. We have training to do tomorrow-"

"Did he have a name?" Albus asked suddenly, knowing that the discussion would have to soon come to an end, but wanting every last tidbit of it covered.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your- your son" Albus said, standing himself. "Did he have a name yet?"

Fairhart ogled him.

"No" he said, his face impassive. "Not really, anyway. We'd been still deciding when- when..."

"You should name him" Albus said at once. "Just to- just to- I don't know."

He really didn't. He couldn't quite explain why, but hearing about the tragic events of Fairhart's life had made him desperate to want to console him in some way. He wanted to remind Fairhart about the former life, because he much preferred it to the vicious Renegade that he knew...

"Well, we had been considering 'Caleb'" Fairhart said. "She- she had a cousin named Caleb who she seemed to like very much."

"Caleb Fairhart" Albus said, nodding. "That actually has a nice ring to it-"

"Caleb Crowe" Fairhart cut him off sadly. "We weren't married yet-"

"No" Albus said, shaking his head. "His name- it- it should be Caleb Fairhart" he said, and his former professor gave him a warm smile.

And then, something clicked in his head. He could give him another reminder...

"Here" he said, shoving his hand into his pocket and withdrawing the silver ring that he'd possessed for far too long. Fairhart's eyes-even the one half-closed by his mangled face-lit up at the sight of the ring.

"How did-"

"It doesn't matter" Albus said, unwilling to tell him about how Blackwood had tossed it away, and all of the events that had brought it to him from there. "It's just- I know you used to wear that" he told him. "You should wear it again."

Fairhart took the ring from him in a delicate manner. Slowly, he put it on his ring finger, a look of elation transforming his face entirely-

"Thank you" he said, his eyes boring into Albus'. "Really..."

Albus nodded, smiling himself. Fairhart clapped him on the shoulder, eyes still examining the silver ring, and he then turned to leave.

"Get some sleep Albus" he said, and Albus nodded. Fairhart was very close to the doorway out of the room when Albus decided that he had one more thing to ask-'

"Profess- erm- Fair- uh- "

"San" said Fairhart, the smile on his face stretching the skin in a disgusting way that Albus was now accustomed to. "My friends call me 'San'. Or at least they did" he added somewhat sardonically.

Albus tensed up. His friends. Wilde had been his friend...and he'd also betrayed him.

"I just- I just wanted to know. About Fango Wilde. Have you- have you forgiven him?" he asked nervously, unsure as to why this question was so important to him.

Fairhart stood in the doorway, still examining the ring around his finger, which was faintly glowing blue as he was now further away from the light of the fire. After a moment, he finally answered, his voice sour and cold.

"No" he said, and Albus felt his stomach drop. "And you should know, Albus," he continued, "that the last I heard of Fango Wilde, he was a high ranking member of the Dark Alliance. If I see him on the island...I *will* kill him."

Albus nodded his head, not knowing how to reply. Not that it mattered, though. After this declaration, San had left the room wordlessly.

Chapter 22: To Murder

It was always unusual to be in Fairhart's presence, but the days following their conversation over the Pensieve proved to be especially awkward. It was not Fairhart's doing; his former professor remained tactfully quiet about what had been discussed, and seemed intent on pretending as though it hadn't even happened, instead hammering his lessons into Albus' head just as vigorously as he had before. It was instead Albus who was prone to long, thoughtful silences, but thankfully, these were interrupted regularly due to his new training regimen.

"Watch yourself now!"

Albus ducked quickly, having been momentarily lost in his thoughts. He heard a tree explode behind him and felt shivers go up his spine.

"What are you trying to do!" Albus barked back at the scarred man standing in the snow thirty feet away.

"Time-out" Fairhart said with a groan, and they both walked towards each other angrily.

"This is supposed to be practice-"

"You're supposed to be paying attention-"

"Well had I know that you were going to be trying to knock my head off, I would have focused a bit more!"

"Oh really?" Fairhart said acerbically. "And were you counting on your enemies announcing which spells that they would be using against you beforehand? Or perhaps they hand you a list, specifying what lies in their arsenal?"

Albus shot him a dark look; Fairhart sometimes sounded too similar to people like Larson for his own liking. When he failed to respond, Fairhart elaborated on the spell in a more instructive voice.

"That was the Blasting Curse" he said. "Very powerful, and an extremely vital piece of magic to use in many different situations."

Albus racked his brain, positive that he heard of this curse before.

"Isn't there a Blasting Spell too?" he asked, pretty sure that Larson had used it in a demonstration before. "Specifically for people-"

"The curse version is more wild, and yes, that makes the other version-the one designed as a concentrated force-more effective for facing humans. I will, however, be teaching you the curse."

"Why?" Albus asked, intrigued. Fairhart's face darkened.

"Though there will undoubtedly be Dark Alliance members in Azkaban, Albus, I'd say that we are more likely to encounter danger from the Silhouettes, or any other monstrous creation that Darvy has at his disposal. Killing Curses will prove ineffective, as these beings are basically already dead. And I'd imagine stunning would be useless as well; they don't seem quite conscious either."

Albus nodded. He actually knew these details himself, as he and Morrison two years ago had ran from the vicious creatures through the streets of a war-torn Hogsmeade. Their most powerful spells had amounted to nothing, but if Albus remembered correctly, a well placed Trip-Jinx by Morrison had managed to subdue one temporarily...

"The Blasting Curse will be our best bet then. It is designed to obliterate physical objects, and unlike the Explosion Curse, which is better served on inanimate objects, the Blasting Curse should double as a great way to cause damage to other moving targets."

Albus said nothing, but a terrible image had just manifested itself in his head. It was of he and Fairhart running and screaming, fifty Silhouettes chasing after them with no signs of slowing down...

"Do you- do you really expect us to face those things?" he asked uneasily.

"It is possible that we won't" Fairhart admitted, and Albus felt the knot in his chest loosen slightly. "Ideally, I'd like us to go largely unnoticed as we attempt our infiltration. But we must be prepared for the worst...as we've discussed before."

Albus nodded solemnly, then watched as Fairhart whipped his wand through the air. About seven or eight large, wooden crates immediately appeared, scattered around in the snow.

"The incantation is '*Confringo*'" Fairhart told him pointedly. "Be careful when you aim now..."

Ten minutes later, and Albus thought that he had something of a grasp on the curse. True, he had nearly blown apart half of Fairhart's cabin ("That's okay!" Fairhart had said, as a stymied Albus had stared at the damage with his mouth wide open, "We can fix it!"). And also, it had taken him more attempts than crates to effectively obliterate all of them. But as Fairhart had pointed out, he had not once been unable to perform the spell.

"Got a good grasp of it?" Fairhart asked him as Albus blasted the last crate to pieces.

"I think so" he replied. "Reminds me a bit of the Reductor Curse."

"As it should, you're essentially doing the same thing" replied Fairhart knowingly. "The primary difference being the actual nature of the destruction itself. Perhaps it is time we learned some defence though."

"I already know the Shield charm" Albus said firmly; he was actually quite adept at it.

"Well you'll want to expand a bit" Fairhart said, crossing his arms over. "The Shield Charm is good for single attacks, and even though it is effective, it is used more for the deflection of minor jinxes than anything else. Both powerful curses and multiple enemies make it somewhat elementary."

Albus glared at him. The Shield Charm had gotten him this far, hadn't it?

Fairhart withdrew his wand in a sharp motion. "Mimic my wand movements as best you can" he said, and Albus, taken aback, immediately raised his own wand in preparation.

He watched as his trainer began making circular movements with his wand, occasionally flinging it in a different direction, only to bring it back fluidly. No magic was actually being performed, but there was something very impressive about the mere movements, in the way that they seemed both arbitrary and coordinated simultaneously. After a few minutes of tracing Fairhart's strikes, Albus managed to detect a rather intricate pattern.

"Keep that up" Fairhart said, stopping his own movements and standing still. Albus did as he was told, suddenly feeling a little ridiculous; this had felt way cooler when he was miming Fairhart.

"What am I-

"When you perform the Shield Charm, you are focused on both protection and deflection, correct? You-at least subconsciously-attempt to aim the rebounding spell back at the opponent?"

"Yes" Albus said, distracted. He was still trying to memorize the pattern. To the left, then bring it back, down low, then bring it back, then to the right...

"Ignore this desire. A barrier is not meant to be offensive. As you make each circular movement, I want you to focus solely on protection, and to imagine each section of space as its own, private shield. Can you do this?"

"I- I think s-

"Good, I am going to attack you" Fairhart said, his tone extremely forward.

"What? What do-

"Stay focused now!"

Albus did as he was told, though keeping the pattern up was much more difficult now that he had the idea of Fairhart attacking him in his head. Slowly, with his eyes on Fairhart and his wand twisting itself in front of his body, he watched as Fairhart fired an innocent looking, light blue colored spell his way. He braced himself-

The spell was an inch away when Albus saw it; a small disk of energy, hovering in the air in front of him and to his left. The spell ricocheted off the disk and into the air...

Albus grinned, excited, though he made a mental note to keep his movements timely and correct.

"Just relax" Fairhart said. "Your wand movements are not protecting you. You are protecting yourself, and you are using your wand..."

Albus nodded, barely paying attention as Fairhart began walking around him in a large circle, firing the occasional spell his way. Time and time again, they were all rejected, deflected into the sky at the same angle of the corresponding wand movement. Even when Fairhart had fired a spell at his back-one that he couldn't even see-it was still knocked aside from behind him. He then had a sudden, vivid memory. At the wedding last year...the first time that he'd seen the Silver Wizard. This was how Fairhart had been deflecting back spells!

"This is incredible!" Albus said aloud, unable to contain himself as a dark yellow spell fired to his upper right was sent spiraling away. "Who taught you this?"

"I did" Fairhart said absent-mindedly, apparently concerned more with Albus' proper form than anything else. "Good, good...don't speed up now, you're fine as you are..."

For about another ten minutes this was kept up, and when Fairhart finally stopped, Albus allowed a small twinge of disappointment to course through him; he'd actually been enjoying himself.

"That's so simple" he said breathlessly. "I can't believe no one else-"

"We all have our own ways of defending ourselves, Albus" Fairhart cut him off. "I am simply teaching you my method, because developing your own would be very time consuming. And don't forget, it is simple to *you*. You're a quick learner."

Albus snorted. "Not really" he admitted, suddenly feeling a bit down. "I still can't Apparate, and I only just got average at Transfiguration last year-"

"So you have unique difficulties" Fairhart said lamely. "You are not the first to excel at some branches of magic, and perform poorly with others. You must remember, however, that magic is an extension of yourself. Muggles deem what we do "impossible", and yet, the mere fact that we can do them is proof of its possibility. Magic is not abnormal, nor is it a contradiction of what the Muggles know. Magic does not disprove science; it expands upon it. And that means that there are constant variables to it. What are you most adept at?"

"I'm good at Potions" Albus said, trying to sound as humble as possible.

"Properly brewed potions come about through precise actions; you can see every step that you are making, and can determine the next one accordingly. Transfiguration is instantaneous. Metal to wood. Circle to square. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe your proficiency in the art of potion making is a result of the same characteristics that make Transfiguration so difficult?"

"What are you bad at, then?" Albus said forcefully, staring down into the snow with red cheeks. His curiosity was legitimate, however.

"I am much older and much more experienced" Fairhart said at once, his voice warm and comforting. "So naturally, there will not be one particular field that I would struggle with, lest I'd abandoned practice of it. If you must know, however, potions is my weakest field. I feel that had I attended a formal magical institution, it would have been my vice. It requires too much patience. Too much attention to detail."

"But isn't that your strong suit?" Albus asked, confused. "You're good at tracking people, and waiting in trees and stuff-"

"Locating a human being and attacking them is a different game than watching a cauldron simmer, contemplating what it will become if I add even the smallest of components" Fairhart said, shaking his head with an unappealing smile. "I repeat: creating potions are my weakest field."

"So then I'm- I'm better at it than you are?" Albus asked, feeling both proud and astounded.

Fairhart shrugged, still wearing his smile. "If you are as good as you claim" he said.

Albus smiled to himself. It actually felt somewhat strange, to have his lips curl so widely in such a direction, as it hadn't happened in so long. But Fairhart's compliments really were boosting his confidence, so much so that he was eager to resume his training. To get shaped up a bit, before going to rescue his father...

"So what am I learning next?" he asked, trying to contain the childish excitement in his voice but failing a bit.

"Whatever you want" Fairhart said simply. "I have already taught you what I think are the most prudent techniques; you have a powerful offensive spell to utilize, and powerful defensive techniques to rely on as well. Whatever it is you want to learn next, I will teach you, provided that I know it myself. If you'd like, we can even try and focus on Appar-"

"No!" Albus said quickly. "Erm- maybe tomorrow" he added, his tone lower.

Truthfully, he knew that he was was rubbish at Apparition, and he didn't want to get rid of all of the confidence that he'd accumulated thus far today; training wise, it had been his most productive day yet. He instead tried to remember more techniques that he'd seen Fairhart use, focusing in particular on the occasions in which he'd fought impressively as the Silver Wizard. It wasn't really hard to remember at all; such memories were sure to be forever etched into his skull. More difficult was selecting which techniques he thought would be most beneficial to him.

"Anything I can think of?" Albus asked hesitantly.

"You needn't worry about being temeritous" Fairhart said blandly. "What would you like to learn?"

"Well I've seen you do this- this thing- where like...erm. Like the spells follow people?" he finished lamely, and Fairhart nodded.

"I am aware of what you are talking about" he said. "A bit more complex than what else we've learned today, but if you are willing..."

As it turned out, making your spells follow your targets was more than "a bit" complex. For more than an hour Albus tried doing it, instructed by Fairhart to focus on the target rather than the spell; spells, he said, had no minds of their own.

Again, crates were used. Fairhart would conjure a brittle box from the air, then leave it levitating twenty feet or so away, revolving on the spot idly. When Albus would fire his Reductor Curse, however, Fairhart would fling the crate away randomly, the desired end result being that the spell would follow along with it.

Only once did Albus managed to make his spell swerve, and even then, it did so higher than necessary, shooting passed the crate and hitting the already patched-up-from-earlier side of the cabin. A disgruntled Albus was told to shake his disappointment off, and instructed to, for the time being, focus on something new to learn.

The day grew less eventful as it went on, with mixed results accompanying each new spell that he wanted to learn. He managed to get a moderate grasp of the Tremor Jinx, a spell designed to make the ground rumble to disorient the opposition, but failed completely at a curse meant to completely blind a foe for an extended period of time. Only the Contusion Curse, which caused a powerful soreness at a specified body part, and was meant to distract more than anything, did he actually excel at.

Eventually it grew dark outside, and Fairhart led him back into the cabin quietly, neither of them discussing the day's activities until they were by the warm fire again.

"You did well today" Fairhart said once they were both sitting down, Albus warming his hands by the crackling flames.

"Sort of" Albus said with a mild grimace.

"You expect too much of yourself" answered Fairhart, whose disfigured face was shining brightly in the light. "You made excellent progress today, just as you have every day thus far. You've exceeded-"

"We're on a time limit" Albus cut him off, his own facing shining ominously. "My family is looking for me, and my dad is always on the verge of dying. I know you need to feel that I'm ready, but to be honest, I don't think that there's much more you can teach me that's so necessary.

Half the wizards I'd be facing would know how to use a Killing Curse, and I can already dodge. I've got an okay grasp of one of the few spells that will work against Darvy's creatures. I can-

"What are you saying here, Albus?" Fairhart said crisply.

"I know you want to turn me into a Renegade" Albus said without any hesitation at all. "But I don't think that I need to know how to track, or how perform complex spells. I need to know how to attack, and how to defend. We can't drag this on much longer."

Fairhart said nothing for a moment, his entire, ugly face blank. Albus expected something similar to a disagreement to arise here; expected Fairhart to imbue him with a few powerful, wise words that would shut him up immediately. Instead, he asked a question.

"Why did you choose not to be taught Apparition earlier?"

Albus felt himself tense up briefly before answering.

"I guess- I guess I was afraid I'd fai-

"If you want to make this process go quicker, you cannot be afraid of failure. Tomorrow, you learn to Apparate."

The next day ended up being an exceptionally cold January morning, so much so that Albus ended up tucking his arms inside of his jacket as he exited the cabin, a blank stretch of snow and frosted over trees welcoming him. Fairhart, who had been up for hours it seemed, had done very little to set up for the lesson. A single, large metal hoop was lying randomly in the snow, as though it had simply been discarded nonchalantly.

"Oh come on-" Albus started, but Fairhart cut him off at once.

"You're wasting time" he said darkly, and Albus was then forced to walk through the snow with a disdainful expression on his face.

"This isn't going to work" he said at once. "We use hoops at Hogwarts too, I'm terrible-"

"Just pay attention to what I say" said Fairhart clearly, but at once, a frown formed on his face.

"What?" Albus blurted out loudly, shivering from the intense cold. "You don't have faith in me either, admit it-"

"It's not that" Fairhart said, sounding as though he was lost in his thoughts. "I've just realized..."

"What?" Albus said, a little forcefully.

"Your Trace."

"You took the spells off, didn't you?" Albus said at once, but Fairhart was already shaking his head.

"I took *certain* spells off, yes, but location spells are a bit beyond my reach. Underage Apparition is handled very strongly..."

"Will I still be able to do it?" Albus asked stupidly, realizing that he probably wouldn't be able to do it even he tried anyway.

Fairhart seemed to have settled on something in his mind though, for when he began speaking, his tone was much more confident.

"We will simply have to hope that the substitute Trace I created is unable to register such magic. Either way, Apparition is essential. You must learn it. Now, come stand near this hoop here..."

Albus did as he was told, taking slow steps throughout the snow until Fairhart called out for him to stop.

"Close your eyes, now" he said.

"I'm not doing that stupid 'three D's' thing-"

"What is 'three D's'?" Fairhart asked, sounding distracted.

"It's this thing where- wait a minute-"

An interesting thought had just occurred to him. Fairhart had not attended school. Where had he learned Apparition?

"How did you learn to Apparate?" he voiced, deeply curious.

Surprisingly, Fairhart heaved a sad sigh as he answered.

"Fango Wilde taught me" he said, and Albus felt himself regret asking at once. "But that was years ago. I can assure you, I am skilled enough at it on my own to teach you. Now close your eyes..."

Albus did as he was told, trying to stop himself from getting frustrated with Fairhart, who apparently had not listened to him when he'd said that he'd tried and failed with something similar while at Hogwarts.

"Focus on the hoop" entered Fairhart's crisp voice into his ears. "Mentally place yourself inside of it. That image in your head...you need to make it a reality. Make it happen. Desire it. When I say so, turn your body forcefully; turn into nothingness, and relax yourself, the only thought in your head being you standing in the center of that hoop. Understand?"

Albus nodded, his eyes still closed. Though he knew that his arms were hardly necessary, he removed them from his jacket anyway; the stabbing cold immediately distracted him.

"Now!"

Albus turned forcefully-

He slipped in the snow, losing his balance and falling over slightly in the process. Pushing himself back up, he tried hiding his bared teeth from Fairhart.

"That's okay" Fairhart said soothingly. "We will try again. You have not practiced in a while, and I didn't expect you to get it on your first try. Close your eyes now..."

Albus didn't get it on his second try either. Or his third. Or even his fourth. Finally, after having fallen over again he decided to lash out.

"This isn't working!" he yelled, picking himself back up. "It's just a stupid hoop-"

"Close your eyes" Fairhart said softly, sounding as though he was going to try something new.

Albus stared at him for a moment, absorbing the placid look on his hideous face as he did so. He seemed rather confident this time...

Albus dutifully closed his eyes and straightened himself out. Standing in a rigid manner, he tried focusing on the patch of snow encircled by the hoop.

"You are on the island of Azkaban" Fairhart said clearly, and Albus came very close to opening his eyes in surprise. "Your father is with you."

"What's going on here-" Albus started, opening his eyes.

Fairhart made an angry noise, and Albus jammed his eyes shut at once. Fairhart continued all in the same breath.

"You are with your father, and you are on the outskirts of the island, where there are no Anti-Apparition charms. I am not with you-I'm on a different side of the island. Your father is bleeding profusely from the struggle required to get so far. Copious amounts of blood-"

"I get it" Albus said, teeth gritted, though his eyes stayed shut.

"Your father is leaning on you for support" Fairhart continued. "You can feel his weight on your shoulder..."

Even as he said it, Albus felt his feet sink somewhat. It was rather difficult to imagine the island surrounding the infamous prison; he simply placed it in the backdrop, the rest of the scene in his

head resembling the Forbidden Forest. His father was very clear however. Looking exactly as he had when they'd last met, only with blood on his face...

"He is too injured to Apparate you both to safety. You must do it. You know where Hogwarts is, if you can get him to just the grounds, he can receive the necessary medical treatment. Fail to Apparate, and he will die of blood loss. Do so incorrectly, and the results will be no better. You must Apparate both you and him to safety. And the grounds of Hogwarts are inside of that hoop..."

Albus swallowed, the image of his bleeding father vivid in his head.

"Turn and Apparate! Now!"

Albus spun around, excited at the prospect-

And nothing happened.

"Dammit!" he growled, furious. "Dammit!" he repeated, stomping at the snow with his foot.

"Albus calm down-"

"Forget it!" he roared, spit flying from his mouth. "I can't do it-"

"Stop it!" growled Fairhart, his voice so loud and intimidating that Albus was forced to bring his tantrum to a halt. "Stop it!" Fairhart repeated icily. "You may not wish to become a Renegade, Albus, but you *will* become an adult! I will *not* allow a child to accompany me to Azkaban. If you are willing to give up right now, then I will be the one Apparating you to Hogwarts, where I will ensure that you are stuffed up inside of the castle being spoon-fed by the adults the same lies as the rest of the oblivious student population!"

Albus said nothing. He was still shaking, but it had nothing to do with the cold now.

"Are you going to be an adult?" Fairhart asked, his tone not sounding in the least bit rhetorical.

"Yes" Albus mumbled.

"What?"

"Yes!" he said loudly.

"Then close your eyes and prepare to try again" Fairhart said, each word sounding as frigid as the weather. "You have your father with you..."

And so, Albus was forced to recreate the scene. The same thing as before, his bleeding father, leaning on him for support, in desperate need of help that only Albus could give him...

And when he failed, he simply got back up and pictured the scene again. And again. And again, until finally-

"You can do this" Fairhart said to him. "Relax yourself. You *can* get your father the help that he needs, but you need to focus. When I say so...now!"

Albus spun around, feeling his father's grip tighten on his shoulder as he did so. In an instant, he felt pressure hit his entire body. Even with his eyes closed, he easily understood himself to be in complete darkness, and he was losing air now too, feeling as though he might just die at any moment-

He took a breath of fresh air and opened his eyes. Staring down immediately, he saw that he was standing within the designated circle of snow.

"I did it!" he yelled breathlessly, astounded. "I- I did it! I was over there- over- right over there- and now- and now-"

"You're over here" said Fairhart, who had not moved. His expression had softened somewhat however. "You Apparated."

"I can't believe it..."

"No wonder you struggled with it so much, then."

Albus stared at his professor, still surprised with himself. "I-"

"Go back to where you were" Fairhart cut him off quickly. "You still need to practice."

Albus did as he was told. On his next attempt, he failed. Undeterred, he tried again, failing as well. And then, on the next attempt-

"I did it again!" he exclaimed jovially. "I-"

"Go back to where you were" Fairhart said dryly, and Albus, ecstatic, followed the command without another word.

This went on for another hour or so, Albus managing to Apparate successfully every fourth or fifth attempt-though once, he managed to do it twice in succession. It became more and more frequent as he grew more used to the experience, both the necessary mindset and the feeling of Apparition itself. Once the hour had passed, Fairhart called him to a halt.

"I think you've got the hang of it" he said.

Albus, who was breathless from having been squeezed into nothingness so many times, gave a grin. "I think so too" he said.

"You seem chipper" Fairhart said curtly, but he didn't go further than this.

"I just- never mind" Albus said, a little embarrassed at how he had acted earlier, but unwilling to bring it up.

The sun had started to lower at this point, making the cold that much more unbearable, but Albus found himself unmoving as he stood across from Fairhart in the snow, rather unsure of what to do now. Just as he had the day before, he found himself eager to see what he would be learning next.

"I suppose we're done for now" Fairhart said crisply, turning to walk away.

"Wait!" Albus called out, and Fairhart stopped mid-step.

He turned. "Yes?"

"Isn't- isn't there anything else you want to teach me maybe?"

"I thought that you had learned a sufficient amount of spells?" Fairhart asked wryly.

"Well I- we already started the day" Albus said lamely. "It can't hurt too much to learn a few more, not really wasting time..."

Fairhart gave the smallest of smiles, then continued walking.

"It's getting very cold out" he said aloud. "Come back inside, we'll discuss some theories."

Albus followed along, his feet numb from the low temperature, his clothes-the same clothes that he'd been wearing since he'd arrived, rewashed again and again-sopping wet from his numerous tumbles on the frosty ground. When Albus entered the cabin he saw that Fairhart had already ignited a blazing fire, and was sitting by it comfortably, apparently deep in thought.

Albus sat down next to him, relief washing over him as he felt the warmth of the fire up close. Fairhart appeared to be fine; perhaps he'd dried himself magically.

"I'm sorry about what I said last night" Albus said to him, gazing into the fire himself. "About dragging this on and stuff-"

"You were correct" Fairhart said lightly. "There is no need to apologize. I have very high standards for those who fight alongside me, but I should not have allowed these standards to interfere with your ultimate goal. I do firmly believe that your father is alive, and I also believe that we have enough time to train you up before going after him, but I should have realized that your timetable is much smaller than mine, and thus, I have adjusted it accordingly."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked.

"I'm going into town tomorrow" Fairhart said. "I plan on acquiring some supplies and some provisions. A mode of transportation as well. I hope to be ready to go within the next few days."

"How are we getting there?" Albus asked, surprised that he hadn't done so before. "To Azkaban, I mean..."

"Well it's an island, so I'm thinking that a boat would be our best bet."

"Can't you just create a boat?" Albus asked, curious.

"One magically designed? No more than I can create a racing broom. It's one thing to bewitch an object, Albus, another to create it for a specific purpose. I'm no magical craftsman."

Albus nodded in understanding, but Fairhart went on anyway.

"But you needn't worry about any of that yet, you'll see tomorrow, should you choose to go with me. To get back on our topic from before, though, what exactly were you interested in learning more about?"

Albus sat in silence for a moment. Truthfully, he'd enjoyed the learning of powerful, complex magic the day before, even if he had considered it to be too time consuming. It was along these lines that he thought when he spoke up...

"Curses" he said, rather mildly, and Fairhart gave him a bemused look. "I know you taught me the Blasting Curse, but that's for attacking Silhouettes mostly. If I end up having to fight people..."

"Just exactly what curses are we talking about here?" Fairhart asked grimly, apparently catching on to some of Albus' reservations.

Albus tensed up a bit. He certainly didn't want to learn any of the Unforgivable Curses. Having dabbled in Legilimancy, he wasn't fond of the idea of being inside someone's head too much, so that ruled out the Imperious Curse. He was fairly certain that he'd be terrified of using the Cruciatus Curse as well. And then there was the last one. The Killing Curse. The *Avada Kedavra*. Certainly a beneficial curse to learn more about, but he couldn't even picture himself using that one either...

"Just- just some powerful ones" Albus said after a few moments of private thought. "Ones that you use."

"I most frequently use the Killing Curse-"

"Well I mean- I mean other ones" Albus shot out quickly, not trying to have the conversation stray to such an area.

Fairhart tilted his head slightly, as if he were in deep contemplation. After a moment, he finally voiced what he was thinking.

"Are you sure that there's nothing that you have in mind, in particular?"

Albus thought about it. He tried thinking back to some of the more impressive magical duels that he'd seen; ones in which magic had not been confined to attempting to kill. His first, immediate thought was of back in his third year, when his father and Ares had went at it, the Foulest Book in between them. They'd been all but evenly matched, but neither of them had really shown much intent on dealing a devastating amount of damage, except for at the end, when Ares had fired a Killing Curse...

He fast forwarded a year in his head, now replaying what he'd witnessed in Hogsmeade. Ares and his father were again involved, this time with Darvy and Uncle Ron as well. Darvy had dealt the fatal blow to his own brother here, but not before Ares had already been gravely wounded. The image of his blood splattered former headmaster wafted through his head, reminding him of who had inflicted that particular wound-

"I saw my dad use a curse once" he said. "A bad one. I don't know the incantation though."

"If you described its effects, I might be able to identify it" Fairhart said shortly.

"It- it created a gash. Well a wound actually, a huge one. It was like an invisible sword, slicing through skin, loads of blood-"

"I'm not familiar with it", Fairhart said at this point, and when Albus frowned, he continued, "but that is not to suggest that such a curse doesn't exist. I am not aware of every spell that there is, and there's always the possibility that this curse was created uniquely by your father; it is not uncommon for an exceptionally skilled wizard or witch to invent a spell that suits their abilities and personality."

"Well what do you use, then?" Albus asked. "Outside of the Killing Curse" he added.

"Well, in a magical duel, the best way to subdue is to cause pain."

"I don't want to learn the Cruciatus Curse!" Albus said, panicking slightly, but Fairhart shook his head.

"I said cause pain. Not *torture*. I was thinking more along the lines of the Fracture Curse."

Albus allowed the words to register for a moment, before realizing that he'd heard of such a curse before. Someone had mentioned that it was being taught in the Protector's Club...

"I've heard of that one!" Albus exclaimed. "We had WAR members at Hogwarts, and one of them was teaching it, this bloke Larson-"

Fairhart cut him off with a hoarse laugh.

"What?" Albus asked, clueless as to the source of humor.

"It's very unlikely that anyone from WAR was teaching the Fracture Curse correctly."

"What do you mean 'correctly'?"

Fairhart stopped his chortling in preparation of giving an answer.

"Most wizards and witches, sadly, believe spellwork to be as simple as memorizing some words and pointing your wand. They fail to realize how instrumental wand movements and proper concentration are when successfully performing magic. This Larson fellow probably told the students to just point their wands and yell, but the results would be minimal. The Fracture Curse is designed for bones, not flesh, or cartilage. When they fire the spell, they may cause some pain or discomfort, but it won't be nearly as well served as if they had aimed for a specific location, and concentrated on that particular part of the body."

"So what, like aim for the head-"

"Aim for anywhere that will cause both pain and reduced movement. If an opponent is in the middle of raising their wand, aim for the ulna, or the radius" Fairhart said casually, tapping at his arm.

"Erm- those are- those are the what? The arm bon-"

But Fairhart was already tapping at random parts of his body, listing them off loosely as he did so.

"The clavicle...the sternum...the femur" he added ominously, tapping at what might have been his thigh.

"The- the femur?"

"Oh yes" Fairhart said darkly. "If you want to cause sudden, excruciating pain, and also reduce someone's mobility completely, you fracture the femur. Incantation is *Fracturus*, by the way. Easy enough to remember."

Albus stared at him with a pained expression on his face, to which Fairhart, snapped out of his stupor, commented further.

"It's not like the Cruciatus Curse, Albus, which is designed specifically to cause pain for extended periods of time. Such an act is designed just as much to instill terror as it is to inflict harm."

Albus said nothing, instead lost in his own world. Fairhart knew all about using such curses...he'd tortured Janine Fischer before he'd killed her last year, after all...

"You- you know a lot about hurting people" Albus said, shaking somewhat, despite the fact that he was completely warm now.

A powerful silence followed these words, one in which Fairhart, who had been speaking to him quite freely, had resumed staring back into the fire. After a moment, he spoke up.

"What is it that you wish to say, Albus?"

Albus said nothing at first, still allowing the tragic scene to play out in his mind over and over again, each time more and more rich with detail. After a moment, he decided that it was wrong to bring up Janine Fischer first. Not with what else had happened...

"I'm sorry about...about Blackwood" he said quietly, his eyes briefly finding Fairhart's silver ring, illuminated by the close proximity of the embers.

Fairhart gave a deep sigh.

"What happened to Ida was not your fault, Albus. It was mine."

The crackling of the fire grew absurdly loud at this point, with Albus realizing at once that Fairhart was unwilling to say any more about what had happened to Blackwood. But still...there was something else that he needed to ask. Something that had been bothering him just a little bit, every day since he'd woken up in the cabin...

"Do you ever regret what you did to Fischer?" Albus asked, his throat scratchy. "Or feel bad?"

"Sometimes" Fairhart said, his response much quicker than Albus had anticipated.

"Sometimes?"

Fairhart nodded, still staring into the fireplace. "To murder is complicated, Albus. You never really know how you will feel afterwards, until you do it. Sometimes it brings you sweet relief, other times, horrible regret. Sometimes both. What I did to Janine Fischer I did because it brought me peace of mind; it comforted me, my retaliation. And yet I sometimes wonder what would have happened had I simply not done it; had I simple showed mercy. In those moments, I also realize that I would probably regret *not* doing it, much more than I regret having done it now."

Albus sad nothing, but it was at this point that Fairhart turned to him, his expression stony and pugnacious.

"Make no mistake, Albus, I had not planned on your father's subsequent arrest, nor any other ramifications-"

"It's not even about that" Albus interjected. "It's about *you*. About what *you did*. It's about- it's about whether or not you even feel remorse-"

"I have been responsible for much death in my life, Albus" Fairhart croaked. "After so many times...it becomes natural."

Albus shook his head, his heart plummeting.

"Do you remember the first person that you killed?" he asked.

"Killed? No. Murdered, yes."

"Can you really distinguish them?" Albus asked. "I mean, is there even a difference?"

Fairhart gave him-surprisingly-a weak smile.

"We've had this conversation before, Albus."

"What? When did we-"

"You don't remember?" Fairhart asked. "Sitting in the back of the classroom, and hollering at me? For having suggested that, in some cases, to kill was necessary?"

It dawned on him immediately. Albus scratched at the back of his neck, trying to piece together what his opinion had been then, to see if it had changed over the years. Unwilling to see if it had, he asked a question.

"What is the difference?" he asked. "Between- between killing and murdering."

"Well it depends on the person, Albus" Fairhart said. "There are laws and statutes, and commonly agreed upon ideas, but only each individual knows what their intent was. I personally see murder as the more personal, more nefarious act. A selfish act. I personally consider murder to be the act of killing, for the sake of appeasing one's self. To kill for personal gain; for power or for control. To kill out of envy, or spite. To kill for revenge."

Albus said, nothing, instead absorbing these words and mulling them over as each was spoken.

"What do you consider it, Albus?" Fairhart asked, snapping him from his thoughts.

"Pretty much the same" he said coldly. "And you- you've done that. Those things. Murdered, according to you..."

Fairhart nodded. "I have" he said, and Albus truly did find it incapable to detect if it was regret- or possibly even reflection-that was in his voice. The silence returned following this admittance, at which point Albus delved back further into his own mind, trying to figure out if there was a point in his own life when he'd distinguished between the two acts...

He felt his entire body go clammy at once. What had just happened with the train had immediately come to mind, but apart from that, there was something else. Something that he'd never told anyone except for his father...

"I almost kil- I almost murdered Ares" he said aloud, and Fairhart turned to him, interested.

"Really?" he said, sounding surprised, and indeed, mildly impressed.

"I had him up against a tree. He was defenceless. I was twelve."

Fairhart gave him a clap on the shoulder, and Albus jumped.

"You needn't worry, Albus. At that age, it is *extremely* unlikely that you'd have been able to use such a powerful curse. The errant thought might have crossed your mind-

"No" Albus said, shaking somewhat as the memory became more and more vivid in his head. "I could have done it. I had the Dragonfang Wand. It- the Wand- well myself really, I told myself that I could have done it. The Wand would have given me the strength."

This revelation wiped the smile from Fairhart's face, replacing it instead with a look of dawning realization.

"You had the Dragonfang Wand, you say?"

"Yes" Albus said.

"And it- it told you that you could kill Ares, should you choose to?"

"No, it told me *to* do it" Albus said, cringing. "Well, the Wand didn't say anything, *I* said it, to myself, if that even makes sen-

"I understand" Fairhart said, an extremely unusual expression formulating on his face; it was almost epiphanic.

"And despite this," he continued, sounding as though he deeply wanted clarification, "you chose not to?"

"Obviously" Albus said, a little annoyed at the stupidity of this question.

"Why?"

"I dunno" Albus said with a shrug. "It just- I dunno. Why?"

But Fairhart did not answer him right away. His mind seemed to be racing, and for what Albus was sure was at least five whole minutes, he pondered to himself quietly, leaving Albus to survey the faces he was making with discomfort.

"Erm...profess- San-" he started, but Fairhart had finally started to speak.

"You never actually *used* the Dragonfang Wand, correct?"

"Yes" Albus said icily, very agitated now. "Like I said-"

"You spoke to yourself, clearly able to distinguish between the two opposing ideas" Fairhart said lightly. "Do you ever still do this?"

This was such a peculiar question that Albus couldn't help but wonder whether or not Fairhart already knew the answer.

"I- yes" he said slowly. "Why...?"

"When was the last time?" Fairhart said, the alacrity in his voice somewhat disturbing. "The last time you *really* struggled, just as you mentioned what happened with Ares-"

"I don't- well actually" Albus changed his sentence in the middle, thinking carefully. Hadn't he just had the memory in his head? "Right before you found me" he admitted. "I had- do you remember what I told you before? Back when you were at Hogwarts? About me glowing and all that-"

"I remember" Fairhart said sternly. "Go on."

"It happened again, before you found me" he said. "I had nearly- I had nearly done something stupid. I'd almost killed- well *murdered* a lot of people, I guess you could say, and I'd heard my own voice too. The- the bad one."

"Not necessarily bad" Fairhart said lowly, sounding more as though he was speaking to himself than to Albus. "Just...different..."

"San," Albus started anxiously, "do you *know* why this stuff happens to me? I've known it's been unnatural for a while now-"

"I believe I do, Albus" Fairhart said, staring at him intently, and fireworks went off in Albus' stomach.

"You do!" he asked, the wind nearly knocked from him; he had expected a much more convoluted answer.

"I believe I do" Fairhart repeated. "But just in case I am right...I cannot tell you."

The smile slid from Albus' face in a millisecond.

"What?" he said, his mouth hanging open from confusion and disappointment. "What do you mean you can't tell- in case you're *right*? What the-"

"You should get some sleep" Fairhart said, standing up without looking at him and dusting off his robes.

"Get some sleep!" Albus exclaimed, standing up himself. "Why won't you tell me what-"

"You are coming with me tomorrow, yes?" Fairhart said loudly, though Albus knew for sure that he could hear him.

"I- what- yes, but-"

"Then get some sleep" Fairhart told him sternly, and his tone was so definitively final that Albus could do little more than mouth at him wordlessly, irate at his behavior.

Fairhart then extinguished the fire with a wave of his hand, the darkness unable to conceal his exiting footsteps, leaving Albus to stare into nothingness, his expression blank and his mind racing.

Though he ended up dwelling on Fairhart's final revelation for most of the night, exhaustion from his laborious magical training had eventually taken its toll on him. It was to mere cracks of sunlight that he awakened, his body strewn out over the uncomfortable couch in the same twisted manner in which he'd fallen asleep. Raising himself up and wiping at his eyes, the still silence made him wonder just where his would-be-mentor was. Wasn't he supposed to have woken him up early?

Removing himself from the couch and entering the next room, the mystery was solved immediately. Fairhart was crouched down in the corner, looking as though he hadn't slept, tapping his wand at the strange silver box that Albus hadn't paid mind to once since his arrival.

"Have you been up this whole time?" Albus said groggily, and Fairhart stood up and turned to him.

"Yes" he said. "I see that you got some sleep though."

"Yeah- a- a bit. What's that?" he asked, pointing down at the silver box with interest. He recalled having declared it a safe of sorts at his arrival, and Fairhart confirmed this to him.

"That, Albus, is a safe; magically reinforced, of course."

"Don't you have a Gringotts vault?" Albus asked, remembering that his father had even said so the previous year.

"I do" said Fairhart, his hands on his hips as he looked down at the silver box. "But sometimes it is better to have things close by, as is the case here."

"What were you- were you putting something in it?" Albus asked him with a yawn.

"Yes" Fairhart replied firmly. "But what exactly it is, I'm afraid-"

"- you can't tell me" Albus finished weakly, frowning. "You're being very secretive, you know" he added.

"We all have our secrets, Albus" Fairhart said, smiling slightly. "But now start getting ready to leave; we're heading out soon."

Albus spent a few minutes cleaning himself off with the same bar of soap that he'd been using for the last two weeks or so, but this was all that he could really do aside from getting completely dressed and stowing his wand away in his pocket. All ready to head into town, he waited for Fairhart by the front door, and together the two of them left and set off down the snowy road on the opposite side of the trees.

It was bright out, and with little wind, Albus was much more comfortable than he'd been in the freezing cold the previous day. What was somewhat unnerving, however, was the attitude of the man walking next to him. Fairhart was not speaking at all, which was frustrating, as not only was Albus deeply curious to know both what Fairhart knew and why he wasn't telling him, but he also had a handful of questions to ask about their current whereabouts as well. Realizing that the information wouldn't simply be given to him, he decided to work for it.

"So what's this place called anyway?" he asked.

"It's a small wizarding settlement known as Lambshire. Very quaint, and very- well...you'll see when we get there."

The road was a winding one, even if it was difficult to tell due to the white coating over all of it, but it was easy to see that they were making their way out of the more forest-like portion of land and towards one more indicative of civilization; Albus could see long stretches of what may have been farmland on both sides of the road.

"San," Albus started tartly, the name still difficult to say casually, "you said before that we're- that we're still at least in Great Britain, right?"

"Oh yes" Fairhart said reassuringly, the pace of his stride unchanging. "In fact, we're rather close to the North Sea."

Something similar to alarm coursed through Albus. "Wait what?" he said, aghast. "Just how close-"

"Lambshire-though on no muggle map-is actually not far at all from Edinburgh, and it is also from a port in Lambshire that I hope to eventually depart from on our quest to reach Azkaban."

Albus nodded, but before he could say much else, something had caught his eye. They had began walking down a steep, almost hill-like portion of the road, and in their descent Albus could make out what looked like a giant, stone door of sorts, one that reminded him quite eerily of the brick wall that led to Diagon Alley. The stone door looked worn and chipped, though still somewhat sturdy, and the wall that it was placed in appeared to be long and equally fortified; it extended as far as Albus could see on both sides of it.

"I thought that you said that this place was small?" Albus asked, tucking his hands in his jacket as they continued to move down the road, the giant door becoming larger with every step closer.

"Lambshire is actually not nearly as big as the wall surrounding it, Albus. Don't forget that we are in a predominately muggle location, and thus, it cannot simply be out in the open. I don't know for sure what enchantments are placed around to prevent muggles from entering, but I'd imagine that the wall looks much less intimidating and, more than that, much more uninteresting. Muggles probably simply see a vacant lot with high fences."

"Why are these people so secluded?" Albus asked, coming to a halt as they did so. They were officially staring up at the giant stone door now.

Fairhart ignored his question as he removed his wand, his voice changing to one of a more serious nature.

"I must let you know now, Albus, that the place that you are about to see will be unlike any you have probably seen before."

An explosion of questions went off in Albus' head.

"What do you-"

"Growing up with your father, you will probably have never heard of such a place either" Fairhart told him, his voice little more than a whisper. "He-the Ministry, really-will have kept it from you."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked, feeling somewhat frightened now. What was going on here? What could be so unusual, or so worthy of warning, about this small wizarding town?"

Again failing to answer him, Fairhart tapped his wand on a few random places of the concrete-colored door. At once, it started to open slowly, with each passing second allowing Albus to see a bit more...

He gave a gasp, and Fairhart looked at him with a twisted, rueful smile that mangled his face further.

"This, Albus, is the world that your father never would have wanted you to see."

Chapter 23: Lambshire

Albus had to wipe at his eyes as the wizarding settlement came into focus, utter disbelief flooding him. Lambshire was a wreck.

The dirt road that immediately greeted them was the most aesthetically pleasing thing in view; the houses that lined the road were more like huts than anything else, small, slanted hovels all made from the dirty stone and what may have been straw. There was an unnerving feeling of negligence in the very air it seemed, with disgusting piles of trash mounted up next to each shanty, and the small glimpses of backyards that Albus could catch were equally displeasing; filled with bags of garbage that, despite being coated in snow, were being encircled by flying insects. Though the road ahead was lined with dilapidated homes, Albus could see in the distance, in different directions, small stands crammed with different assortments of unappetizing meals. And behind those stands...were vendors.

People!

The shock of seeing such a run-down place had temporarily drawn Albus away from the fact that this was supposed to be a thriving town; people were living here. Even as he thought this, he could just make out small bits of movement from where he was standing; an emaciated woman, only half clothed, was sitting on a stool in one of the backyards full of waste. The stool, he noticed, looked as though every inch of it had been spellotaped. Just two houses (did they qualify as homes?) away, he saw a sunken face move by a battered window, frightening him slightly. And then, worst of all, he saw an elderly looking man hobble from one place of residence to another, his wooden leg among the least dirty things on him, least of all his face, as evidenced by the long, filthy beard hanging from his weak chin. He hadn't seemed to notice Albus' staring, or indeed, the arrival of he and Fairhart at all.

"What- what is this place?" Albus asked, horrified as he looked up at Fairhart's face, which, in comparison to the passing pedestrian's, didn't really look that bad at all.

"This is Lambshire, Albus" Fairhart replied matter-of-factly, not even taking care to glance at him.

"Was it- was it always like this?" Albus asked, trembling somewhat at the thought.

"No" Fairhart said. "Whether or not Lambshire was ever the epitome of beauty I don't know, but it certainly hasn't always been the decayed, forgotten fragment of society that you see now. Lambshire, Albus, was one of the many small towns attacked by Voldemort during the second war."

"Voldemort?" Albus repeated, flabbergasted. "That was- that was more than twenty years ago!"

"Indeed" Fairhart said grimly. "But we need to be moving now, I would think that our destination would lie somewhere in the middle of town..."

Albus felt his feet start to carry him without even realizing that he was moving. As they walked along the dusty pathway a series of horrid images and frightening sounds plagued his senses; he could hear a woman screaming in pain somewhere close by, could see what looked like a dead animal roasting over a poorly created fire in another trash-filled backyard.

"I don't understand" Albus said. "Why are- what happened?"

"I already told you. Voldemort's forces attacked this area. Considering the damage I'd say that his army of powerful creatures were more involved than his Death Eaters. Probably a giant or two."

"But why isn't it all fixed up by now?" Albus asked, nearly tripping over something that he didn't even bother to look back at it, in case it would terrify him. "I mean, when Ares attacked Hogsmeade, it was-"

"Fixed by Warren Waddlesworth, who has plenty of gold to spare, Albus."

"But then the Ministry-"

He stopped his sentence there, the realization dawning on him. "The Ministry never helped this place recover..."

"No Albus, it didn't" Fairhart said sadly. "More than half of these small, isolated locations were never tended to following the second war with Voldemort. Quick fact: almost ninety percent of all Ministry funding following the war went to adjusting the Ministry itself. Aurors were hired to replace those who'd died, many key members of the Ministry were given new wands, and places that the Ministry had personal interest in were given precedence over communities like this one. Think of Hogwarts, Albus. The castle was horribly damaged at a certain point of the war, but was as good as new by the time that the students were ready for it that very September..."

"But couldn't they just use magic to have fixed those things? Couldn't *these* people use magic-"

"Magic is not always the solution, Albus. Yes, it is a convenience and an important aspect of our kind, but we have currency for a reason; magic can not do everything. And as for these people, what makes you think that they're all capable wizards and witches? How many of them do you think even have an education? How many of the younger ones do you think could even purchase a wand? What makes you think there's even a place here that *sells* wands? Lambshire, like many other places, was abandoned by the Ministry."

"No!" Albus all but shouted, his words just barely able to mask what was being called out by a vendor to their left.

"Billywig soup!" the old man was yelling out, and Albus saw that he was bald, with an eyepatch. "Billywig soup for a knut or two!" he added desperately. "Or medicine..."

Albus ignored the chills going up his spine as he reaffirmed his indignation at Fairhart's comment.

"I don't believe that" he said. "My dad wouldn't-"

"I said that the Ministry abandoned them, Albus, not your father. It is important that you distinguish from this synecdoche. Individually, your father, and the Minister at the time, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and many others may have made it a priority to help places in need, like this one. And indeed, had they set foot in here, maybe they would have. But the Ministry as a whole makes decisions Albus, usually to appease one another, and the end result is that these 'smaller' troubles end up being postponed and eventually forgotten."

Albus said nothing. He was soaking in everything that he was hearing, but he was also paying attention to his surroundings. He and Fairhart took a sharp turn at the end of the dirt path and found themselves in a more open area; it looked a bit like Hogsmeade, with actual shops set up around a considerably sized promenade. Unlike in Hogsmeade, however, the area was all but vacant, with only a few people meandering around, many of them wrapped in bandages and looking as though they would eat for a week straight if given the opportunity. As a distraction to this, Fairhart continued his analysis.

"If you were ever wondering how men like Waddlesworth received so much attention back then, Albus, it was because of places like this. Lambshire was unfortunately out of his reach; he'd probably never even heard of it at the time, but places nearly identical to this one had gold funneled into them."

"I heard that before" Albus said, thinking back to when his aunt and uncle had given him this information. It had been right after he'd seen Waddlesworth for the first time, delivering a speech that had rallied support like none other that Albus had seen. He recalled having actually liked Waddlesworth a bit back then...

"Something on your mind?" Fairhart asked him, stopping briefly to allow an elderly woman to take her time walking passed him.

"It's just- I dunno" Albus said lamely. "Why did Waddlesworth stop? Why didn't he just keep fixing places, he was rich enough."

Fairhart sighed, and Albus saw a slight frown register on his face as he did so.

"I don't know the exact details of it, and much of this is speculation, but it isn't hard to deduce what could have brought out the change in his agenda. Waddlesworth was loved by the people for his generosity, and at the time, the people were all about the start of the Renegade movement.

Waddlesworth had the intelligence, the appeal, and the gold to make the movement into something special. After a while he became less about rebuilding and more about finding *redemption* for those who hadn't contributed in the war. His own tenacity and his aggressive personality shaped the situation into what we see today; Wands and Redemption. Or I suppose we should be calling them the United Ministry now, actually..."

"I still can't believe that there's places like this everywhere" Albus said, a morose feeling overtaking him.

"It is a painful thought" Fairhart said, and though Albus expected him to continue, he didn't. It seemed as though that was the end of it.

They walked passed a series of shops, which Albus saw now were simply larger versions of the shacks that he'd seen earlier, sometimes colored dully to denote their importance. Albus was forcibly reminded of the Hogpenn as they walked by, what with the people in ragged clothing sitting slumped against the walls, but even the slums in Hogsmeade couldn't quite compare to what he was seeing here. Interestingly enough, however, a lot of it was similar. They passed by two individuals as they walked, one frail looking with gaunt eyes, the other with dark black hair and scars around his mouth. The latter was handing over a vile of orange liquid in exchange for a small burlap sack, the contents of which Albus couldn't even begin to guess at.

"What's going on over there?" Albus murmured, nudging Fairhart slightly and pointing over to the exchange.

"Well Albus, there are numerous scenarios to play with" Fairhart said, rather casually. "One idea is that the man giving the bag has a sick child, and is thus exchanging food or some other product in exchange for a potion that will help. The second scenario involves the individual with the bag handing over something stolen from someone else, in exchange for a crudely brewed, make-shift concoction that will help him drift off and forget how awful his living conditions are. You're good at Potions, you said?"

Albus nodded, unable to take his eyes off of the conversing people, who had officially made their trade and now seemed to be discussing another potential barter.

"Then you'd be one of the few doing well in a community like this. Potions are pivotal here; if you can create something that can heal sickness or help with wounds, you will have an abundance of small luxuries thrown your way in return."

"Why wouldn't I just make the potions for free?" Albus asked, and Fairhart smiled. Lightly, he clapped his hand on Albus' shoulder.

"You remain as innocent as ever" he told him. "But think carefully now," he added, "if you were living in these same conditions, wouldn't you expect payment for your services? Perhaps even an unreasonable amount of payment, considering that what you have to offer is so necessary?"

"No!" Albus hissed, finding the idea outrageous. "I'll whip these people up some potions right now, it's no big deal-

"You are very polite, Albus" Fairhart said, still smiling. "But you have no ingredients. And besides, the exchange that you just saw probably wasn't as genuine as you think. It is highly unlikely that anyone here is as talented at brewing potions as you are, considering that you seem to naturally excel at it, and have also had instruction in the field for several years. My guess is that the man who received the potion is walking away with a very poor version of what it is that he sought. He'll return for more though; it's the best that he'll get."

Albus said nothing, watching as the wispy man walked away, apparently unable to come to an agreement with the man with the scarred mouth. This second fellow, who was now holding a sack filled with something that Albus was unsure of, turned away and made eye contact with Albus at once.

"What are you looking at!" the man barked, and he started to walk toward him.

"Uh-oh" Fairhart said placidly. "It seems as though you've attracted some trouble..."

"I- what-" Albus started, looking up at him, but he was caught off guard by the grimy man coming his way, who was looking very brutish, his yellow teeth gleaming in the sunlight. The man cocked his fist back...

Albus reached into his pocket and withdrew his wand. Instinctively, he raised it up and said in his head the first spell that came to mind-

Fracturus! he thought, taking aim at the man's cocked fist.

No burst of light issued from his wand, but a loud bang and the following crunching noise told him that his spell had been successful. The man fell to the ground at once, screaming in pain and clutching at his broken wrist, the burlap sack that he'd just earned laying by his feet.

"That kid's got a wand!" someone yelled, and Albus started to panic. What was going on here? A minute ago he'd just been asking Fairhart a few questions-

But things had changed extremely fast. The man crying in pain on the floor was being stepped over by three or four men, all of whom were sporting bandages and worn out clothes. He looked behind him and saw a woman running toward him as well, her long brown hair flapping along behind her, a manic expression on her dirty face-

Three flashes of light went off in succession, each of them accompanied by a wail of pain. When Albus looked around he saw that Fairhart had removed his own wand, and that three of their attackers were now laying on the ground, each of them apparently inflicted by a different malady. The one closest to Albus, who was laying by his feet and shrieking, was sporting blood from his nose.

"Let's move" Fairhart said, sounding quite unperturbed. He grabbed Albus, who was shaking with fear, and pulled him along out of the open, leading him down a dingy alleyway and back onto another dusty road, this one void of people entirely. Albus looked behind him and caught a glance of the scene; more people had gathered, about ten more actually, and he could see a woman with short hair walking away carrying the burlap sack with her, apparently pleased that she hadn't needed to do any work to obtain it...

"What- what happened back there?" Albus asked, quivering. "I didn't- out of nowhere-"

"That very unfortunate, now broken-wristed man, evidently perceived your voyeurism as an offensive gesture, and chose to attack you."

"Thanks for the help by the way!" Albus said scathingly. "Just about how far were you going to let that guy go, eh? Just going to let him thump me? You seemed awfully aloof-"

"I've been teaching you powerful magic for quite some time now, Albus" Fairhart said coolly. "I was rather hoping that you'd be able to defend yourself adequately, especially as your challenger didn't seem to be too much of an issue. You did well, by the way. And incidentally, I did eventually intervene, didn't I?"

"Yeah, when the entire town tried attacking me!" Albus spat. "What was that anyway? Someone yelled that I had a wand-"

"As I've already told you, Albus, basic things like wands are rare here. Barbaric though it may be, the idea on everyone's mind was to manhandle the wand away from you, for keeps. Having a wand can be a considerable difference in places like this. The ability to perform magic easily, even if the results are poor, means that those who are learned in healing spells and basic charms have sizeable advantages, including the ability to offer services for things in return. Someone with a wand may offer to fix someone else's home in exchange for food."

"They didn't go after your wand!" Albus shot out angrily, still somewhat disconcerted from what had just transpired.

"Someone did the first time that I showed up here" Fairhart told him pointedly. "And most...most know not to try again. They probably didn't realize that you were with me-"

"Ever think of maybe helping these people?" Albus said, exhaling deeply. "Instead of just walking by and commenting?"

Fairhart gave him a slanted smile, one made only more gruesome by the state of his face.

"I share your sentiments, Albus, I really do. But you are treading on very complex grounds. It would take more than one individual to sort things out here. What could I really do? I could help people piece by piece. Help them fix their lives a day at a time. But when you cater to one person who is desperate, the hundreds of others will show contempt. And even beyond that-and this will

be difficult for you to hear-it is unwise to show power around these people. You were just attacked for possessing a wand. They were going to *kill* you, not ask you politely to magically sew their clothes."

Albus said nothing, instead rubbing at his temple to soothe the splitting headache that he was having; why were things always so complicated? Whether Fairhart was delving into his thoughts or not, he wasn't sure, but either way, his former professor had started to speak in a much more lighthearted manner.

"If it makes you feel any better, Albus, I have friends here too."

"Friends?" Albus asked, his ears perking up.

"Well...maybe not *friends*" Fairhart said lamely. "But acquaintances. People who I'm on good terms with. I've spent a lot of time here, as it is unlikely to be reached by the Ministry, and also, because it is so out of touch with the rest of the world. A newspaper article that shows me with a price over my head is unlikely to ever make it this far, and even if it did, the people here are too despondent to care much for the regular going-ons of the rest of the apparently thriving world."

"That explains why you have no information on anything else going on" Albus said, frowning, and Fairhart nodded. "But if you have 'acquaintances', where are they-"

"A little bit further into town" Fairhart answered him right away. "And hurry along now..."

Albus nodded and followed along as Fairhart resumed his brisk pace, the dirty road once more in his sights. They continued to pass along poorly created hovels as they went, and Albus was sure that as terrible as they seemed, they would look even worse without bits of snow frosting them off, which concealed the decay of them a bit. While passing by them Albus again saw only hints of life; he saw a shadow here, heard a terrible cough there. Only when they walked passed a particularly pitiful looking place of residence did Albus see an actual person, and he felt his skin crawl when it happened.

It was a little boy. Ten or eleven, he had straggly hair the color of (appropriately enough) dirt, and his body was so thin that even his makeshift rags seemed to be hanging off of him. He looked extremely sickly, but his tired eyes appeared to be intently interested in something. On closer inspection, Albus saw that they were focused on what was in hands: a shiny gold Galleon.

"You'll want to put that away" Fairhart said darkly as they passed, and the boy gave a small jump, then stowed it away and out of sight. Albus waited until the boy was well out of earshot before speaking up.

"He had money!"

"Yes he did."

"But why?" Albus asked. "What's it good for here-"

"Bartering may be the primary method of exchanging goods here, but only because gold is so sparse. Proper money is still good to have; there's always the chance that someone who *does* value it from outside the town will pass through, with something that they're willing to sell. Likewise, these people have nowhere to go in particular, but only because they can't afford anywhere else. They know that in other places gold is necessary; you can expect many to try and save whatever they come by, with aspirations of leaving this place."

"Erm- so do you use gold then?" Albus asked him, and Fairhart nodded, then tapped at his pocket, which jingled unexpectedly.

"The people that I make contact with here are among those who have the aspirations of leaving. Gold will suffice."

"How much do you have?" Albus asked.

"I was an Auror for quite some time, Albus. I have enough."

"And you're getting a boat, right?"

Fairhart only nodded, then extended his hand towards something. Albus looked straight ahead and realized that they had entered another circular area, filled with rotten buildings that appeared to be shops, as opposed to the homes that he'd been walking past. Most prominent among them was a large hunk of wood in the middle, and it looked to be in surprisingly good shape. True, it wasn't decorated and the door was hard to find, as it was the same dark brown as everything else, but it at least looked sturdy, and also had a single word painted on it sloppily in red.

Alcohol

"Is that the name of the place?" Albus asked, pointing at it.

"No Albus, that is the most offered product" Fairhart said wryly. "Advertising is unimportant here; there are no other taverns or pubs, I can assure you of that. Keep your wand tucked away" he added, and Albus double checked to make sure that the instrument was concealed. He then followed Fairhart over to the door of what was apparently a pub, and they entered it one after the other-

For a wild moment, Albus had anticipated something similar to the Three Broomsticks. Perhaps it would be a bit dingy, and maybe it wouldn't be as well cared for overall, but certainly, he had thought that the general appearance would be similar. He ended up being completely wrong.

The entire inside of the nameless pub was brown. Rotted wood served as the only true decor, and the actual furniture looked uncomfortable at best. Round tables were set up randomly, propped up on various different objects so that they weren't all the way off balance. Each table had one,

maybe two stools to it, all of them looking as regularly repaired as those that he'd seen outside. The actual counter where drinks were supposed to be served was simply a slab of darkened wood stretched across nothing; it was hanging in mid-air magically.

It was only at this point that Albus realized that this makeshift bar top was the only thing he'd thus far seen-apart from maybe the potion from earlier-that indicated magic. Right away he understood that whoever owned this place was a man of great stature in Lambshire; just how powerful someone could be in such a place, though, Albus wasn't quite sure.

Surprisingly enough, however, the dismal nature of the place and his wonder at its ownership was wiped from Albus' mind when he realized something else; there were people in the pub. A lot of them.

More occupied than any road or outside area that Albus had seen so far, the pub that he was in now was the closest thing to flourishing imaginable, considering the overall state of things. About twenty or thirty of the most disheveled people possible were in sight, a handful fortunate enough to be sitting at one of the stools as they took long swigs of smoking glasses, the rest forced to stand hunched over the tables as they drank. No one's face was clearly visible; it was either bandaged or concealed by the hood of a cloak. No one paid them any interest as they entered either.

"It's a sullen place, isn't it?" Fairhart said, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Albus said nothing, instead ogling random people, including a witch with a squashed nose and a teenaged, fit looking boy who had a large bottle in his hand. He quickly aimed his gaze at the floor though, remembering what had just occurred outside.

"Don't look so intimidated" Fairhart said under his breath, leading him through a small crowd of disinterested people. "You are much more capable magically than any of these individuals. Have confidence in your abilities, Albus."

"You just told me to make sure my wand was out of sight" Albus said lowly, out of the corner of his mouth.

"I didn't tell you to be eager to *instigate*" Fairhart told him dryly. "I just told you to have confidence in your abilities..."

He trailed off slightly, apparently distracted. Albus realized why at once. The slab of wood floating in the corner of the pub now had someone standing behind it. Albus' first observation was that he was among the hairiest men that he had ever seen. He had bushy black hair and a matching beard, reminiscent of Hagrid's even, but rather than tangled it looked ruffled, poking out in odd ways. Barely an inch of his face was visible behind it all, and it thus took Albus squinting his eyes to realize that the barkeeper, like someone else that he'd seen earlier, had an eyepatch over his left eye.

Fairhart steered him by the shoulder through the crowd of murmuring people, many of whom had looked up at the appearance of the hairy man. One person—a woman with stringy gray hair and a pallid, sunken look—actually approached the counter, dropping a single Sickle on it eagerly. The hairy barkeep turned, reached into a crate, and withdrew a brown paper bag that clearly had a bottle concealed within it.

Albus followed Fairhart all the way up to the counter, the woman turning and walking right by them with a dazed expression on her face. Fairhart casually laid his hand on the floating block of wood, and the hairy bartender nodded his head in greeting.

"Business seems to be booming, Otis" Fairhart said, a small trace of sarcasm in his voice.

The man known as Otis scratched his beard—his hand momentarily out of sight—before answering.

"And what can I help you with today, John?" he said, his voice gruff, with a slight wheeze to it.

Albus looked up at Fairhart inquisitorially, though Fairhart gave no sign that anything strange had happened.

"I was wondering if you'd managed to procure what I'd asked you for not too long ago?" Fairhart asked him.

Otis scratched at his beard again, and when he spoke, there was a definite note of fallacy in his voice.

"I did. But it was harder to get than I'd thought. Cost went up."

Fairhart smirked. "Are you trying to play me for a fool, Otis?"

Otis shrugged his shoulders, but at that very moment, the fit looking teenager approached, throwing down a Sickle just as the woman had. Otis reached behind him and pulled out another bottle from the crate, then slid it along absent-mindedly.

"Sorry, John" Otis told Fairhart, shaking his head. "It cost me a bit just to get—"

"Is it in the back?" Fairhart asked, pointing at a door just behind Otis that Albus hadn't even registered before. "I've got the gold, calm down" he added, when Otis shaped his mess of a visage into a suspicious expression.

"Come on back" he grunted, and Fairhart made to move behind the counter. When Albus mimicked this, Otis gave another grunt.

"Don't know 'em" he said sharply. "Not bringing 'em back—"

"He's with me Otis—"

But Otis had crossed his burly arms over obstinately, leaving Fairhart to sigh.

"Go sit down" he said to Albus, turning to him. "I'll be right back-"

"But-"

Albus had suddenly went cold. He did not like the idea of sitting in this shady pub, surrounded by drunk savages who would tear him apart if they saw that he had a wand. Fairhart had already followed Otis however, and Albus, uncomfortable with standing, peered through the groups of chattering people and miraculously found an unoccupied table in the other corner of the pub, with a vacant stool for him to sit on as well. He tore through the people with a pounding heart, then sat down on the stool with a sigh of relief. It wobbled slightly, but before he could think anymore on it, someone had already approached him.

It was a man with, like nearly everyone else he'd seen, a frail physique. His skin was wrinkly and tinged grey somewhat, but there appeared to be no immediate disability to him; he had both eyes and both legs anyway.

"I was sitting there" the man growled, his voice raspy.

Albus made to rise at once. "Oh sor-"

But then he realized something. The man had most certainly *not* been sitting on this stool, Albus had seen it from the other side of the pub. He remembered what Fairhart had just told him.

"No you weren't" he said darkly, and he leaned back somewhat, which he immediately realized was rather foolish, as stools had no backs to them.

"Yes I was-"

"No, you weren't" Albus repeated forcefully, and the man eyed him with contempt-

And then walked away. Albus exhaled once more, rather pleased with his tenacity, then resumed waiting. For five minutes he sat, no one approaching him again, and then finally, Fairhart appeared next to him, a medium sized, brown bag in his hands.

"What's in there?" Albus asked at once.

"Provisions for the next day or so" Fairhart answered at once. "Our means of transportation is just behind the pub, by the way. Let's get moving."

Albus rose from his seat and followed Fairhart back through the dingy pub, catching sight of the brittle man from before as he did so. He was yelling at someone for having taken his seat.

Only when they left the pub and were met with the sight of ruin before them did Albus actually appreciate the building that he'd just been inside of. It had been gloomy, yes, but there had been

noise, and signs of life. The scene of despoliation that he and Fairhart made their way through next made Albus want to distract himself badly, and thankfully, he had something to talk about.

"John?" he asked lamely, and Fairhart gave a light chortle.

"People like me, Albus-those of who are all but vagrants in this world-are better off not letting their names slip. The barkeeper in there, Otis, is not unintelligent. He knows that's not my real name. But he respects my privacy, and so long as he has a consistent name to call me by, we can do business."

"Whatever you say, San," Albus started dryly, "if that *is* your real name..."

Fairhart smiled. "My name is Sancticus Fairhart, Albus. I would not have used a pseudonym while teaching at Hogwarts, or while working at the Ministry."

"I was only kidding" Albus said, making the same turn as Fairhart, to just around the pub. They were met with a clearing of sorts, a patch of dirt and slush that had, predictably, heaps of garbage littering it. Albus was forced to pinch his nose as he examined the clearing, wondering whether or not this had been some sort of sick joke of the barkeeper's.

As it turned out, it wasn't.

"Right over here" said Fairhart jovially, and he walked over to a seemingly random pile of trash, one that consisted of food too rotten for even these people to eat, along with scraps of newspaper and tin cans. Fairhart reached his hands into the pile and gave a tremendous pull. Slowly, a large object was extracted from the pile-

It was, as Albus had suspected, a boat. Closer to a sailboat actually, though of course, there was no mast. It was entirely wooden, sizeable enough to fit two or three people at the most, and apart from the fact that it appeared to be in good shape, there was nothing immediately special about it. It did appear to be pristine though; there were no nicks or scratches on it, and it even appeared somewhat polished. Albus couldn't help but compare it to a new broomstick, despite the obvious differences.

"What was it doing in the trash?" Albus asked at once.

"It was in hiding" Fairhart replied. "Otis was kind enough to ensure that no one would take it; people typically rummage around here, looking for scraps of food and such, but he managed to secure it well enough, don't you think?"

"I- I guess" Albus said. "So that's it, then? What we're taking to Azkaban?"

"I know it doesn't look like much" Fairhart said. "But it is specially made. No ordinary muggle boat with a few charms on it could have gotten us there, not with the enchantments that I expect will be around the island."

Albus nodded, then watched as Fairhart removed his wand and tapped the boat twice. At the second tap, strings appeared, attached to the boat and positioned in such a manner that it could be carried as though a backpack. Albus doubted very much whether or not this help; surely, the boat weighed enough so that it simply couldn't be carried on one's shoulders? But then, to his immense surprise, Fairhart picked it up and threw it around his back as easily as if he'd been lifting nothing at all.

"How-"

"Featherweight Charm, Albus" Fairhart said.

"I know!" Albus said quickly. He then realized that Fairhart now had the boat strung across his back in an upright manner, the bag of supplies clutched tightly in his hands. Relief swept over him. "We can go now, right?" he asked.

"Our time in Lambshire is done, for today" Fairhart told him, nodding. "But like I've already told you, I plan on passing through here once more, and relatively soon at that. Lambshire is very close to the North Sea, and the port that I plan on leaving from is only a small hike away-"

He broke off there, and Albus understood why at once. Loud yells and shouts had just pierced the silence of the town, sounding distant but still well in ear-shot. Albus froze on the spot, wondering what could have made such a lugubrious, lifeless area suddenly start making noise collectively. Had someone foolishly, like Albus, indicated possession of a wand, and was now being ambushed for it?

"Stay here" Fairhart said, and he tossed the bag over to Albus, who peered into it at once; as he should have known, it was full of the unappealing bread that he'd somehow gotten accustomed to in the last week or two. Fairhart next removed the boat from his back and tossed it his way. Albus caught it and stood it upright in front of him. It was almost three times his height, but only twice his width.

Fairhart vanished at the next second, slowly working his way around the pub and out of sight. Albus stood still, his hands clutching the sides of the vertical boat, waiting with baited breath. The yells had not quite subsided, but seemed more organized, as though there was now only a handful of speakers, with the majority listening.

And then, a minute later, Fairhart had rounded the corner again, looking worrisome.

"What's going on-" Albus started.

"We must get moving. Now."

Albus mouthed wordlessly while Fairhart snatched the boat from his grip and slung the weightless object around his shoulders, leaving Albus with only the bag of bread.

"What's-"

But Fairhart had already grabbed him by the hand, and was leading him further through the mounds of trash. Eventually, when Albus was sure that he'd come close to dying from lack of clean air, they found themselves back on the main road, as dirty and snowy as ever. Albus looked behind him and saw, to his astonishment, what was probably almost the entirety of Lambshire, all with their backs turned to them as they were witnessing something as a group. All one hundred or more of them, Albus was sure, were completely distracted, transfixed by whatever was going on.

"Why are they all-"

"The United Ministry is here" Fairhart said fiercely, his head turning back and forth, as though he was sizing up each decrepit shack as a hiding place. Finally, he settled on one that looked reasonably sturdy, though based off how black and charred the wood was, it had been on fire before.

"In here" Fairhart told him, pushing Albus along and making him enter first.

Albus pushed the door open and felt his heart skip a beat as it fell over completely. Still being moved along by Fairhart, he stepped over the broken door and instinctively moved his way to the corner of what was a completely empty room; everything in it, he assumed, had been plundered years ago. This particular residence was clearly void of any owner.

It was a bit more difficult for Fairhart to get in, as he had to remove the boat from his back and shift it through horizontally, but after a few moments, they were both standing in the same blackened corner, the boat on the floor in front of them.

"Why is the United-"

"Shhh!"

It appeared as though they'd hidden themselves just in time. The yells were getting louder now; it seemed as though the crowd was making its way down the road. It was nearly impossible to see what was going on though, as their only means of doing so were a few cracks in the wood of the front of the shack, which, judging by their size, had once been makeshift windows. Fairhart caught on to this and stepped over the boat quietly, then made his way over to the crack and peered through it. Albus followed after him, but Fairhart held out his hand.

"Stay where you are" he said quietly, but Albus, for the first time, ignored him.

"I need to know what's going on to!" he hissed, and went to the opposite side of the empty doorway, peering through a crack himself.

As expected, the sight that met his gaze was one of disorder and cluttering. It seemed as though the entire population of the town had tried to filter themselves into the one dirty pathway, all of them muttering incoherently or shouting foolishly into the air. After a moment of this chaos, Albus heard a chilling voice penetrate the confusion.

"We're not here to hurt any of you!" bellowed a loud, confident voice. It appeared to be magnified slightly by magic, but even still, Albus thought that it sounded vaguely familiar.

"We are looking for someone!" the voice said again, and the crowd dispersed slightly. Albus caught sight of what was going on in the middle, and he gave a small gasp.

It was indeed the United Ministry. About ten or fifteen of them, actually, all dressed identical to the security that had been on the Hogwarts Express. The man speaking, however-the one who appeared to be the leader-was Donovan Hornsbrook's father.

Albus backed up slightly, but Mr. Hornsbrook's loud growl continued to inform him of the situation.

"We are looking for a man who resides not far from here" he continued loudly. "And whoever is able to point us in his direction will receive a substantial reward!"

Albus didn't need to see the large sack of gold to know that it had been withdrawn. There was a single moment when everything went quiet-when the citizens of Lambshire seemed to be transfixed by the bag that Hornsbrook's father was holding-and then he heard what sounded like a battle cry-

There was a loud, explosive noise, and Albus pressed his face back into the crack, eager to see what had happened.

It was apparent at once. A man was laying on the floor, howling in pain, his straggly, dirty hair covering his face. The people behind him had recoiled somewhat in fear, and a United Ministry member next to Hornsbrook's father had their wand raised. The man had evidently made a desperate grab for the gold.

"I repeat," Hornsbrook's father said, his voice cutting through the crowd, "we do not wish to hurt anyone. We are seeking information on the whereabouts of a certain individual."

"I don't even think they can understand you, Hank" said a woman a few feet behind him, and Albus recognized her as having been one of those who had spoken to him when he'd went to meet Waddlesworth months ago. "These people are savages, honestly..."

Albus scowled, but then had to remind himself that he had thought the same thing earlier. Still, he hadn't said it aloud...

The noise of the crowd had thinned somewhat now, consisting mostly of raised inquiries about how to obtain the bag of gold. Finally, a random voice from the crowd called out, "What do you want to know?"

"Now we're getting somewhere" said the man next to Hornsbrook's father, who still had his wand raised. "Give them a description."

"The man is easily recognizable" Hornsbrook's father said clearly, as though he was speaking to rambunctious children. "And any information on his whereabouts at all, proven correct, will be sufficient for this reward. The man has a disfigured face, entirely on one side. Has anyone seen-"

He stopped there, however, and Albus saw an annoyed expression flicker on his face. He understood at once what was bothering him. Nearly everyone in the crowd had something wrong with their face; Fairhart himself probably could have stood in the group unnoticed, blended in perfectly.

Quietly, Albus inched his way passed the empty door frame, then over to Fairhart's side. He was staring through the cracks of the shack intensely.

"What are we going to do?" Albus murmured, so low that he needed to tap Fairhart on the shoulder slightly to let him know that he was speaking.

"I'm working on it" Fairhart told him from the corner of his mouth.

"How did they find-"

"They must have tracked your Apparition after all" Fairhart whispered, more to himself than Albus, who flushed.

"Sorry-"

"It's not your fault" Fairhart said, turning to him briefly. "But it is very fortunate that we were here today. They've undoubtedly already searched our base of operations."

Albus felt his insides freeze up. "Does that- does that mean that we can't go back?" he whispered sourly.

Fairhart nodded, but said nothing, for Hornsbrook's father had just started speaking again, a sudden inspiration apparently over taking him.

"He may have been seen in the company of a boy!" he announced loudly, and Albus felt his insides writhe. "For those of you who know who Harry Potter is," he continued, and nearly everyone nodded and mumbled, "the boy bears a striking resemblance to him-"

"They're here in the town!" someone yelled out, amidst other comments. Albus inhaled sharply as he watched Hornsbrook's father's face harden. He instinctively removed his wand as though he

was going to attack, as did everyone else wearing the immaculate black uniforms. Everyone in the crowd recoiled cowardly, unaware that the United Ministry men were actually equally as frightened.

"What do we do?" Albus hissed again, and Fairhart exhaled deeply. Not seeing this as an adequate response, Albus asked another question. "Can- do you think we could take them?"

"Oh I'm not worried about the United Ministry members" Fairhart commented calmly. "We can dispose of them easily. I'm more worried about the residents of Lambshire..."

"They don't even have wands" Albus said blandly, peering through the cracks again as if to double-check.

"No, instead they have powerful aggression and a lack of ethics. If they see us, they will attack with more ferocity than any United Ministry member, desperate to hand us over and reap the reward."

This certainly did seem to be the case. The United Ministry, now alert, was pacing along the dirt road as if setting up a perimeter, all the while with Hornsbrook's father issuing instructions to the people.

"Whoever finds them receives the reward!" he barked. "Now start looking-"

"Get behind me!" Fairhart said, and Albus obeyed without question, but not before catching a glimpse of the scene outside.

At once the crowd divided itself, many going backwards along the road, a few others taking short cuts down alleyways. Albus realized at once that it was a town-wide search, and thus their chances of successfully fleeing were limited. A painful lump rose in his throat as he contemplated the outcome. The United Ministry would capture them, and then-

Wait, why was he afraid? The United Ministry wasn't after *him*. Warren Waddlesworth didn't give a damn about him. It was Fairhart that they wanted. And really, wasn't this entire thing, bar a few missteps, their plan anyway?

Waddlesworth had simplified it for him by outlining only a few actions on his part. First, he needed to find Fairhart, or have Fairhart find him, something that he'd been able to cross off for two weeks or so now. Next, he simply needed to make sure that he had Fairhart's trust, and then find a way to hand him over to WAR...or the United Ministry, as they were now called. Well, he certainly had Fairhart's trust...

Albus watched the back of Fairhart's head intently as he stood behind him, breathing heavy and listening to the noise of the search commence. Fairhart seemed extremely preoccupied with formulating a plan to get out of Lambshire undetected. So much so that he was paying little mind to what was going on behind him...

Had Albus been foolish to immediately side with his former professor? Had his agreement to infiltrate Azkaban been based entirely off of a spur of the moment reaction, as opposed to the logical, calculated plan that he'd created with Waddlesworth? If Albus was able to hand Fairhart over now...what would Waddlesworth do? He was a man of his word, right? Fairhart for his father. Waddlesworth was planning on invading Azkaban anyway. If Albus handed over Fairhart, would special care be given into the task of getting his father off of the island as unharmed as possible?

Slowly, he removed his wand from his robes, his hand shaking. This was it. Fairhart was so busy focusing on getting them to safety that there was no way he'd be able to block Albus from behind. All it would take was a nonverbal stunner. And even if it failed, it would alert everyone to their presence, which was just as good. He could make great leaps to getting his father out of Azkaban right now, and all that it would take was a single act of betrayal. An act that, realistically, was nothing more than comeuppance for the situation that Fairhart had gotten them all in anyway. Just a single act of betrayal. It couldn't be that hard...Fango Wilde had done it after all, and he, like Albus, had been Fairhart's friend...

Albus lowered his wand, disgusted with himself. He waited for a cold, condescending voice to reprimand him for his inability to act, but it never came. Instead he gawked at the back of Fairhart's head for another full minute, until finally-

"We're leaving" Fairhart said darkly, turning and heading toward the boat, which he strapped onto his back at once.

"Yeah I figured-" Albus started, not bothering to lower his voice much, as a tumult had started outside of their hiding place. He was cut off by the sight of Fairhart brandishing his wand however.

Albus watched as in one quick motion the back wall to the shack was blown open.

"Follow me" Fairhart told him, and Albus obliged dutifully, the bag of food swinging in one hand, his wand clutched tightly in the other.

They found themselves on another dirty road, this one occupied by the noises not too far away, but thankfully with no people in sight. They weren't on it for long though. Fairhart again flicked his wand, and another hole had appeared in the hut directly in front of them, which he led Albus through quickly.

They weren't navigating the roads, they were plowing through them. Time and time again Albus followed him through another opening, created by a sharp stab of Fairhart's wand. Albus was sure that before too long this would cause some suspicion, but as he himself had no better plans, and as it was working, he raised no objections. He did have an important question to ask though.

"Where are we going?" he asked, dodging falling debris as he followed Fairhart through yet another hole.

"To Azkaban" Fairhart replied seriously.

"Yeah I know, but-"

And then it dawned on him. The United Ministry had tracked them down to Fairhart's cabin, and had followed the road along to Lambshire. This meant that there was nowhere for them to return to. It was just he, Fairhart, a boat, and a bag of bread now.

"So we're leaving- we're leaving now?" he asked.

"You said it yourself, Albus, you have sufficient enough training, and we have the boat. Watch yourself now" he added, blasting a hole through another shanty.

"I don't- we didn't plan anything yet though-"

"Albus, listen to me" Fairhart said, and he actually stopped in his tracks to turn and face him, his mangled face full of intensity. "No amount of training or theorizing can possibly prepare us for what we will encounter on that island, assuming of course we even make it there. From here on out our success is dependent only on our skill, our knowledge, and our trust of one another."

Albus said nothing, still feeling rather frightened at what was being suggested. Leave for Azkaban...now?

"There will never be a 'good' day to do this, Albus" Fairhart said sharply. "It's now or never."

Albus sighed for a single moment, reflecting on his opportunity back when they'd been hiding. None of this would be happening if he'd just acted on his impulse. Instead of going to the most dangerous place in the Wizarding World, he'd probably be going back to Hogwarts, waiting to here news about his father...

A surge of guilt washed over him, and he nodded his head gravely. He could hear the sounds of shuffling feet and anarchic screaming, and so he nudged Fairhart along, understanding that he was content with his choice, whatever the repercussions may end up being.

Fairhart gave a shadow of a smile before he resumed blasting a pathway for them, and soon enough they were jogging briskly, making their way through the barren settlement. After five or so minutes of this, they found themselves met with a large wall, one that, like the one from the entrance, extended as far as the eye could see.

"Stand back" Fairhart said, and Albus stepped backwards without question. He watched as Fairhart raised his wand and aimed it at the wall-

There was a powerful explosion, one certainly loud enough to alert everyone of which direction they were in. It had been a necessary sacrifice however, as a massive chunk of the stone wall had been obliterated completely, allowing them to pass through, which they did hurriedly.

They were met with a plain of snow, and no discernible path to follow off into the distance. Fairhart seemed to have a good cognitive map however, as he immediately led them forward and slightly to the left, his gait so straight and determined that it appeared as though he was merely a long, wooden boat with legs. Albus trotted along after him, and this only intensified when he heard noises from behind him. As he'd suspected, blasting a gaping hole in the perimeter of the town had not went unnoticed.

"Run" Fairhart said, his tone fiery, and Albus did so at once, taking off after him as they sped through dirt and snow, not bothering to look back. Albus kept his gaze on Fairhart the entire time, knowing at once that, as he was bringing up the rear, any spell fired would hit him first. There didn't seem to be anyone chasing them though, and he was sure that the bland openness of the area was hindering their followers. Unless the United Ministry knew that their prey would be heading towards an as-of-yet-unseen dock, they'd have no way of knowing which direction to go.

The hike was a staggering one, and without the gratification of an end in sight, it was even more difficult. Albus had ran before, but the air seemed unnaturally thin as he followed along behind Fairhart (whose stamina was ridiculous, as he had yet to slow down) and pangs of pain in his chest and gut ended up transcending being a bother and had instead become a full-blown difficulty.

"We're coming up on it now!" Fairhart hollered from ahead of him, and Albus received enough revitalization from these few words that he was able to keep a steady pace from behind.

Thankfully, the trek ended up turning downhill at this point, so much so that he was able to let the slipping and sliding of the snow do most of the work. He practically rolled down the last few inches of the steep hill, and managed to just barely stand up when he came to a halt behind Fairhart, his hands on his knees as he doubled over, gasping for air.

"We- we- we-"

"We're here" Fairhart said, and Albus looked up.

They had indeed reached water, but Albus thought that Fairhart having called this particular place a dock had been a bit of an embellishment. Though the term may have been correct as far as what they were actually presented with, Albus was essentially staring at an ominously still body of water, with a single, short wooden pathway leading into it. It comprised of only about twenty planks or so, and looked as though it had been constructed by muggles. Compared to the vast horizon of endless sea in front of it, it was absolutely minute.

"Did we- did we really have to do all that just to get *here*?" Albus asked breathlessly, still clutching at his body and sitting down in the snow.

"We took the easy way" Fairhart said, not sounding anywhere as close to winded. "We could have tossed ourselves off of a cliff, if it makes you feel any better."

He then removed the boat from his shoulders and tossed it into the water. He flicked his wand twice, and the ropes that had been used to carry it immediately elongated and snaked their way around the post of the dock, holding it in place from drifting away. Albus realized that the first flick had been designed to restore the watercraft to its original weight.

"Ready to go?" Fairhart asked him, and Albus stared back up at him with a stunned expression on his face.

"Can you wait five minutes!" he complained, still clutching at his chest. This had already been one of the most unusual, unnerving, and fast-paced days of his entire life. He was not going to be denied his few minutes of rest, especially as he was positive that, given his current state, he would vomit once the boat began rocking anyway.

Fairhart glared at him with a look that showed signs of agitation.

"Albus, we are being *chased* by the United Ministry-"

"No one's coming!" Albus retorted, tossing his arm wildly behind him to show the steep, snowy hill. The idea of them being followed was ridiculous, especially as it was unlikely that anyone would even be willing to risk their health as Albus just had. He could even see the marks in the snow where he'd fallen and gotten back up, and was sure that there were sloppy footprints of his lopsided running as well-

And then it hit him.

"Oh shi-"

"You didn't wipe your footprints behind you!" Fairhart barked, catching on as well.

"I- no- did you-"

"Of course I did!" Fairhart said. "You didn't notice?"

"I wasn't really paying- why didn't you remind me- "

"I shouldn't have had to! We went over this! I explicitly told you-"

But someone had already appeared at the top of the snowy hill. His head slowly came into focus, followed by his entire body, and Albus recognized him as the man who had been standing next to Hornsbrook's father, and who had attacked the person who'd made a snatch for the bag.

Even from a distance Albus was able to watch carefully as the man opened his mouth to yell out- He saw Fairhart slash his wand through the air, and no noise erupted from the pursuer. Albus capitalized on the Silencing Charm and aimed his own wand, then concentrated as hard as he could on making an acceptable Stunning Spell-

The beam of red light connected with the man right in the chest, and he immediately fell over into the snow. Albus expected it to end there, but it didn't. His victim then proceeded to tumble down through the snow even worse than Albus had, his unconscious body looking like a rag doll as he hit bumps and slid his way down in a contorted fashion, ultimately landing right at Albus' feet.

Somewhat disturbed by what he'd just witnessed, but unwilling to voice it, he turned to Fairhart with a different question in mind.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"My guess is that they sent this one along to scout and alert them" Fairhart told him, his eyes narrowing as he gazed down at the unconscious man. "The rest must've spread out a bit, intent on an ambush. They must have little awareness of their surroundings though. They're just going to go higher and higher..."

"That worked out okay then" Albus said mildly, feeling rather ashamed at his ignorance, and how it had almost gotten them in serious danger.

Fairhart said nothing, instead walking forward and gently nudging him out of the way. Albus watched in confusion as Fairhart stared down at the unconscious man, then aimed his wand-

"No!" Albus said, pushing his arm away frantically. "What are you doing?"

"I know you don't understand" Fairhart said quietly. "But try and realize the potential backlash from letting this man live. He will wake up, and when he does, he will be able to tell others that he saw us. They will deduce from there that we began traveling on the sea-"

"So what, you're just going to leave his corpse here!" Albus spat out bitterly. "That's a bit suspicious too, isn't it-"

"Use your head, Albus" Fairhart said knowingly. "We are standing a few feet away from the North Sea-"

"No!" Albus gasped, repulsed at what he was hearing. "I'm not going to murder some bloke and toss him in the- *no!*" he finished suddenly, unable to even complete the thought.

Fairhart was staring at him with a look that somehow showed both adamance and admonition. After a moment, he spoke once more.

"I'm not asking you to do anything" he said. "Just step aside. The burden is on me, not you-"

"No" Albus repeated firmly. He knew that the blame would fall on Fairhart, but that didn't change his mind about anything. "This guy's not hurting anyone. There's no reason to kill him-"

"He has seen us!" Fairhart insisted once more. "Step aside, Albus-"

"Then just put a memory charm on him!" Albus argued back.

"Memory charms can be broken!" Fairhart said, his voice raising now in a very uncharacteristic manner. "Don't you understand how detrimental it can be if this man continues to live? We must get rid of every loose end! You are thinking with your heart instead of your head-"

"And you're not thinking at all!" Albus blurted out sourly, surprised at his own audacity, and indeed, Fairhart looked taken aback. "You go around with this- this- this outrageous idea that you can get rid of anyone you want! Just because you're capable of killing a bunch of people doesn't mean that you should! I get it, okay, I know how it was in WAR, I know that getting rid of this guy is standard, but not anymore!"

If Albus was out of breath before, he was practically dying now. His lungs were sore from his yells, but it was nothing compared to his heartbeat, which had seemingly increased tenfold since he'd begun the argument.

Fairhart didn't respond to his words, and Albus, trying to catch his breath still, spoke again in a much quieter, more manageable tone.

"Killing this guy isn't going to get anything done" he said lamely. "Whether he's alive or dead, we plan on being in Azkaban soon. And it doesn't matter if Waddlesworth and United Ministry all know it, there's no way that they're hunting us down that far. This guy can wake up and tell them everything he knows, he could be listening to us right now, it's not going to matter. No one's going to follow us all the way to Azkaban."

Fairhart heaved a sigh, his face still an intriguing mix of emotions, but then, slowly, he tucked his wand away. Albus took this moment to glance down at the person that he'd just saved. He was balding, his remaining hair a shade of white, and the only noteworthy thing about his face was a rather flat nose. He wondered briefly if the man had any family, and then, suddenly inspired, he spoke up to Fairhart again, his voice more confident and demanding.

"And we're setting some ground rules right here!" he said briskly, and Fairhart actually raised the eyebrow on the one good side of his face. "From here on out, no killing unless it's necessary! And that means- you know- like actively fighting with someone trying to hurt you! *Not* people unconscious and spread out in the snow!" he added, pointing down at the man.

Fairhart looked for a moment as though he was going to resume his silence, but then made to speak. Already detecting a hint of cynicism in his voice, Albus quickly added what he hoped would be the last point of the argument.

"You said that from here on we need to trust each other" he said lightly. "And if you- if you just go off killing people who could just as well be spared, then I- I can't trust you. And friends need to trust each other!"

There was yet another moment of silence, and then, finally, Fairhart gave an answer.

"Fine" he said. "But that goes both ways. I need you to trust me, and that means *listening* to me when I advise you. Believe it or not, I'm rather good at what I do."

"Deal" Albus said, exhaling deeply, but overall pleased with the result. He made to comment further, but Fairhart had already started toward the boat.

"And right now, Albus," he started, "I'm advising you to end your break. It won't be long before the rest of the United Ministry realizes that they've yet to receive a signal. We have to leave *now*."

Intent on obeying Fairhart's commands from here on out, Albus casted a final look toward the motionless man on the ground, then walked onto the wooden set of planks himself. He watched as Fairhart settled himself on the back end of the boat, and he then sat down in it himself, nearly losing his balance as he did so. He placed the bag of bread down between them, and then allowed Fairhart to do the rest.

"Are you ready, Albus?"

"The- the boat seems a little clunky-"

"The boat is fine, have faith in it" Fairhart said casually. "I mean *you* personally. Once we leave, there is absolutely no going back."

Albus swallowed a lump in his throat, then crossed his arms over, a powerful wave of discomfort overtaking him. He knew what Fairhart was doing here; he was putting an end to all offers to return Albus safely to the castle. Albus took a moment to dwell on the situation he was in now, his thoughts once more returning to his brief moment of indecision but an hour ago. In one scenario, he'd be safe at Hogwarts with his friends and family. There would be no more worry about him or his whereabouts; everyone would know that he was okay, and he would only have to wait for news of his father. He knew that everything would be better there.

But he also knew that no matter what, regardless of however well things turned out, he'd be regretting his decision. Regretting it because this was not just about him, and not just about his father, and not even just about Fairhart. It was about all of them. He could get his father out of Azkaban, and he could do it without handing Fairhart over to WAR. And if Fairhart was

correct...he could help put a serious dent in Darvy's plan, and maybe even contribute to the war as well. In fact, and he tried not to think about it, as he knew it was too good to be true, but perfect execution of this plan could even result in Darvy losing the war altogether...

"I'm ready" Albus said, nodding.

Fairhart removed his wand once more, then tapped at the back of the boat in a complicated, rhythmic pattern. The next thing that Albus knew, they were speeding off into the North Sea, foam hitting the back of his neck and chilly water splashing him in the face.

Chapter 24: The Island In The North Sea

It was several minutes before there was any discussion on the boat. Albus merely pulled his knees up to his chest quietly, determined to not allow the winter chill and cramped condition of their transport bother him. Fairhart sat across from him in a very lackadaisical manner, his own knees up, but extended somewhat, one hand rested across his arched leg, the other supporting his face as he gazed out into the open water idly.

"How uh- how long of a trip are we looking at?" Albus finally asked, trying to stop his teeth from chattering due to the icy water splashing up at him, though it was to no avail.

"Well it depends" Fairhart said, turning his attention to him but maintaining his position. "At the speed that we're going, it could only be a few hours of actual travel. But the enchantments surrounding the island could serve to elongate the journey somewhat. Excluding the storms, of course."

"The storms?" Albus asked, turning slightly to stare out ahead of him. All that he could see was chilly water, and the sky looked relatively clear.

"At this time of year it isn't uncommon for normal storms to hit the North Sea" Fairhart told him. "But don't forget that beyond making the prison impenetrable, it has to be hidden from muggles as well. At a certain point, weather enchantments will kick in, enough to make any muggle caught sailing in it more than willing to turn around."

"And you- you're sure that this thing will hold?" Albus asked tensely, indicating the very object that they were sitting in. "If no muggle boat can-"

"How many muggle broomsticks have you seen fly?" Fairhart asked him rhetorically, and Albus shifted his mouth to the side.

"Just trying to be cautious" he said.

Fairhart smiled, his already disgusting face distorting itself into one that was heavy with irony.

"A bit late to be cautious" he said. "Whether this boat holds or not, it's our only means of transportation, and beyond that, survival."

Albus inhaled his breath sharply, but Fairhart waved this previous comment away.

"Albus, do you really think that I would purchase something that wasn't guaranteed to hold? Our destination itself will be difficult, as what happens there is somewhat out of our control. But I knew what it was I was buying; the boat will hold. Remember, it is our way off the island as well."

"What happened to Apparating?" Albus asked. "You had me practicing Apparition-"

"I don't know where the Ministry trail begins, Albus" Fairhart told him. "There are few places on the island from which Apparition will be possible."

"Well my dad will know them" Albus said, as though it were obvious, but Fairhart didn't respond.

Albus stared at him darkly, positive that he was picking up the correct inference from his silence.

"My dad *will* be with us" he said. "Unless you lied about thinking that he's still alive-"

"I didn't lie about anything" Fairhart said, his voice surly. "But we must simply plan for any contingencies. In case we cannot Apparate out, the boat will need to remain intact. As I've already specified, I planned on this durability when I asked for it."

The finality in his voice effectively ended the conversation, and Albus reverted back to his old standing accordingly, his knees still tucked into his chin and his face lowered. Fairhart too returned to his silence, his gaze extending out into the sea.

Boredom started to sink in within the first half of an hour, though Albus couldn't quite pinpoint why it unnerved him. The nuances of their trip had given him mixed feelings about what exactly it was that he wanted to happen. Every second that he was on the sea he was safe from the dangers lurking around and inside Azkaban, but each passing second could also prove to be the difference in his father's condition. Part of him wanted to be on the island now, making noticeable progress. But the other part of him knew that once they were there, he'd be tempted to stay afloat.

The only sounds to distract Albus were the sloshing of the boat against the waves it was creating, but this changed when Fairhart cracked their silence.

"So how were you doing at Hogwarts?" he asked.

Albus looked at him, knowing full well that his facial expression was matching his actual confusion.

"Huh?"

"Your classes" Fairhart said plainly. "You've taken your Ordinary Wizarding Level examinations, right?"

"Oh!" Albus blurted out, somewhat surprised by the inane nature of the question, but still willing to answer it. "Yeah, yeah I- I took them last year" he said. With a slight pang in his chest, he remembered that it had been on the last day of his O.W.L's that he'd flooded to Fairhart's old house...

"So?" Fairhart asked, extending his hand somewhat as if he were asking for him to continue.
"How did you do?"

"Not bad" Albus answered, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "Did really good in Potions. And Charms too, actually" he added thoughtfully.

Fairhart nodded, a warm, if not slightly forced smile on his face.

"Cool" he said absentmindedly.

"Yup" was all that Albus could muster, and then the silence resumed again.

He knew what Fairhart was doing here, or at least, he had a couple of legitimate ideas. There had been some considerable tension before they'd hit the water, and polite, unimportant conversation would be a good remedy in repairing the overall mood. Another thought that struck him, however, was that Fairhart was in fact curious as to how his Hogwarts marks had looked. They were, after all, friends.

This bothered Albus quite a bit though, mostly because he had no way to properly reciprocate the sentiments. What was he supposed to do? Ask Fairhart how *he'd* been the last few months?

"So erm- I'm sorry about your headquarters" Albus said dryly, deciding he would at least give things a try. "I guess that since the Ministry's been there even once, you don't plan on going back?"

"I'm afraid not" Fairhart said with a sigh. "Not until I can be sure that it's not being watched."

"And I guess all of those books and stuff are gone too, huh?" Albus asked.

"Doubtful" Fairhart said. "They wouldn't have confiscated anything, their primary goal was to find me. A few things, I am sure, will have remained, even if the entire area had been thoroughly searched."

He didn't elaborate any further on this matter, which Albus was fine with, as he'd ran out of ways to prolong their discussion anyway. As the mood called for more talking, however, he decided to tackle a different route.

"So you sure this thing's going in the right direction-"

"Did you know, Albus, that in my time as an Auror, I never once had your father issue me any rules, despite him being my superior?"

Albus said nothing, caught off guard by this burst of information. Curious as to where it was going, though, he allowed Fairhart to continue with no interruption.

"Your uncle, on the other hand, had a very clear rule that all were instructed to follow. Do you have any idea what it was?"

Albus shook his head, and Fairhart gave him the answer.

"It was a decree that stated, that unless you were in the middle of working, you *couldn't* speak about work. Not anything to do with it. He'd reprimand you, too, if you didn't follow it. He'd deduct 'Ron Points' from his own personal record of you."

Albus smiled at the idea, but understood the deeper meaning behind the anecdote. Fairhart didn't want to discuss anything about Azkaban right now.

"Sorry" Albus said lamely. "I just-"

"You're nervous" Fairhart said blandly. "I understand; I get it. But the sad truth, Albus, is that our preparation time has come to an end. Your training, unfortunately, ended prematurely, and there will be no more opportunities to coach you along in a safe environment. Likewise, I've already told you everything that I know about our destination; there is nothing else to go over. Try and cherish this boat ride, as it is the last moments of solace that you'll have until we are, hopefully, heading back the other way."

Albus nodded, scratching at the back of his head foolishly as he did so.

"And to answer your question," Fairhart continued out of nowhere, "yes, we are heading in the right direction. A bit hard not to actually, as the island should be in the center..."

Albus again said nothing, choosing to do as Fairhart had said and enjoy the moments of false relaxation. He still couldn't refrain from shaking with worry however, and Fairhart seemed to catch on to this quickly.

"Try and occupy yourself" he said. "It will remove your thoughts from the task at hand. Do you know any traveling games?"

Albus tossed up his hands, sorting through his memories for something that he could clasp on to.

"I dunno...my friend Morrison told me about one" he said, remembering a random moment. "He grew up in America, and his dad used to drive him around a lot. He said that they used to look at the different license plates on cars" he told Fairhart stupidly.

"I see" Fairhart said, a wry smile forming on his face. "I'll be on the lookout, then."

"Yeah..."

And then, quite suddenly, he laughed. He wasn't quite sure why this last biting remark from Fairhart had done it-perhaps Albus had done it to himself, actually, to help clear his head-but

either way, his hollow laugh overshadowed the sounds of the boat rocking against the waves, and soon enough Fairhart himself had joined in, his laugh much louder and more piercing...

The brief moment of humor somehow managed to linger on further than expected, and though the conversation remained thin, it kept a lighthearted grace to it that Albus was appreciative of. Soon after they delved into their bag of provisions, gobbling down the moldy bread in silence, which carried over to even after the meal.

Though the laughter and food had managed to occupy Albus briefly, the long stretches of inactivity sent him spiraling back into boredom and anxiety. Sadly, as he had no indication of time, he was unable to tell how much longer this would last. He was just starting to wonder if Fairhart had been keeping track of the hours when his friend spoke up.

"We're nearly there" he said, his expression hardening somewhat.

Albus spun around so quickly that the boat rocked back and fourth temporarily. He stared off into the distance, squinting, and then realized that Fairhart was mistaken. No island of any sort was in sight, though there was a gigantic hunk of rock protruding from the ground, looking as though it extended quite far off into each direction, very much like the wall surrounding Lambshire.

"That can't be it" Albus said dismissively, his heartbeat returning to normal. "You can't even see Azkaban itself, and it's supposed to be towering isn't it?"

Fairhart said nothing, and instead simply pointed up at the sky. The longevity of the journey had forced them into the later hours of the day, and darkness was settling upon them. He was sure that the scattered stars in the sky were not what Fairhart was pointing at though. Instead, Albus could see ferocious looking storm clouds, and even the occasional flash of lightning...

"The enchantments..." Albus said, the panic returning.

"My guess is that in addition to the weather charms placed around the island, the entire area itself is bewitched to resemble a large, but ultimately insignificant rock. This was done so that muggles who are trying to fish in the area and who were caught in the storm will know that the land nearby is not accomodable; even from here we can see the jagged rocks and other negative characteristics."

"So when will we be able to see that it's actually an island with a prison on it?" Albus asked.

"Not until we're actually standing there?"

"There will obviously be a point when we can detect the defensive magic surrounding it, and will have the opportunity to break through it. I can't imagine it being until after we brave the storm though. Brace yourself now, we're getting close..."

Albus felt his entire body tighten, though how exactly he was supposed to prepare for this, he didn't know. The first indication that they were actually entering the storm was the rain; thick droplets of it pounding onto Albus' head unnaturally hard. He felt his body freeze up at once, feeling as though he was passing under a perpetual, icy shower, and then realized that his visibility had been impaired as well. When he turned to look at the mass of rock again, he could only make out a messy shape that was growing larger and larger as they neared it...

And then the wind came. Timed perfectly by a flash of lightning and clap of thunder, a powerful blast of wind had sent the boat rocking, nearly capsizing, and Albus gave a yell as his slippery fingers clung to the edge of boat-

The boat fixed itself at once, flopping downwards onto its bottom with a powerful splash that drenched him even further. He could see Fairhart sitting across from him, robes soaked and teeth clenched, not looking nearly as perturbed, but still somewhat shaken-

There was another powerful blast of wind, this time from behind, and Albus gave another loud yell of fright as the boat began to go vertical-

And then, miraculously, the boat reverted back to its normal position. Momentarily bewildered at how this was possible-he'd been so sure that they were going to flip over entirely-he quickly realized why he and Fairhart had not been tossed into the North Sea. This boat, it seemed, had been well worth whatever Otis had charged Fairhart.

But still he kept his fingers clasped around the edges, his teeth chattering and his body jumping every time that the thunder thrashed his earlobes. He kept a watchful eye on Fairhart, who hadn't moved an inch, but was now staring ahead thoughtfully.

The powerful bursts of wind continued to toss around the boat, so often in fact that Albus was sure that it was veering them off off course. His worries were proven false, however, as each time that he glanced over his frozen shoulder, he continued to see the titanic shape of the rock. He was just starting to wonder when it would transform itself into a recognizable island when Fairhart stood up.

On a small, rickety boat, in the middle of a storm.

"Are you crazy!" Albus hollered over the sound of the roaring wind and pounding rain. Fairhart wasn't listening however; he'd removed his wand and had aimed it straight ahead, and was now making complex movements with it, yelling loud incantations that were indiscernible amidst the ruckus of the storm.

There was yet another powerful blast of wind, and Albus, who had realized not too long ago that his safest bet in these instances was to curl up and cling to the bottom of the boat, could only gaze up at the disfigured man in horror, astonished at his intrepidity. He had stopped waving

his wand and had hunched himself over to cling to the boat, but was still standing firmly on two legs. And once the wind ceased, he was right back to making complicated wand movements.

This continued twice more, each time a fervent gust forcing Fairhart to halt his spellwork, only to resume, his perseverance causing Albus to gawk at him with his mouth hanging wide open. Finally, Fairhart sat back down in the boat. Albus was right about to holler over the wind his bitter inquisitions, when his former professor pointed over his head.

Albus spun around as yet another clap of thunder hit, the brief illumination from the preceding lightning strike allowing him to register what it was he was looking at.

The shape of rock had transformed itself into an even larger, more expansive area. He could see the tops of tropical looking trees, and the stretch of sand that led into the denser parts of the island as well. It was as though he was looking at a smaller, more tropical Forbidden Forest, condensed and placed on a body of water.

And even from the sea, he could see what the island housed. His eyes slid upwards as another flash of light presented him with the foreboding, vertical structure of Azkaban, so high that its top was obscured by stormy grey clouds, so far back in the distance that he could only make out its shape. It was a thick obelisk, the size of which made him realize just how large the island itself was as well.

"Albus grab onto the boat!"

Fairhart's terrified shriek dragged him away from the ominous structure and its surrounding area, instead forcing him to focus on the matter at hand. They were still very much in the middle of a powerful storm, and an even stronger complication had just manifested.

They were being pulled into a whirlpool.

The swirling vortex of water was massive, its size and strength immediately apparent as Albus felt the boat move off course and towards the aquatic vacuum. The relatively still water surrounding the maelstrom told him that their predicament was the product of powerful magic, rather than abnormal weather, and this thought terrified Albus greatly; this whirlpool had only started when the enchantments surrounding the island had been broken by Fairhart. It was specifically designed to end whatever threat was approaching the island.

He clung tightly to the sides of the boat, then realized that this was doing nothing to halt their movement. Fairhart was standing once more, his wand this time pointed down at the boat, his confidence in it clearly cracking at this point. Albus wasn't sure what invisible spells he was firing at it, but he knew that he needed to contribute as well. He jumped to his feet- nearly falling over into the water as he did so-and aimed his wand down at the boat.

"Impedimenta! Impedimenta!"

He cried the spell over and over again, unable to even hear his voice due to the rain and ferocious wind. The combined efforts of he and Fairhart amounting to nothing however, and he felt fear course through him as he looked over his shoulder at the swirling body of water, which he now considered to be a representation of death, an unknowable abyss that he simply couldn't avoid. He heard himself give a squeal of terror; felt his body go numb as he prepared to just give up and let the sea take him-

And then he saw, from the corner of his eye, that Fairhart had taken a different approach. He was now aiming his wand at the whirlpool itself, his face screwed up in concentration as beams of different colors hit the maelstrom, the cyclonic nature of the water seemingly not being affected.

And yet, the boat had slowed down somewhat. It was instead spinning, almost revolving on the water actually, and Albus realized that Fairhart was now trying to manipulate the water itself, to change the direction of the powerful current, or to do something that could, unimaginably, save them in some way. And then it hit him. Fairhart had not given up. He had not stopped fighting.

He was fighting a *frickin' whirlpool!*

This thought collided with Albus like a ton of bricks, and at once he stuffed his wand back into his robes and reached his hands into the water, paddling at it childishly with the pathetic intention of assisting in the battle. He didn't know the powerful magic that Fairhart was using to keep them from being swallowed up by the storm, but that was not going to stop him from doing something-anything really-to help the situation.

But Albus was still losing, as was Fairhart. It seemed as though the spells were only postponing the inevitable, and Fairhart seemed to realize this, as the concentration on his face had transformed itself into one that more closely resembled intuition than determination. He had realized that he would not be able to keep this up for much longer, and just when Albus had found himself falsely hoping that he'd devised a plan, the Renegade asked something in an outrageous growl that seemed to match the thunder in volume.

"Can you swim!"

"I- yes-"

Fairhart whipped his wand through the air, and Albus' vision immediately went slightly blurry. Though the rain continued to riddle his entire body, his head now seemed unaffected, and only when he actually reached up and went to touch his face did he realize that something nearly invisible was blocking his fingers. He'd had the Bubble-Head charm placed on him.

He looked up to see if Fairhart had done the same thing to himself, but before he could even focus on the long, black, mess of drenched hair that was Fairhart's head, the Renegade had already pointed his wand down at the boat-

There was a bang like a cannon, and Albus' scream of terror stayed enclosed within his magical bubble, reverberating around the insides of his eardrums as the boat was blasted off of the water in spectacular fashion, rising fifty feet into the air and soaring away from the whirlpool, which could no longer affect it.

For a single, unbelievable moment, Albus thought that they were going to stay in the air, and he foolishly connotated the belief to his comfortability on a broomstick. The boat started to descend through the sky slowly, rocking back and forth in the air, whatever expertise craftsmanship used in its creation unable to endure all that it had just went through-

It crashed back onto the water as though it were splitting the sea, the top of it plummeting into the icy water and taking Albus with it. He felt his entire body-already soaked-immersed itself in the freezing water, his very skin screaming in anguish as random parts of his body began to go numb. He was just getting ready to swallow mouthfuls of seawater when he realized that the Bubble-Head charm had come in very handy. Though everything else was going wrong, he could at least breathe.

He seemed to stay still in the frigid, dark water, hyperventilating in his own private bubble, the eerie feeling of being under the storm threatening his sanity. It was a most unusual feeling, to be completely submerged and to have no sense of direction, but to also be able to inhale and exhale freely, even if it was excessively rapid. He thought instinctively of the powerful whirlpool, wondering how close he was to it, but other frightening thoughts had already started to plague his mind. He thought of those dark, underwater creatures that he'd learned about in Hagrid's classes; things like Kelpies and Grindylows. His heart sank at the thought of the Giant Squid in the Black Lake, wondering vaguely if it had a brother somewhere that wasn't nearly as friendly.

He had no idea where Fairhart or the boat was, but he knew that he couldn't stay underwater for long. Trying not to let the icy water win, he kicked his feet with expedience, his arms flailing helplessly as he felt himself inch closer and closer to the surface. After almost a full minute of punishing his body he felt his neck exit the water, his breathing settling down somewhat...

But only for a moment, as he quickly realized that he was back to witnessing the storm. He felt his body start to break down from exhaustion, almost reclining back as if to float, and then he saw it off in the distance. The shoreline was not terribly far away. He could see the dark sand, and the towering trees, and the gigantic prison, which looked absolutely colossal now that he was so close to it. He was right about to try and slowly move his way toward it when he felt something grab him by the back of his collar-

He gave a shriek, images of the various water fiends again crawling through his head. He heard an unintelligible series of words however, and when he'd turned he saw that Fairhart was right next to him, his head poking out of the water, his body shaking spasmodically as he tried to stay afloat, and the next that Albus knew, he was being pulled along by him.

Fairhart now had one hand around the collar of Albus' shirt, the other cutting into the water forcefully as he propelled them both forward; he was extremely athletic. Albus didn't even bother to object to this selfless act, he was so weary and cold that he wasn't sure he could do much by himself anyway. They seemed to have passed through the more arduous parts of the storm, and slowly, his eyes closing and opening lazily, he felt the pull of his body exiting the water, the coarse, wet sand serving as a bed for his back. They had hit dry land.

It was only now that he realized that the bubble surrounding his head had vanished, and for how long this had been true he wasn't sure. He instead lay gasping on the coarse ground, an inky black, starless sky inhabiting his entire field of vision, flecks of a much lighter rain sliding off of his face slowly. Though he couldn't see Fairhart, the heavy breathing told him that he was directly next to him.

"We- we made it..." Albus moaned, trying to roll over, but his languor preventing him from saying or doing much else.

He felt activity from next to him, and a second later he realized that Fairhart had stood up.

"Stay here" he said hoarsely, and he walked away, the sound of his padded footsteps on the sand becoming more and more faint with every second.

Albus didn't need telling twice. Unable to move, and despite the rain and sand, he closed his eyes blissfully and allowed himself to drift off.

He awoke to the sounds of a crackling fire. For a single, beautiful moment he considered that perhaps he was back in Fairhart's homely cabin; that he'd woken up to the fireplace just as he had weeks ago. But after propping himself up on his elbows, he realized that he was not on the uncomfortable couch that he was accustomed to; he was instead laying on dirty stone.

He opened his eyes widely, feeling much more energetic than he had last time he'd been awake. He glanced at the roaring fire next to him, then saw Fairhart sitting across from it, his face gaunt.

"Where are we?" Albus asked, looking around. It was only darkness that met his eyes though.

"We are on the island that houses Azkaban-"

"No, I know *that*" Albus said, rubbing at his stiff neck. "I mean- what happened-"

"Your body gave out when I went back into the storm" Fairhart said simply.

Albus' jaw dropped. "Back...storm...what?"

"I tried retrieving our boat" Fairhart told him, the flames flashing against his hideous face to present a powerful dramatic effect.

Albus' heart sank. The boat, which he now realized was the greatest thing to ever exist, was nowhere to be found in the dark. "Did you-"

"No" Fairhart said quickly, and Albus gave a groan.

"There's no point in dwelling on it now" Fairhart told him crisply. "We will worry about our escape when we are sure that we will be leaving. Are you all rested up?"

Albus nodded, but frowned slightly. "I can't believe- I can't believe I fell asleep" he said, somewhat shamefully. "I mean...look at where we are."

"You were exhausted" Fairhart said plainly. "It is completely natural for your body to have given out like it did. And as nothing negative arose from it, there is no point to acting so sullen" he added, seeing the look on Albus' face.

He couldn't help it though. He sat himself upright, leaning his back against jagged rocks as he stared into the fire absently. He'd nearly given up on that boat. *Had* given up, actually, for a brief moment...

Fairhart spoke up with information of their whereabouts , and Albus was distracted from his thoughts at once.

"We're not far from the water" he said. "I levitated you and brought you along to this small cave, where we've been for a few hours now."

"A few hours?" Albus asked, unaware of how long he'd been out of it. "Is it- is it still night time?"

"Early hours of the morning" Fairhart answered him. "The rain stopped, but I'd imagine that this pause will only be temporary. We should use the increased visibility to our advantage and get moving as soon as we can."

Albus shifted his mouth to the side, then lowered his head to his knees. Fairhart stared at him intently through the flames, which Albus now realized were used for light only; he was completely warm and dry.

"Something is troubling you" Fairhart said sternly.

"No-"

"We need to be able to trust each other" Fairhart said sharply. "And that means being honest. What are you thinking?"

Albus heaved a sigh, then rubbed at his forehead. He knew that Fairhart wouldn't like what he said next, but he simply couldn't help it.

"It was stupid to bring me along" he admitted. "And you know it."

"Albus that's not true-"

"I'm just slowing you down!" Albus said fiercely, the fire shining brightly in his eyes. "You're trying to infiltrate Azkaban here! You can't be babysitting-"

"Stop it! You are acting like a child again!"

"Yeah I am!" Albus rebutted. "Because I'm sixteen! Because I'm not ready-"

"Whether you are ready or not, you are here now" Fairhart said icily, shifting his weight slightly. "I gave you an opportunity to go back, I gave you several-"

"This isn't about me being afraid" Albus said, trying his hardest not to look at the man across from him. He allowed his eyes to wander and gaze at the silver ring on his finger instead. "It's not about me being unwilling, or anything like that. It's about the truth; that you put way more faith in me than you should."

Fairhart shook his head solemnly, looking, strangely enough, abashed.

"What?" Albus demanded. "Why are you looking-"

"You overestimate my abilities, Albus" Fairhart said. "Either that, or you are underestimating what lies ahead. We are currently in what may very well be the most dangerous place in the world, and here you are, claiming that I'm better off alone. Do you really think that's best? What happens when I get stuck, with no one to help me? What happens when I am caught unawares, and ambushed? With another person by my side, with someone to watch my back, and with me to watch theirs, every situation becomes immediately easier. Albus, *any* help at this point is welcome."

"You said before that you wanted me specifically" Albus said, a shiver in his voice. "You listed a whole bunch of things-"

"I listed things that were very true" Fairhart said firmly. "But they are only true if you allow them to be. You sometimes allow your low self-esteem to overshadow your more prominent traits, Albus. You have learned powerful magic in a very short amount of time, and yet, you feel that you will fail if you use it. You have thus far survived tremendous perils, and yet you expect yourself to fail each time you face a new challenge. You've made it this far, haven't you-"

"Because of you!" Albus lashed out. "You saved me back there!" he added, pointing away in a random direction. "You saved me from drowning, then you brought me to this cave-"

"You're right, I saved your life" Fairhart said. "And perhaps while we are here on this island, trying to breach the deadliest wizarding prison to ever exist, you will save mine. That is how this works, Albus. We look out for one another."

Albus couldn't muster a defence against this, and he thus remained silent while Fairhart continued to peer at him. Fairhart was right, after all. Albus could be helpful, but only if he allowed himself to be. For a single second, a flash of his family and friends went through his head, their faces proud, rather than miserable. No one had heard from him in weeks, but what would happen if he managed to make it off this island with his father, and a couple of Darvy's powerful objects in hand?

"Do you- do you really not mind having me around?" Albus asked meekly.

"I feel much safer with you by my side" Fairhart said seriously. "Give yourself more credit, Albus, and don't be afraid to let your abilities flourish. Nothing that I've taught you could have possibly helped you against that whirlpool. Now that we are on solid ground, be prepared to use some of what you learned."

Albus nodded his head. Fairhart did not sound as though he was coddling him, but it was also apparent that he wasn't going to tolerate Albus' personal doubts anymore. Suddenly invigorated by the idea that Fairhart did not regret bringing him along, he jumped up on two legs with enthusiasm-and cracked his head on the ceiling.

"Oww-"

"You'll want to be more careful" Fairhart said lightly. "But incidentally, I take it that you are sufficiently energized?"

Albus nodded, still rubbing at the top of his head.

"Good" Fairhart said. "Then we can head out now."

And without further ado, he slashed his wand through the air, extinguishing the fire immediately. Albus heard his footsteps and felt his way around so as to adequately follow them, small rays of light meeting his eyes after only a minute or so of walking. Slowly, he exited the tiny cave and surveyed his surroundings, prepared to take in his first true look at the island.

The first thing that crossed his mind was that his fantasies had been nearly correct. The area around him bore an uncanny resemblance to the Forbidden Forest, but there were some noticeable differences as well. Rather than dark and dense, light was pouring overhead and revealing an enclosure that was more tropical than wooden. The towering trees had leaves that were of a vibrant green, rather than the darker shade from the Forest, and the ground, though comprising mostly of dirt and soil, also had some sand mixed in. Vegetation and foliage was

everywhere that he looked, including a number of brilliantly colored, exotic looking plants that Albus knew were nowhere in the syllabus for his Herbology class.

It would have been a rather pleasant picture if not for one aspect of it. Deep in the background, looming over the colors of the jungle, was the ominous, vertical structure of Azkaban. Even as Albus glanced up at, shivers went up his spine, timed perfectly by cawing birds that soared over the tops of the trees.

And then, for the first time, it hit him.

"Darvy's here" he said aloud, his voice low, but clear.

He felt Fairhart's hand land on his shoulder in a comforting way.

"Yes, he is" Fairhart said from next to him. "And we know it. He, however, does not know just how close we are. Darvy has no reason to expect a stealthy attack; he'll be on the lookout for the United Ministry instead. We must remain cautious, but also, we must allow ourselves to consider our advantages. Neither Darvy, nor the Dark Alliance, nor any army of any sort is currently looking for us here. If we are immaculate in our actions, we will elude the grip of Death's Right Hand."

Albus sneered at Darvy's title, feeling a little more confident. Having Fairhart around was serving as a powerful ego boost; hopefully he didn't let it run away with him.

"So do we just walk forward?" Albus asked, glaring up at Azkaban and wondering just how far away it really was.

"Yes" Fairhart said plainly. "But we walk forward slowly, and I always go first. This place is sure to have enchantments around it, and I'd rather be the first to encounter them."

Albus scowled from next to him, but Fairhart turned to look at him with a stony expression, his voice indicating some minor pontification.

"Magic leaves traces, Albus. Always. Through no fault of your own, you are not yet old enough to acknowledge these clear magical warnings. Me taking the lead is not designed to make you feel weak; it is done for practical purposes."

"I didn't say anything-"

But Fairhart had already started walking, Albus instinctively following along behind him.

The ground felt squishy underneath him, and Albus realized that it must've only just stopped raining. He stayed behind Fairhart by only a foot or two, listening as he walked and occasionally stopping to let Fairhart make a complicated motion with his wand.

"Are you- are you like- deactivating enchantments?" Albus asked with curiosity.

"No, I'm merely checking for them" Fairhart said. "In the event that I locate one, we'd be better off trying to go around it than disabling it; certain enchantments, particularly dangerous ones, activate once anything is done to them at all. Keep on the lookout behind me" he added.

"Lookout for what?" Albus asked, ducking underneath a protruding branch from an elderly looking tree; the sunlight was starting to thin now, as they were heading deeper into the flora.

"Shelter, mostly" Fairhart said. "Once the rain starts back up we'll want a place where we can keep dry. Are you wiping your footprints?" he added randomly.

"Huh?"

Albus looked behind him and saw a single path of muddy footprints.

"Sorry!" he said quickly, and he waved his wand quickly to eradicate them.

"Don't apologize" Fairhart said, sounding somewhat sidetracked. "Just remember next time...don't move, by the way."

Albus froze at once, then watched as Fairhart did something very strange. He raised his wand and tapped it to his own head, then turned and did the same to Albus'.

"Erm- what are you-"

"Supersensory Charm" Fairhart explained. "This should heighten your senses somewhat, but be warned, it doesn't react well to powerful odors and extremely loud noises. I'm using it here because it seems as though there's been some sort of disturbance here, and I want our reflexes top notch."

Albus nodded; he didn't feel any different, but he expected that the charm would certainly come in handy at some point, given that they knew almost nothing about the area that they were in. Almost at once, however, he heard a loud rustling from next to him.

He nearly jumped, then turned to his left and aimed his wand at a massive tree a few feet away, one that had a bush moving from behind it.

Fairhart too raised his wand, but what happened next Albus was completely unprepared for.

No less than ten Bowtruckles emerged from the bush, all of them tiny but quick, the twig-like nature of their bodies making it quite a sight to watch them run. They all made squealing noises as they ran by, apparently unaware that there were two wizards there.

"Calm down" Fairhart said. "They're just Bowtruckles-"

"I know what they are" Albus said intently, watching them go by and disappear into another patch of vegetation. "But I don't like them...why are Bowtruckles here?" he asked.

"This island was not created by the Ministry, Albus, it is simply regulated by it. When the Dementors were here I can't imagine much in terms of a proper ecosystem, but now, I wouldn't be surprised if there is an abundance of unique creatures here."

Albus nodded his head, then watched as Fairhart began walking to the side; evidently, he didn't want to trigger any defensive spells.

They walked this way for more than ten uneventful minutes before Fairhart finally changed his direction.

"Did we just walk around an enchantment?" Albus asked, looking up at the massive prison and realizing that it looked no closer.

"Indeed we did" Fairhart said, his wand held out ahead of him. "But most interestingly enough, the enchantment was designed to be set off by something with a lot of weight; Bowtruckles like the ones you just saw would have been able to walk through it with ease."

"So what does- what does that mean?" Albus asked, slightly thrown off by the lack of composure in Fairhart's voice.

"What it means, Albus," Fairhart started slowly, "is that the Ministry has selected certain parts of the island to be unreachable by even heavy magical creatures. And it appears as though we just happened to arrive at a portion of the island in which this is the case."

Albus felt his body go cold. "So you think that- that there's a big creature around here somewhere?"

"Oh yes" Fairhart said, coming to yet another halt, just as they reached a small clearing of trees. "Yes I do...quiet now, Albus. You don't want to wake it up."

Albus raised an eyebrow curiously; why did Fairhart suspect that whatever the creature was, it was asleep? But then he heard it. Magnified in his ears, a deep, powerful breathing was going on somewhere, and a putrid smell had entered his nostrils as well. He slowly walked up to where Fairhart was standing, and he nearly had to gasp at what was laying down only ten feet in front of them.

Though curled up to sleep, the beast was boisterous and thick, roughly twice the size of any normal human that Albus had ever seen. He first noticed its thick, grey, furry body, but what caught his attention next was far more foreboding. It was a lion's head, complete with a bushy red mane and menacing mouth that looked as though it could crunch through bone. Its paws were covering its face as it slept comfortably, but the last portion of it seemed to be actively awake. It was a long, thick tail, dark green in color and appearing to have a scaly texture that Albus knew was akin to lizards-or more specifically, dragons.

A Chimaera was sleeping right in front of them.

Chapter 25: Breeding Grounds

Albus felt his body go numb, his knees nearly buckling beneath him at what he was seeing. Fairhart too was eyeing the Chimaera intently, its giant, furry body heaving up and down in tune with its deep, heavy breaths. They both turned to face one another immediately, but it was Fairhart who spoke first, his voice so low that it was difficult for Albus to hear even with the Supersensory Charm placed on him.

"Don't move" he said out of the already thin corner of his mouth.

This was hardly advice, as Albus was fairly certain he couldn't move anyway. The sight of the beast in front of him was enough to paralyze him with fear, and the awful smell emanating from it was close to making him pass out. Slowly, he watched as Fairhart raised his wand and aimed it at the Chimaera.

"What are you doing!" Albus hissed stupidly, suddenly aware of what was going on.

"I'm going to kill it" Fairhart whispered back.

Albus felt a combination of emotions flood through him, confusion and intrigue among them.

"What with- with the Killing Curse?" he asked, his attention now back on the sleeping creature, one eye on the scaly green tale, the other on the feline head. When Fairhart nodded, he asked another question. "Will that even work?"

"In theory, the Killing Curse should kill anything" Fairhart mumbled, his wand still outstretched. "Creatures with powerful magical skin-like dragons- may be somewhat immune...but I can't imagine them surviving more than a few in rapid succession. Stand back now-"

"No!" Albus hissed again, and the Chimaera snorted in its sleep, causing him to cover his hands with his mouth in terror for a moment.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean- just- just go around it" Albus whined, unwilling to provoke the creature even in the slightest, and, strangely enough, also unwilling to kill something that wasn't currently posing a threat. "It- it's not hurting anyone" he added lamely.

Fairhart stared at him in disbelief, his wand extended. He looked as though he was waiting for a better answer.

"My- my- my girlfriend wants to be a Magizoologist?" Albus voiced in a whimper, and Fairhart actually rolled his eyes.

"Fine!" he spat, and the Chimaera gave another snort. "But if this thing ends up tearing us to shreds, I'm blaming her!"

Albus nodded in relief, then watched as Fairhart backed up slightly. Slowly, he began to walk in a circle around the slumbering beast, Albus following suit in mimicked movements. He kept his gaze on the Chimaera the entire time though, not speaking again until the sight of it was obscured by thick trees.

"Close one back there, eh?" he said, walking side by side with Fairhart now.

Fairhart said nothing, his legs apparently acting independently from his head. As he walked forward, ducking under branches and moving silently through undergrowth, he seemed to be extremely preoccupied by something.

Albus heaved a sigh. "What, are you mad at-"

"Greece" Fairhart cut him off swiftly.

"What?"

"Greece" he repeated. "I was thinking of where Chimaeras are native to. I believe it's Greece."

Albus stared up at him as they walked, and though his magically improved senses registered small noises, he made nothing of them; he was too curious as to what Fairhart was trying to get across.

"Okay" Albus said stiffly. "Erm- that's important because...?"

"Because we are not in Greece, Albus" Fairhart said, his pace slowing somewhat as he turned to face him. "And yet, a powerful, dangerous creature native to that land is here on this island. What does that tell you?"

Albus thought about it for a moment. "It tells me that...that the Chimaera we just saw wasn't always here?"

"Precisely" Fairhart answered him. "That creature is not part of this island naturally. It was placed here by the Ministry, probably as a security measure. I had always heard that Azkaban had more than enchantments around it, but it seems as though they've also found creatures adequately capable of replacing Dementors as well."

"But there can't be anything here worse than Chimaeras!" Albus practically yelled, panicked. He instinctively thought of what Fairhart had mentioned earlier: dragons.

"Well I have yet to have a confrontation with a Silhouette," Fairhart told him icily, "so I can hardly confirm whether or not they are more dangerous. As for the creatures you'd find in textbooks, however, I wouldn't be surprised if there are other, equally deadly ones on this island."

Do not forget that the absence of Dementors here means that the Ministry has to consider the possibilities of a prisoner escaping out into the open. Typically, once they slipped by the Dementors, a prisoner would probably have a relatively easy departure ahead of them. Now, however, prisoners must think twice about even leaving Azkaban; the area surrounding it is just as foreboding, and not nearly as monitored."

"How did Darvy even get here?" Albus asked. "And take over Azkaban? I mean there's that storm, to start, whirlpool and all, and all these creatures and spells-"

"I don't imagine 'Death's Right Hand' having had to endure the same difficulties that we are now. Do not forget that he has Fango Wilde with him. Wilde's department at the Ministry would have given him considerable knowledge about the proper transportation on and off this island, including Apparition points, and, presumably, the Ministry trail itself. Darvy most likely only had to brave a fraction of what we are going through, and if he had even a few of those monsters prepared, it would not have been a very large struggle to storm the prison itself."

Albus looked up at Fairhart in confusion as he spoke, for his words were entering his ears in a muffled fashion, a faint buzzing accompanying them as well. The Supersensory Charm placed on him seemed to be aiding him somewhat here, but strangely, he couldn't pinpoint the nature or direction of the noise. He watched Fairhart's face to see if he had detected anything, but before he could even get a good look, the disfigured man next to him had already forced him down with a yell.

"What the-" Albus started, his face colliding with dirt and soil. He felt Fairhart drop to the ground next to him, and then, quite suddenly-

"Stay low Albus!" Fairhart growled from the ground.

Albus felt an intense heat overtake him. Though his eyes were smushed into the dirt, his peripheral vision allowed him to see dazzling shades of orange and red, his advanced hearing also serving to heighten his awareness of the roaring flames that appeared to be streaming just inches over his scalp.

He kept his body pressed as flat to the ground as possible, his eyes eventually jamming themselves shut tightly, all the thoughts in his head erased and replaced with a single idea. He could not raise himself up, not even an inch. If he did, he was sure the inferno would take him.

From behind his eyelids the glowing light of the flames danced, the heat now so powerful he felt as though his back was going to melt. He tried counting the seconds in his head, waiting for the flames to stop, and then a horrific thought entered his mind. What if they weren't going to?

No sooner had he thought this did the jets of fire cease, an eerie stillness entering the area. The warmth lingered, as did the smell of burnt vegetation, but embers were no longer visible from his

eyelids, and this alone was enough for Albus to raise his head and stare at Fairhart, who was already standing.

Albus too rose to his feet, surveying his surroundings and swallowing dramatically. The air felt thicker, a residual effect of what had just occurred, he was sure, and the towering trees around them had been charred greatly, all of them now issuing smoke as though they'd been magically doused following the onslaught of flames.

"What- what the-" Albus started.

"Immolation Charm" Fairhart told him darkly. "And one used in a most crude fashion as well..."

Albus wiped at the soil covering the front of his shirt, shaking his head as he did so.

"This place is crazy" he spat out. "Chimaeras, whirlpools, fire randomly shooting at us-"

"There was nothing random about it" Fairhart said, holding out his hand and swiping it through the air as if he was trying to detect something. "We definitely set off an enchantment designed specifically to destroy whatever crossed over it. We'll both have to pay more attention next time."

Albus nodded, looking at one of the giant trees. Its charcoal color sent shivers down his spine; he wasn't eager to look similar.

"We should press on now" Fairhart said, snapping him from his thoughts. He looked up at the cloudy sky as he spoke. "It should start raining again soon" he said. "Like I said before, let's focus on finding shelter as we move. This way, now."

Albus followed after him dutifully, still somewhat shaken by what had just happened. Did Fairhart not realize that they'd both nearly just been burnt to a crisp? But his former professor didn't seem disturbed by this fact. Even as Albus looked at him, he detected a hint of exuberance in the half of his face that could create such expressions.

"What's up with you?" Albus asked him, jogging somewhat to keep up with his pace.

"Just pleased to know that I guessed right" he said.

"What?" Albus asked, and Fairhart came to a halt to explain.

"Do you know where we're going, Albus?" he asked.

"To- to Azkaban-"

"Yes, but have you noticed that we're not heading straight toward the prison? There's too many enchantments. We've been walking in more of a circular pattern."

"I've just kind of been following you" Albus said, somewhat ashamed. He'd never really bothered to guess how Fairhart's knew which way was correct. But they were both still alive, weren't they?

"Well I've been forced to make a few haphazard decisions since we've been here" Fairhart told him. "The second that I saw that Chimaera, for instance, I knew that we were close to the Ministry trail. Chimaeras are highly territorial. From wherever it started on the island, it won't have went far. When we arrived on this island, we weren't far from the safe trail at all. I simply had to guess in which direction it was. I guessed east."

"But we're heading-"

"West" Fairhart finished for him. "The opposite way. We are heading into powerful enchantments, like the ones that we just so narrowly survived."

"But we should be heading towards the Ministry trail!" Albus blurted out, horrified. "Why would we-"

"You are forgetting the nature of our occupancy here" Fairhart told him, a steely gaze on his face. "That 'safe' trail has already been compromised by the Dark Alliance. Whatever dangers we face out here, it is unlikely that we risk being discovered. The last thing that we want is Darvy knowing that we are here. We must decide which is a better route. Going through the Ministry's defences, or going through Darvy's. Considering the latter should have an impressive army built up by now, I'd say that the former is our best bet, don't you agree?"

Albus mouthed wordlessly at the logic, but as he had no proper rebuttal, he was forced to simply wait for Fairhart to resume leading the way. Only five minutes into their trek through the entanglements of the jungle did Fairhart's weather prediction of water were starting to slowly fall on Albus' head, the feeling actually rather refreshing after the the way that the flames had scorched him.

"We'll have to split up momentarily" Fairhart said out of nowhere, and Albus felt his skin crawl.

"W- what?"

"We'll find shelter faster if we divide our efforts" Fairhart said, turning to him. The rain began to speed up as he spoke, the thick drops of water now serving as more of an annoyance than anything.

"Can't we just- can't we just move through the rain?" Albus asked hopefully; he was not very keen on separating himself from Fairhart.

"We could" Fairhart told him blandly. "But I figured that we could see the precipitation as a schedule of sorts. A designated point of rest. You don't fancy a nice break every now and then?"

"I do, but-"

"You can go off on your own" Fairhart told him soothingly. "You are more than capable, I am sure of it. And I doubt you'll be encountering any powerful enchantments like what we just went through; remember, this island needs to be habitable for the creatures here, there won't be jinxes in such close proximity. Just be on the lookout for sleeping monsters, and don't go too far."

Albus inhaled sharply, but the downpour was now so strong that he could hardly argue against the necessity of a resting place. He considered asking if there was any combination of spells that could serve to provide them with shelter exactly where they stood, but he figured that Fairhart would probably have some outlandish reason for making them do things the hard way anyhow. And so, they split up, a giant, charred tree serving as an indication of where they were to meet if they found a reasonable place to set up camp.

Albus didn't even bother glancing over his shoulder to see where Fairhart was going, instead too preoccupied with trying to navigate his way through the shrubbery without his vision impaired by the rain. For about five minutes straight he proceeded through the dank foliage, at one point even hurrying along fearfully; a menacing, lilac colored plant had hissed at him as though it were going to attack. The Supersensory Charm placed on him seemed to be wearing off as well, as the pounding rain was starting to sound more and more normal in his ears, and this worried him somewhat. It would just be his luck to stumble into an enchantment with no way of having had prior warning.

There didn't appear to be any defensive measures in the path that he'd selected though, leaving him to wonder if Fairhart had encountered any on his selected route. He was just starting consider the fact that Fairhart could already be dead, with no way of Albus knowing, when something distracted him.

About ten feet away was a cluster of bushes, rustling fiercely as though they contained something living. Albus narrowed his eyes to peer through the rain, raising his wand up instinctively as he did so. His eyes widened when something terrifying caught his eye. For a fraction of a second, a human hand had been visible, poking out of the damp shrub.

"*Homenum Revelio!*" Albus cried through the rain, whipping his wand downward.

Nothing happened. He felt his body clam up with anxiety. Either his mind had been playing tricks on him, or a person was indeed nearby, and his spell hadn't even worked. Sadly, he realized, the second possibility actually seemed more likely, considering he'd only just recently learned this spell while under Fairhart's tutelage, and had by no means perfected it.

His mind began racing with what else it could have been; definitely not a Chimaera, but hadn't Fairhart mentioned other creatures being on the island? If it wasn't a person, which of them could it have been?

The bush rustled again, and this time, the hand actually extended from it sharply, making Albus jump back, his wand once again raised. He was just preparing to fire a hex when the entire figure emerged, making him gasp and clasp his other hand to his mouth.

It had been a human. In fact, it was himself.

A double of Albus Potter had exited the bush, its appearance so similar it was sickening. It wore the same loose fitting shirt, and the same worn pants, and even the same muddy trainers. What was different about it, Albus realized at once, was its golden, glowing eyes. Staring maliciously through the rain, the Albus Potter from his nightmares was standing only a few feet away.

Albus felt his body go numb as his hand began shaking up and down. He cowered slightly, watching as the nightmare Albus began walking towards him with a cocky, malevolent smirk-

It stopped dead in its tracks. There was an odd, completely unpredictable moment in which the golden eyed fiend began contorting itself eerily, and then, at the next moment, it had started to transform, its shape becoming more rectangular, beginning to bear a passing resemblance to some sort of long box, or maybe even a crib-

"Riddikulus!"

There was a loud cracking noise, and the object had vanished completely in a puff of smoke. Albus turned around and saw Fairhart standing just a few feet behind him, his wand outstretched and his expression grim.

"Come on" he hollered through the rain. "I found another grotto for us to use..."

Albus followed along after him silently, still somewhat shaken. They retraced his steps all the way past the charred tree and then some, until eventually Albus was being led to an area that he hadn't previously been to. Sure enough, though, there was a small cave positioned right by a stream of rushing water, and it was this small cavity that he entered, the sight of a blazing fire welcoming him at once.

"Try and get a bit of sleep" Fairhart told him as they sat down by the flames, the sound of the rain outside now accompanied by claps of thunder.

Albus didn't even comment on this. He instead looked up at the Renegade with what he knew was a gaunt face. As if to show that he was aware of what was going through his head, Fairhart started his explanation of what had just happened.

"It would appear as though, despite the absence of the Dementors, the Ministry is still using a psychological-"

"That was just a Boggart, right?" Albus cut him off testily, remembering the name from years ago, when he'd done a homework assignment on them.

"Yes" answered Fairhart firmly. "Just a Boggart" he added warmly.

Albus said nothing, instead simply nodding his head. When Fairhart spoke to him again, the curiosity in his voice was almost unnerving.

"What was it you were looking at?" he asked. "Was that you, during your transformations? Like before I found you?"

Albus nodded, his throat scratchy. Still, he spoke.

"I see that in my dreams" he said, rubbing at the sides of his arms. Fairhart noticed this and waved his wand lazily; Albus felt warmth spread through him at once.

"Still?" Fairhart asked, and Albus shook his head.

"No" he said quickly. "Not- not for a while. I fought it once. Told it that I wasn't afraid of it. It never showed up again after that."

"Interesting" Fairhart said, staring at him intently. Albus avoided his gaze, however. "A Boggart transforms itself into what you fear most; there must be some aspect of what you saw that intimidates you. Why are you so fright-"

"I don't know!" Albus lashed out angrily. "But you do, right?" he added acidly.

Fairhart tilted his head to the side slightly.

"What do you mean-"

"You know everything, don't you?" Albus spat. "You know why I have these dreams, and why I talk to myself like a nutter, right?"

He had not forgotten Fairhart revelation from before; the series of events that had brought him here had simply forced Albus to postpone further inquiries about it. He was not about to allow Fairhart to pry him for more information though, not now. Not until he at least had some answers.

"Albus...calm down..." Fairhart said, a note of concern in his voice.

"Tell me what you know!"

"Think about what you're asking!" Fairhart barked, sounding, for the first time in a while, truly agitated.

The flames shot upwards along with the tone of his voice, but this was not enough to make Albus recoil. He instead stared at Fairhart with a look that combined both ire and inquisition.

"Ask yourself something, Albus" Fairhart said shortly. "Do you *honestly* think that I'd keep something from you if I thought that it could benefit you? Do you think that my secrecy is an act of spite? Or loathing? Is that what you think?"

Albus bared his teeth, not entirely sure how to answer this. Not that he even got the chance, of course. Fairhart had already continued seamlessly.

"What I know-or more accurately, what I *think* I know-I am not telling you because I believe that it will come with severe consequences. I *will* tell you, this I promise. But not now. You will have to trust that I know what the best time is to give you answers that you seek."

Albus said nothing, still seething somewhat. Slowly, he nodded.

"You will tell me?" he shot out darkly. "We're friends, and we have to trust-"

"That is correct" Fairhart said, his voice calmer. "We have to trust one another. And I need you to trust me now."

Albus crossed his arms over, still frustrated, but now unwilling to escalate things further. Fairhart turned his attention back to the fire, staring at it with intensity as though a mild row had not just broken out. Albus kept his eyes on him, curious as to just what it was going on in his head.

"What are you thinking about?" he finally asked lowly, intent on perhaps changing the atmosphere.

Fairhart turned to him slowly. He hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Ida" he said plainly, and Albus felt the cold return to his body.

Stupidly, he lowered his head, unsure of how to progress from here. It had been truly idiotic to ask such a question; he'd long since learned that Fairhart's mind was a complicated one, and its contents typically only served to exude negativity when brought to light. To his surprise, however, Fairhart asked a question of his own.

"Who is your best friend, Albus?"

"What? Erm- Morrison and Scorpius" he answered automatically, knowing that it would be futile to pick between them. He excluded Mirra from the equation as well; that was a different thought process entirely.

Fairhart nodded, but said nothing. Unsure of how to decipher this cryptic question, Albus asked of its importance outright.

"Why?"

Fairhart gave a wry smile, half of his face contorting to accompany his words.

"Don't ever forget the love and support of your friends and family, Albus. When all else seems lost, you will find no greater strength than the knowledge that others care for, and depend on you."

This did little to answer Albus' question, but Fairhart's comment had been made in such a way that it seemed as though all conversation was to cease. As if to exemplify this, Fairhart positioned his body in a more reclined manner, staring outwardly and away from the flames as he did so.

"Try and get some sleep" he said once more. "I will wake you when we can begin moving again."

Albus nodded and went to his lay his head back against a smooth piece of rock behind him. Only when he tried closing his eyes did he realize something.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" he asked.

"It is never wise to have no one on lookout" Fairhart replied, almost robotically. "I will keep watch."

Albus frowned. Fairhart had kept watch after they'd washed up on shore as well. Come to think of it, when was the last time he'd even slept? It must've been before the debacle in Lambshire...

"I'll keep watch" Albus said, picking his head up, but Fairhart shook his head aggressively.

"You need your sleep" he said. "I will keep watch."

Albus exhaled deeply, knowing that arguing the point would get him nowhere. He instead placed his back against the smooth stone, trying to drift off as instructed.

He was having an extremely hard time of it though. The moment of tranquility was also providing him with pieces of frightening, inarguable truths. He had nearly died today. More than once, actually. They may not have been his first ever ventures, but these most recent close-calls had one thing that his previous ones didn't. He had asked for these. Had even prepared himself for them beforehand.

The excitement from the boat-the enthusiasm at being so close to his father-had worn off almost completely now. His burning desire to be his father's savior was now marred by terrible images of his brief time here on the island, and the knowledge that there was plenty more to come was not making things any better. They were still on the outer rim of the island. His father was in the center, encased in a powerful fortress, an army like no other separating them. And even beyond all that, Fairhart also wanted to leave the island with at least one rare, most likely heavily guarded artifact in hand...

Without even realizing just how melancholy he was, he felt a warm tear slide down his cheek. Fairhart's comments about his friends and loved ones were poisoning his thoughts now, sending bittersweet memories wafting through them. He had come to this island to do something productive; to make a difference. But what was he leaving behind? He thought of Morrison and Scorpius, and Mirra, and his brother and sister, and his mother and his cousins. His heart sunk at the thought of their faces right now, at this very moment. What would those faces look like if he never returned? Fear shot through him almost painfully; a fear that made what the Boggart had induced feel almost euphoric.

For how long he sat there in silence he wasn't sure. He was fairly certain that the faces plaguing his mind prevented him from ever truly falling however, and after an indeterminate amount of time, he registered movement. He opened his eyes to find Fairhart close to him, both of his eyes looking sunken. The disfigured side of his face had never looked more lifeless.

"Ready?" he croaked.

Albus nodded. Five minutes later, the fire had been extinguished, and they had exited their natural place of would-be slumber. The rain had ceased, but the ground beneath their feet was wet and slippery, thick drops of water still sliding down the thick tree trunks around them. The muggy chill sent a shiver through his body, and, desperate to simply get moving, he voiced his thoughts aloud.

"You still know where we're going, right?"

Fairhart nodded from next to him. "I have an idea" he said lamely. "Stay focused though. It is very unlikely that we've seen the last of the enchantments around this island. Which reminds me-

"

He brandished his wand, and once more, a Supersensory Charm had been placed on them both. When the previous charms had fully worn off Albus wasn't sure, but the sudden influx of previously undetectable sounds and scents proved that they most definitely had. Albus was now back to being as alert as possible.

Together the two of them trekked through mud and severed branches; the storm had done some damage to a few of the weaker trees, leaving Albus to wonder just how they'd survived this long anyway. Ferocious storms seemed commonplace here, after all. On more than one occasion an odd sound caught them off guard, but it always ended up being some form of nearly harmless creature, typically some sort of unrecognizable bird. Only once did they reach a point where Fairhart needed to stop and walk around as well; entering a dense patch of plant life, some sort of invisible barrier had forced them to tiptoe diagonally, Fairhart keeping his wand raised the entire time as if to prevent some form of actual defence from arising.

Every now and then Albus stared up at the sky to catch sight of the looming structure of Azkaban, and he had to admit, it did seem to be getting closer, if only slightly. As they walked in almost complete silence, he spent a great deal of time trying to calculate just how far away they were, every answer that he came up with ultimately leaving him dissatisfied. It was not until something highly unusual entered his ears that he abandoned his thoughts completely.

It was a muffled voice. Albus froze on the spot, as did Fairhart, who needlessly held out a hand protectively to stop him from going any further.

"What was-"

"Shhh!" Fairhart whispered darkly, and again the voices could be heard, though they were still unintelligible.

Albus felt himself start to sweat. He immediately thought of the Boggart from before, but he was also fairly certain that Boggarts didn't speak, and beyond that, the odds that both he and Fairhart would be hearing a voice were extremely low. Before he could give anymore thought on the matter, Fairhart had already raised his wand at him again.

A surprising, though familiar feeling overtook him; it was as though an egg was cracking over his head. Albus held up a hand to his face for confirmation, and though he expected what he saw, he couldn't help but be perplexed.

"A Disillusionment Charm?" he asked, staring right through his camouflaged hand. "What are-"

Fairhart casted the spell on himself quickly, then guided Albus with a low voice, just the muffling sounds were becoming louder.

"Up a tree now. Hurry!"

Albus did as he was told, turning around and spotting the nearest climbable tree at once. He felt movement from next to him as Fairhart began bounding up his own personal mountain in complete silence. To his immense surprise, Albus was able to match the professionalism. He reached a branch towards the acme of a tree in only a few seconds, and though he heard a few slight sounds, he knew that he could hardly be angry with himself; they had been low, and he *did* have a Supersensory Charm placed on him...

He sat perched like a bird, trying to make sure that his apprehension didn't interfere with his stillness. From this point of view the island had never looked more like a forest, the tops of trees serving as a backdrop that extended all the way to Azkaban, all of them uniquely shaped but serving to create an overall uneventful stretch of green. He turned his head from side to side in an attempt to find Fairhart, but he gave up almost once. Knowing his former professor, it would be difficult to find him if he were wearing red in a field of white; trying to find him when

camouflaged into a random tree was impossible to say the least. For whatever it was they were dealing with, he was on his own.

And all too soon it became apparent just what it was they were hiding from. The voices were now clear, and Albus could hear an active conversation below.

"Who do you reckon he throws in their next?" said a crunchy, menacing voice.

"That fool who attacked Markson, probably" answered an icier, slow voice. "He'll probably make a few others in that row spectate too; I know I would. Sets an example."

Albus had no idea what the two people below him were talking about, but one thing was obvious: they had no idea they were being watched. He peered through leaves and caught on to their position with ease. It was just two of them, dressed in dark cloaks and void of the red masks that Albus usually saw them wear. They were walking at a slow pace as well. It wouldn't be too difficult to get a well aimed spell in there...

Being unable to communicate with Fairhart was awful, as he wasn't entirely sure what the Renegade's own plans were. But Albus was not about to let these two Dark Alliance members dawdle in their vicinity, preventing them from doing anything until they left. He had the advantage here; the element of surprise. He'd been training for events like this almost *exactly*.

He took aim at the Dark Alliance member on the right, who had just started a sentence-

He concentrated as hard as he could on the Stunning Spell, and sure enough, a well sized stream of red light soared through the trees. Bizarrely, a second, slightly larger stream of red light soared by it in a parallel fashion; the two wizards crumbled to the ground silently, unable to even give a yell of surprise.

Before Albus could even begin to make his way down, he'd heard a thump, telling him that Fairhart had leapt to ground level. By the time he'd managed to drop down himself, Fairhart was already hovering over the two incapacitated foes, his Disillusionment Charm removed. Albus approached him, watched as Fairhart waved his wand, and then realized that the charm had been removed from himself as well.

"Good call, Albus" Fairhart said, sounding impressed. "You didn't even need to see my stunner; you took the lead."

"Well I figured that we're better off without them conscious" Albus said lamely, looking down at the two men, neither of whom were wearing masks. One had a twisted, wiry look to him; the other was thicker, with tangled brown hair and chubby cheeks.

"You know what we do next, right?" Fairhart asked, raising his wand up.

"No-"

"We interrogate them" Fairhart said, and Albus, whose heart had begun to beat rather quickly, lowered his hand.

Fairhart didn't revitalize either of them right away however. He first made slashing movements through the air with his wand, and Albus understood that he was placing jinxes on their prey now. If Albus had to guess, he'd say that Silencing spells and Full Body-Bind jinxes were among them.

"*Rennervate*" Fairhart muttered after a moment.

There was immediate struggling, though it amounted to nothing. Incapable of speaking or moving more than their necks, the two men simply shook their heads back and forth like turtles turned on their backs. With surprising strength, Fairhart lifted them both by their collars in each hand, then placed them both slumped up against two thicketrees that were next to one another.

"You can stop trying to move" Fairhart said crisply. "It's not going to amount to anything."

Both of them stopped at once, the thin one looked fearful, the thicker one more aggressive.

Fairhart positioned himself so that he was in between both of them, leaving Albus a few feet behind. Albus watched him tensely, both curious and anxious to see exactly what a Renegade did once they'd successfully neutralized their target.

"Now here's what's going to happen" Fairhart said to them both, his wand outstretched threateningly. "I'm going to take the Silencing spells off of you so that you can answer me. If either of you attempts to shout or scream or make any other pathetic noise meant to lure more people my way, you will be silenced again, tortured briefly on principle, and then killed. Understand?"

Both of them stared at Fairhart with hatred, but Albus couldn't help but marvel at him. He'd sounded almost like he was reciting his demands. How many people had heard that same thing before? And how many of them had foolishly not complied?

After a moment, both of them nodded. Fairhart waved his wand lazily, and Albus saw, to his immense relief, that both of them valued their lives. Neither of them made a sound.

Fairhart crouched down onto his knees, examining them both with interest. Albus couldn't see his face from where he was standing, but he had the strange suspicion that something like a smile was playing on his face. This unnerved him slightly.

"Now if I didn't know any better," Fairhart started, "I'd say that you two were patrolling. Now what would two relatively poor wizards be doing patrolling such a dangerous area? Looking for someone?"

Neither of them spoke at first, but after a moment, the thicker one spoke up. His voice was a deep snarl that made Albus cringe.

"Death's Right Hand knows you're here!" he spat. "He told us to distract you, there's more people-"

Fairhart slashed his wand through the air menacingly. There was a flash of white light, a squeal reminiscent of a dog whimpering, and the next thing that Albus knew the man was bleeding profusely from his nose, thick drops of red sliding down over his lips and onto his neck.

"I know when you're lying" Fairhart said icily, and the thin man made a noise of terror. His partner was now staring at Fairhart with glinting eyes, his chin soaked with blood, some fight still left in him.

Slowly, Fairhart inched his way towards the man's face, his wand pointed at his chest.

"And if you lie to me again," he said softly, "I'm going to slowly eviscerate you, do you understand me? Do you know what that means?"

The man nodded his head callously, but it was his intimidated comrade who spoke up.

"We'll tell you whatever you want!" he squealed, petrified, and the bleeding man next to him shot him a dirty look.

"Good" Fairhart said, turning his attention to him. "Now, I'm guessing that this was just a regular patrol, correct?"

The man nodded quickly. This affirmation seemed to be legitimate, as Fairhart continued without making any more threats.

"But your close proximity must indicate that the safe trail that you were using is close by, correct?"

The man nodded again, and Fairhart scratched at his chin.

"How exactly do you enter and exit the prison?" he asked. "Aside from the obvious entrance, has Darvy created alternative routes in and out?"

Albus watched as the man swallowed intensely. He hesitated for a moment-

The moment's hesitation proved to be too much for Fairhart, who turned his wand on the already bleeding enemy next to him.

"Every question you fail to answer results in torture for your pal-"

"Stop!" Albus barked, rushing towards Fairhart. The two men, both of whom were now giving cowardly looks at the wand, turned their attention to him in surprise; it seemed as though neither of them had even noticed him before.

Fairhart glared at him as he jogged up to him, but before he could say anything, Albus had already spoken.

"Can I talk to you real quick?" he asked nervously. "Over- over there?"

Fairhart gave him a piercing look for a single second, then turned to the two men, his wand raised.

"A single noise!" he said, and they both nodded in understanding at the meanings behind his sentence fragment.

Slowly, Albus led him a few feet away and behind a thick tree, trying to keep the two Dark Alliance members in sight without allowing them to hear what was going on. It was very tricky though; the Supersensory Charm placed on him was making it hard for him to get a good grasp of what was supposed to be loud and what wasn't.

"Can't we just use Legilimancy?" Albus asked at once, and Fairhart frowned.

"Albus, you know first hand how difficult that would be. Legilimancy is for extracting more general information; it provides vivid images and extracts basic thoughts, nothing more. I need more details-"

"We'll both do it" Albus interjected. "I'll take one, you take the other, I need the practice anyway-"

"Albus," Fairhart started with a sigh, "I'm not going to *kill* these men-"

"Really?" Albus asked sharply.

"Of course not" Fairhart told him. "I still need to separate them, cross-examine them-"

Albus tossed his arms up. "We do this my way first" he said. "And if it doesn't work, then you can- you can- you can do whatever" he said, a small jolt going through his body.

Fairhart gave him a dark look before answering.

"Fine" he said coldly.

"You really enjoy this, don't you?" Albus accused him.

"Honestly?" Fairhart said lowly, and he looked over his shoulder at the slumped figures of the two terrified Dark Alliance members. "No, I don't. Not anymore. But to be most effective, they need to think that I do."

Albus nodded, but as he made to walk away, Fairhart grasped him by the shoulder.

"Keep one other thing in mind Albus" he said. "To be most effective, I also need to make good on my threats. Understand?"

Albus said nothing, merely giving another nod in recognition, this one more grim. Slowly, they marched back to the two men, both of their wands raised.

"What's going on-" the thin one started, sounding as though his teeth were chattering.

Albus aimed his wand at the more assertive of the two, just as Fairhart had aimed his at the stammering man. Simultaneously, they both cried aloud, "*Legilimens!*"

With no reservations about what he'd see, Albus delved into the mind of the bleeding Dark Alliance member. Images began flashing in his head at once, though the sight of the bleeding man in front of him was equally clear. It was as though one of Albus' eyes was physical, the other mental. He saw a flash of red first, and then witnessed, with a twinge of terror, a man being torn to shreds by skeletal beasts. The image evaporated and became replaced by an older memory, involving a young, hard-faced girl-his younger sister perhaps-teasing him over something. But that memory was of a personal nature, and didn't matter much, so he shifted through it quickly, the next memory presenting him with-

Azkaban. Up close, the facade of the giant stone prison bearing down on him, a hole blown in the side of it. But next to the entrance was a tremendous graveyard, dreary and bleak, random, poorly constructed headstones poking out of the ground. But the graveyard was not empty. No, it was far from it. It was packed with the skeletal monsters from the first memory, and they were all walking around in the same lopsided manner, looking as though they were grazing, with humongous, charcoal colored steeds sometimes accompanying them. And as he slowly walked away, the full picture came into view, revealing hundreds and hundreds of them, an army like no other-

Albus lowered his wand, then wiped at his face at once. He glanced over at Fairhart, who'd finished his own excursion as well. He too was looking surly, and Albus had the feeling that he'd seen something similar.

In a single, unpredictable striking motion, Fairhart struck his wand through the air. Streaks of red light hit both of the men, and their heads lulled to the side peacefully, ending their slight movements.

"What- what did you see?" Albus asked, a quiver in his voice.

Fairhart turned to him slowly. "A lot" he said. "But most importantly...I saw breeding grounds."

Albus nodded. "Darvy's using the graveyard" he said. "That's where he's keeping all of the Silhouettes that he's making. He's amassing his army there-"

"- And keeping them close to the only part of the prison that can be successfully infiltrated" Fairhart added swiftly. "He's more clever than we give him credit for."

Albus felt his entire body go rigid as Fairhart said it. He'd just been thinking the same thing.

"So- so what do we do?"

"We head back" Fairhart said boldly. "And get on the safe trail."

"What?" Albus asked, stymied. "But you said- something- Darvy would be watching-"

"There's a very good chance that the trail laid out by the Ministry-the same one that Darvy took-leads directly to the graveyard that I, and presumably you as well saw. The idea, I'm sure, is that anyone who takes the safe trail will be met face to face with Darvy's army before they can proceed much further. This means that all of his actual manpower can patrol the island freely. This actually slightly helps our ultimate goal. We can use the safe trail without the risk of exposing our presence here. The only difficult thing will be actually getting in-"

"Yeah" Albus said airily, a small, inexplicable laugh in his voice. "Did you- did you happen to see just how many...?"

"I did" Fairhart said. "But I also saw that they were all condensed to the graveyard itself. The graveyard outside the walls of Azkaban is notoriously large Albus, many prisoners have died here over the years. But even still, my guess is that there are Ministry enchantments around it. Darvy is most likely using these enchantments to his advantage, and keeping his creatures contained while he creates more. So long as we are careful about not disturbing them we should be okay."

Albus said nothing, unable to do anything other than shake his head slowly in disbelief. This task was getting more ridiculous by the moment. Their main goal had at first been to avoid as much as possible. Now they were heading right to where Darvy's budding army was?

"So...so first things first, we head back, right?" Albus asked.

"In a manner of speaking" Fairhart said with a shrug. "We'll take a slightly altered route, but yes, we're mostly going to go back the way we came. This too favors us. Any enchantments we've already encountered will be unlikely to activate again, and those that we avoided we'll still know to avoid-"

A shriek penetrated the stillness around them, amplified by the charms placed on them and by the reverberation of the thick trees. The high pitched noise was crude and barbaric; ear-splitting in every sense of the term. Fairhart looked around wildly, but Albus stayed frozen on the spot, a horrible wave of nostalgia overtaking him.

"Silhouettes" he mumbled, his face blank.

"What?" Fairhart asked him sharply.

"Silhouettes!" Albus said loudly. "That's the noise that they make, I've heard that before-"

The sound came again, this time even louder. Albus had to plug his ears to stop them from bleeding, but even as he did so he caught sight of just where the screech was coming from. It was above them.

There, up in a tree just a few over from the one that Albus had climbed, was an enormous black bird. It looked almost prehistoric, its feathers the color of ink and its beak long, sharp, and as white as bone marrow. The Supersensory Charm allowed Albus to take in the foul stench of it, but this couldn't compare to its screech, which it made again-

Fairhart struck his wand through the air, and a jet of green soared upwards into the tree. The Killing Curse hit the bird square in the face, and though this silenced it, it continued to flap its black, leathery wings as though it hadn't been affected at all. Whatever this creature was, it was already dead.

"Run" Fairhart said, and he took off speedily, Albus following along after him without saying a word, still trying to comprehend just what was going on.

"What's going on!" he shouted, though somewhere, in the back of his head, he thought that he knew.

The jet black bird screeched again, and Fairhart was forced to shout over it.

"We must hurry back the way we came. Don't stray away from me now, I am retracing our steps-"

"That bird came from the Veil didn't it?" Albus asked, clutching at his side while he ran and ducking underneath a pair of lethal looking vines that were hanging from a tree.

"I am almost certain of it!" Fairhart called from ahead of him, and Albus watched as he slashed his wand through the air like a blade, cutting a large, messy hedge in half so as to let them go through it. "And I believe that it is alerting other creatures to our presence-"

Albus stopped dead in his tracks, panting and grabbing at his knees, his chest burning. "What?" he asked, trembling.

"There's no time to focus on it now!" Fairhart exclaimed, slowing down somewhat and looking over his shoulder as he spoke. "Now hurry!"

Albus gulped at the musty air, then fought his way through a shrub and began to speed up a bit.

Clip-clop.

"Do you think we'll be safe on the trail?" Albus called ahead, one hand still clutching his side, panic flooding him.

Fairhart slashed his way through another natural made obstacle before answering. "We'll at least have a direct route!" he hollered. "Keep up now, don't slow down!"

Albus leapt over a fallen branch as he hurried along, a clap of thunder telling him that yet another storm was coming. He kept his eyes on the agile image of Fairhart as he chased after him, but he veered off slightly to avoid a towering tree that was obstructing his path-

There was a noiselike a cannon, and the next thing that Albus knew, the ground beneath him had raised itself up, catapulting him forward into the air-

He grabbed on to a branch protruding from a tree, then dropped back down to ground level, bewildered at what was going on. He made to keep running, but the ground moved beneath him again-

This time his right foot shot upwards, causing his left to twist itself painfully. He let out a growl and made a grab for his sore ankle. He heard Fairhart shouting ahead of him, but his voice was masked by something else, something loud and clear due to the Supersensory Charm.

Clip-clop.

Albus massaged his foot, the ground still rumbling underneath him. Whatever hidden enchantment he'd triggered, it was designed more to disorient than to cause major harm, and in that aspect it was succeeding.

He looked up and saw Fairhart emerging from behind a tall tree, breathless and wearing an expression of exasperation.

"What happened-"

He was cut off by another small tremor however, one that threw Albus to the floor completely and made Fairhart stumble as well.

"Microseism Jinx" he answered himself lowly.

"Sorry!" Albus gasped, still massaging at his foot. "Just keep going, I'll catch up!"

But Fairhart had already swooped down on him.

Clip-clop.

"Hold still now" he said, and he tapped his wand to Albus's foot. "*Episkey!*" he cried.

Albus felt the pain vanish at once, but when he made to stand up, he noticed that he was still a little lopsided. His foot was still injured, just no longer in pain.

"How does it feel?" Fairhart asked him tensely, another tremor moving below them. They grabbed at one another's shoulders to keep steady.

"Better" Albus said truthfully. "Just a bit stiff-"

"Healing was never my strong suit" Fairhart admitted. "But we must keep moving, grab on to me if you must-"

Albus nodded, but decided not to hinder Fairhart's movement. He instead fought through the discomfort, hobbling along after the scarred Renegade as fast as he could. His brief rest on the ground had rejuvenated him slightly, enough at least to make him speed up and outrun the tremors, which seemed to have only affected a certain area. Rain started to fall lightly, but Albus mostly used his ears to follow after Fairhart, listening to the sound of his feet slipping on mud and snapping twigs-

Fairhart spun around and grabbed him by the collar.

"What are you-"

"Down!" Fairhart hissed, and he threw him to the floor violently.

Albus felt his body land in a muddy puddle, a thick, massive log serving as a barrier of sorts. The dirty water splashed into his face, entering his mouth and making him choke for a second. He made to yell angrily, but the look on Fairhart's scarred face abated him at once. He too had crouched down behind the log, his entire face-both the normal side and the disfigured one-a ghostly white.

Clip-clop. Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

Slowly and cautiously, Albus raised his head one centimeter at a time, his eyes taking in the scene in an instant. Even through the now furious rain he could see the streaks of red that served as fiery manes, the crimson hooves and massive blobs of black being registered next. There were two of them there, two charcoal black horses identical to the ones that Albus had seen in the thoughts of the interrogated Dark Alliance member, larger than just about anything that Albus had seen in his Care for Magical Creatures class, including both Hippogriffs and Thestrals. They

were both standing still, their long, ferocious faces staring blankly ahead as though waiting for instructions from what was riding atop them.

They were each manned by a tall, menacing Silhouette, thin black reigns in each skeletal hand, the long, slimy legs stretched out loosely over each side of the beasts. It was two Silhouettes riding two flaming horses, and the foul odor added up fast. Albus nearly gagged from it, but Fairhart tactfully pulled him down by his sleeve, concealing them both.

Albus felt his entire body go numb with shock at the situation that they were in. Rain splattered off of the top of his head as he gazed restlessly at Fairhart, hoping that he had some sort of plan for getting out of this alive. But as he'd said earlier, he'd never fought a Silhouette before; of the two of them, only Albus had. And as he'd only barely survived that encounter as well, he couldn't help but think that two equine monsters added to the fold were not going to help his odds this time.

He tried to focus; to think with confidence rather than terror. Fairhart had prepared him for this. He was to use Blasting Curses, right? If his training pulled through, that should at least damage the Silhouettes bearing down on him. About the massive horses though-Necrosteeds, he was pretty sure they were called-he had no idea. Would the Blasting Curse be able to harm them as well?

He continued to stare at Fairhart, who was looking alert, his wand drawn but kept low. He was preparing to lash out and attack, Albus was sure of it.

Clip-clop.

One of the fiery horses was trotting towards them. Albus acted on impulse, not sure what Fairhart was waiting for, but unwilling to prolong things for another second. He removed himself from cover and held out his wand with both hands, preparing to attack.

Fairhart shouted something, but Albus was unable to hear it. The second that he'd stood up to attack, a most peculiar sensation had went through him. A Necrosteed had indeed trotted its way over to the log, but for a single moment Albus had made eye contact with the Silhouette on top of it, his green eyes meeting the hollow, gouged out portions of its skull. Through the rain he stared almost absently at it, the slimy skin hanging off of its skeletal body, its sharp, claw like fingers wrapped around the reigns of the beast it sat atop. For a wild moment, he felt soothed; relaxed. The Silhouette wasn't going to hurt him...

"Get down!" Fairhart roared in his ear, and he felt powerful arms force him down behind the log again. It was just in the nick of time too; the Necrosteed that he'd been ogling had opened its mouth, a stream of powerful fire issuing from it-

The intense heat soaring over his head brought Albus back to reality. What had just happened? There was no time to think about it. He could hear screeching again-the battle cries of the deadly

Silhouettes, and when the fire had subsided above him, both he and Fairhart rose up to see that the two Necrosteeds were bucking and neighing aggressively, their crimson hooves sliding around in the mud.

"*Confringo!*" Fairhart shouted, and there was a loud banging noise. The spell collided with the bucking Necrosteed's underbelly, sending it backward and toppling over, its rider being thrown from it. Albus did the same thing, but his spell missed, hitting a tree instead, which broke to bits, sending splinters in the powerful wind and rain.

The other Necrosteed opened its mouth, and another stream of flames was shot out. Albus threw himself to the ground just in time to watch Fairhart swipe his wand through the air again. What looked like mist shot from it, the vapor colliding with the flames and extinguishing them immediately. This proved to be an ultimately poor choice of strategy however; the resulting fog made it nearly impossible to follow the battle anymore, and Albus caught a fleeting glance of the Silhouette atop the Necrosteed slashing a claw-like hand through the air at Fairhart-

Fairhart spun around to dodge it, but wasn't fast enough. Albus heard him yell out in pain as he sank down on one knee, his hand clutching his shoulder, which was bleeding freely. Albus jumped up from his position on the ground and leapt at the Renegade, intent on forcing him to the ground before any further harm could happen to him, but he collided with the powerful body of the Necrosteed and fell backwards instead. He looked up, peering at the Silhouette through the haze, and saw that it was getting ready to depart from its mount, to execute Fairhart, who was still nursing his shoulder-

A resounding growl entered Albus' ears, and to his surprise, it sounded nothing like the screech that he now loathed. It was instead more feline than anything else, and it was so loud and intimidating that even the Silhouette halted its advancement.

Albus saw a massive shape move through the rain and mist. Swiftly and powerfully, the gigantic mass of black collided with the Silhouette, knocking it off of the Necrosteed with ease and sending it plummeting into the mud. Only when Albus caught sight of a thick, scaly tail did he realize what was going on.

They'd retraced their steps back to the Chimaera. And what's more, they'd woken it up.

Albus crouched down to grab hold of Fairhart, but couldn't take his eyes off of the battle occurring in front of him. The Chimaera had begun attacking the Necrosteed as well, its ferocious claws stabbing into the black horse's body with ease. The Necrosteed raised itself onto his hind legs as it was forced back, and was then thrown to the ground like its rider. The Silhouette had screeched and was trying to stand back up, but was knocked to the ground by the powerful, dragon-like tail of the ferocious hybrid beast.

For a moment, it seemed like the Chimaera had won. But then Albus saw the Necrosteed from before; the one that Fairhart had knocked over. It was back on its feet, and a single flash of fire later and the Chimaera had been blasted back into a tree, which snapped in half and toppled over just inches from where Albus and Fairhart were.

"We need to move!" Fairhart sputtered out, trying to stand and regain his balance.

Albus helped him to his feet, then turned his attention back to the Chimaera, which was already back on its feet. One of the two Silhouettes had leapt on top of it, and was now digging its claws into the belly of the weakened creature. The Chimaera gave another roar and seized the Silhouette by its lanky, skeletal arms. There was a ferocious tug, and both of the arms had been broken right off.

Albus cringed in surprise as the Silhouette fell backwards, armless, some sort of black ooze pouring from its empty sockets. It writhed around in the mud wildly, screeching loudly, until the Chimaera hopped on top of it, its goat body leaking blood. It started to batter the head of the Silhouette around, but the other one had already leapt on it, creating a pile up of the three creatures.

"This way, hurry!" Fairhart said, taking the lead again. Albus followed him through the rain, keeping hold of him to help keep him steady, but they were both forced to a halt when something dropped in front of them.

It was a skeletal torso, and it was missing two arms, a head, and half of a leg. The Silhouette from the bottom of the pile had officially been defeated.

Albus looked behind him again, brilliant flashes of orange scorching his retinas. The two Necrosteeds were both neighing and shooting flames rapidly, though the Chimaera's tough skin seemed to be fireproof. It was fighting its way through the clouds of flames on all fours, clawing at the horses and digging its flesh into them. Albus watched as the remaining Silhouette moved on it from behind while it was preoccupied with the Necrosteeds. It grabbed the scaly green tail in both of its massive hands, and then, with outrageous strength that Albus knew was only possible through magic, it swung the beast through the air. The Chimaera gave a soft whimper of pain as it hurtled through air, in, of course, Albus' direction-

He ducked down, pulling Fairhart down with him. It wasn't quite enough though. One of the Chimaera's feet connected with Fairhart, sending him staggering back and into a dense patch of sinister looking, scarlet flowers, which hissed as soon as his face made contact with them. Albus watched as a bright red, acid-like substance squirted from them, hitting Fairhart right in the face. He gave a yell of anguish and he hoisted himself up, flailing around blindly and clutching at his face with the only arm that could be raised, the same one that was, surprisingly enough, still clutching his wand.

"Are you okay!" Albus yelled through the rain, the sound of the thrashing Chimaera a few feet only making it harder to hear his own voice.

"I- can't- see-"

Albus grabbed on to Fairhart again, trying to steer him through a cluster of trees. He caught sight of the Chimaera out of the corner of his eye; it had leapt to all fours once more, and with another roar from its lion head, it tore back into the fray, where it tackled a Necrosteed and began slashing away at it again-

"Come one, I've got you-" Albus tried crooning to Fairhart, whose bleeding arm was hanging loosely at his side, the other one wrapped around his neck as he steered him through the pockets of plant life. The rain had started to lighten, and with the downpour no longer a hindrance on his vision, Albus was able to lead Fairhart around smoothly. The only problem was, he didn't know where he was going.

"Erm- San-"

"You're going the right way" Fairhart breathed with a rattling breath, and Albus caught sight of his face. Not much had changed for the most part, but both of his eyes were jammed shut, the skin around them-both the disfigured side and the regular one, a deep pink. It appeared as though those flowers, like everything else on this island it seemed, were exceptionally dangerous.

Albus continued to lead Fairhart away from the battle, the noises of the struggle thinning out more and more with every step. He realized that he was having trouble supporting Fairhart's weight, and only after a few moments of thinking did he realize that his ankle was still stiff. He could hardly complain though; not with what had just happened to Fairhart.

None of what Albus saw was familiar, but Fairhart seemed to be aware of exactly where they were; perhaps he recognized his own wandwork, because he was waving his hand through the air forcefully as if to detect enchantments.

"Just a little further now..." Fairhart said hoarsely, his eyes still closed. "Keep going this way...stop!"

Albus stopped at once, and then felt relief on the the left side of his body. Fairhart had removed himself from his crutch and was now holding his wand up, pointing it randomly ahead of him. Slowly, he traced it through the air.

"What are-"

"We are at the trail" Fairhart said, and Albus stared at him in awe, not knowing how he could possibly be aware of this.

"Erm- can- can you see...?"

"No" Fairhart said, exhaling deeply. "But I can feel. Stand back now...if this backfires I want you out of the way..."

There was no point to objecting. Albus did as he was told, stepping back a few feet and allowing Fairhart to continue to make his wand movements. Often times he would jab it through the air and then pull it back, as though some sort of invisible wall was stopping any penetration. Albus watched with baited breath to see if Fairhart could break through-

"Okay" he said after a few more moments. "Come now..."

Albus glanced over his shoulder, the sounds of the battle from before now completely gone, the rain having halted as well. He followed Fairhart passed yet another thick tree, then through some more underbrush-

Finally, they hit a clear pathway. A straight road that looked like it had been mowed down of everything green. It was just a narrow passage of dirt and soil up ahead, the looming structure of Azkaban as clear as Albus had seen it so far, with no trees to conceal it.

From next to him, he felt Fairhart collapse.

"San!" Albus yelled out, sinking to his knees. He watched as Fairhart tried moving through his exhaustion. He was passing his wand over the gash on his left shoulder weakly, trying to heal the wound. It appeared to only be half-working. The flesh was healing, but it still appeared to be raw and sensitive.

"Here, let me-"

"It's okay, Albus" Fairhart said, sitting up and continuing to pass his wand over the skin. "Take a break. We'll get moving soon."

Albus stared at him with his mouth wide open.

"Can you- can you even see?"

"My sight will return soon" Fairhart said confidently.

"How do you-"

"Those flowers acted in self-defence. Had they been carnivorous, or anything of the sort, I'd have been paralyzed instead. My guess is that this is only temporary. Just give me a moment. Get some rest."

Albus didn't even bother nodding. He instead plopped down next to him, his shallow breathing the only sound that he could hear.

"That Chimaera saved our lives" Fairhart spoke up from next to him.

"Yeah, what was that all about?" Albus asked.

"I told you that they're territorial" Fairhart said lightly. "It saw the Silhouettes as a threat to its area, and it attacked. Good call on sparing it earlier. If you ever get to see your girlfriend again, thank her for me."

"If I ever get to see my girlfriend again, I'm going to do more than that" Albus said blandly.
"After this place? Damn..."

Fairhart turned to him and smiled; the pink had still not left his eyes.

Albus didn't return the grin, instead turning to look at the prison again. They were free from the dangers of the island, for now at least, but what would this route bring them? He soaked in the ominous appearance of the towering structure, realizing, with a jolt, that everything was there. Darvy. His father. The Wand, the Veil, and the Book. All of it was closer than ever.

But as Albus looked down at the disheveled, battered image of Fairhart, he realized something else. Since they'd been here, they'd never been closer to failing either.

Chapter 26: The Infiltration

"Just another minute or two."

"Take your time" Albus said, looking over at Fairhart with a pained expression on his face.

With no immediate danger forming around them, he had the opportunity to soak in the appearance of his former professor for the first time in quite a while. His robes were torn on one side from where the Silhouette had slashed him, the feebly mended skin of his shoulder completely visible. The rest of his black robes were frayed and matted, dirt, blood, and mud smeared on them to make them look, somehow, even darker. His face-already not very pretty-was now even worse off, the pink around his eyes dark and prominent. Sitting in a crouched position, he looked all but defeated.

Albus wasn't entirely sure what he looked like- though he at least knew that his face and robes were dirty-but he was sure that he wasn't looking nearly as worn. It was amazing how battered Fairhart had become in only a few hours, and Albus realized grimly that he himself was actually faring better. He still had his eyesight, for one thing, and he was sure that he hadn't shed any blood yet either. Indeed, apart from a stiff ankle and absolute fatigue, he was actually in moderately good health.

"Okay, let's get moving" Fairhart groaned hoarsely, hoisting himself into a standing position and wobbling at once, his hand on his injured shoulder.

"We can rest a bit more-"

"We're better off leaving now" Fairhart said, his voice sounding dry and harsh. "We left two Dark Alliance members back there, and once they're discovered it will be extremely difficult to penetrate the prison. Remember, the only reason we're taking this route is because it reduces the chances of Darvy learning that we're here."

"How long do you think it'll be until they're found?" Albus asked him, unable to remove his eyes from Fairhart's hastily healed wound. He had been slashed in such a way that his entire arm seemed useless; it was dangling aimlessly, the gleam of the silver ring on his hand barely visible.

"Until someone else patrolling finds them. We should have a few hours, probably, and I aim to be in Azkaban by that point. Once inside the prison, it will be extremely difficult to remain undetected, but thankfully, we should have an escape of sorts planned by then."

"We'll have my dad" Albus said plainly, and Fairhart nodded. Even as he did it he winced in pain, his grip on his shoulder tightening.

"That's a curse wound!" Albus blurted out, remembering when his leg had been slashed by a Silhouette two years ago. He remembered the pain, but also knew that his gash had been healed relatively soon, and effectively as well. What would happen to Fairhart?

"I figured that much" Fairhart said, cringing from pain once more. "Certainly feels like it."

"What will happen to you?" Albus asked childishly, worry rising in the pit of his stomach.

Fairhart shrugged, a twisted smile forming on his face. "Curse wounds vary by what caused them. Usually, though, there will be some sort of deadly toxin involved, or a poisoning of the blood. Hopefully I healed it up before anything too bad happened. Typically, as I'm sure you know, an extremely complicated potion would serve to aid the damage best, but sometimes healing charms will do the trick as well, provided it's attended to quick enough."

"Well once you're off this island you can get the help you need" Albus said confidently. "My dad will make sure of it."

Fairhart's twisted smile fell for a moment, but returned so quickly that it appeared as though it had never left. He instead looked away, appearing as though he was unwilling to make eye contact.

"Right" he said briskly. "When I'm off the island..."

Albus nodded. "How's your eyes?"he asked.

"They hurt" Fairhart answered him at once, blinking them vigorously. "But my sight is coming back, as anticipated. It's somewhat blurry...but there shouldn't be too much to look out for up ahead. But let's go now, we can't afford to dawdle."

He watched as Fairhart went to take the lead, but ultimately, it was Albus who led the way. Fairhart seemed to be a bit disoriented from blood loss, and as they had a clear destination ahead, it was easy for Albus to go first. He called back encouragements as they walked, none of which Fairhart really responded to, but beyond that he felt his heart sink. Every time he looked back Fairhart looked even weaker than he did the previous glance, and only when he realized that Fairhart had stopped wiping his footprints did he realize something.

He was going to have to take the reigns from here on out. It was time that he started using some of the training that Fairhart had given him.

They kept their pace up for several minutes, cracks of light leading the way; they appeared to be moving in the afternoon. Albus was fairly certain that the rain would start up again soon, but he appreciated the brief warmth of the sunlight, which, coupled with the plain, dirt path ahead of him, served to be the absolute highlight of their venture on the island so far. He forced all thoughts of Chimaeras and Boggarts and Necrosteeds out of his head as he kept his gaze focused on the clear view of the looming prison, often commenting to Fairhart that it looked closer and closer every second. He was just pointing out that it seemed like the enchantments surrounding the trail were holding up fine when Fairhart called out crisply from behind him.

"Why don't you just sing me a song?" he said loudly and sarcastically, and Albus slowed down and turned as he answered.

"I'm just trying to stay positive" he said firmly.

Fairhart gave him a warm, apologetic smile.

"I know, Albus. But I don't want you thinking that you need cheer me up. My reduced mobility is the product of both pain and careful conservation of energy. When my eyes feel a bit better, I will be able to focus more. And when push comes to shove, I will be able to perform."

"What about your arm?" Albus asked him grimly.

"I've only just healed it, Albus" Fairhart said lightly. "Give it some time, and give me time to adjust. Believe it or not, I have been this injured before."

Albus said nothing, but he stopped with the optimistic comments. It was instead a mostly silent trek along the innocent path, and the lack of danger made Albus realize, quite bitterly, that they could have-and indeed, almost had-started their movement on this trail. It was only because they'd expected the Dark Alliance to be monitoring the trail that they'd even bothered progressing through the hazards of the island instead.

Albus grimaced at the thought, realizing that it would have been impossible for anyone-even someone as intuitive as Fairhart-to realize the exact layout of the island as Darvy had orchestrated it. For all of the advantages that Darvy had, Albus despised perhaps none more than his unpredictability. There was no telling exactly what this trail would bring, or the way in which their encounter with the graveyard would turn out, and Albus kept this in mind as they progressed forward slowly.

He wasn't entirely sure how long of a walk they had ahead of them, but as the scenery barely changed apart from the size of Azkaban, it was extremely difficult to discern just how much progress they were making. He kept his eyes on both sides of the trail, the invisible barrier allowing him to peer into the edges of the vegetation. He didn't catch sight of any creatures, but one thing that he did notice was that, the further along he went, the more decayed the plant life began to look. Certain shrubs and other forms of plant life had a grayish tinge to them, as though infected with something, and in some cases entire patches of flora looked brown and shriveled, as though they'd all died in the same way.

"Are you seeing this?" Albus asked, looking behind him.

"Seeing what?" Fairhart asked him, stumbling along at a sluggish gait.

"Nothing...never mind..."

They kept at the same pace, Albus a few feet ahead for the entire time. They both began to slow as Azkaban started to grow uncomfortably larger, the triangular peak of it almost invisible amidst the clouds. An ominous stillness entered the air as he and Fairhart glanced up at the prison, realizing that, if the trail did indeed lead to the graveyard, it would be coming up soon...

And sure enough, it slowly was. The first thing that Albus got a view of was the enchantment around it; high and glinting in the light, looking as though no spell could possibly even come close to penetrating it. But as the wall of magic was nearly invisible, the contents of the graveyard came into focus as well, and what Albus saw made him stop dead in his tracks.

Seeing the army with his own two eyes was much worse than having seen it in someone else's memories. Hundreds of Silhouettes were walking around slowly in the distance, their thin legs moving them along automatically, their skeletal, slimy bodies bumping into one another randomly, the bits of skin sometimes rubbing off onto each other, their skull heads staring blankly ahead without immediate purpose. For every twenty or so Silhouettes a gigantic Necrosteed could be seen, trotting along at its own lazy pace, its fiery mane shimmering along while it walked.

Albus swallowed, trying to do a very important calculation in his head. About how many Chimaeras would it take to defeat an army like this?

"Keep moving Albus" came Fairhart's voice from next to him, and he realized that Fairhart was now standing upright instead of slouching on his feet. Both of his eyes were open as well, though they were still squinted. He'd made very little progress with his shoulder, however. He was still clutching it tightly.

"About- about how close do you think we can get?" Albus murmured, his voice coming off as almost casual.

"I will tell you when the enchantments begin" Fairhart said calmly. "But try not to be so frightened. I understand that the array of creatures is intimidating, but that looks like an extremely powerful barrier around it. We should be able to pass by without anything happening."

Albus nodded his head, and together they walked forward, taking in more and more of the graveyard as they went. What Albus first saw as nothing more than a plethora of ferocious creatures was actually starting to present what it was advertised as. Sloppily crafted headstones littered the dirt and gravel, many of them looking as though they were incomplete, few of them with words or markings of any kind. Usually he could only catch sight of mounds of dirt, indications of bodies buried underneath shallowly, and the worst part was that this scene seemed to stretch back endlessly. Even compared to the massive prison that it was connected to, the graveyard proved to be expansive, its dreariness overtaking the scene from anywhere that you looked at it from.

"I can't believe that so many people are buried here" Albus commented lowly.

"Azkaban is a very old prison, Albus" Fairhart said from next to him. "As you can imagine, the amount of prisoners with no one to bother caring for them after death has accumulated over time. Stick close now," he added, "we are very close to where the enchantments begin."

Albus didn't need to be told this. He was about twenty feet away from where it looked like the graveyard began, and yet, he could feel a powerful vibration under his feet, and was hearing a loud buzzing as well. He was sure that the Supersensory Charm from before had worn off at this point as well, which made him realize even more just how powerful the actual barrier was.

"This enchantment was made by the Ministry, right?" Albus asked, fairly certain that Darvy couldn't have made it himself.

"Oh yes" Fairhart answered him. "The entrance and exit to Azkaban is undoubtedly within the graveyard. With the Dementors gone, the Ministry would have thus put the most effort into placing enchantments here, as escaping prisoners would be unable to progress further, and would also be unable to injure themselves on the rest of the island. Darvy is tactfully using this graveyard as a place to build his army instead, with the enchantments used to encapsulate them. Though when first storming the island the occasional Silhouette may have gotten loose and turned feral on the island, it seems as though his army is for the most part intact, doesn't it?"

Albus nodded grimly as he walked by. Something that Fairhart had said had caught his attention though.

"You- you said that you think that the entrance to Azkaban is in the graveyard? So does that mean that-"

"I don't think we'll have to break through the enchantment Albus, or subject ourselves to the extremely difficult task of surviving his entire army. My guess is that the entrance to Azkaban has been expanded since Darvy got here. Remember, the prison itself serves as his base, and his henchman need to be able to leave and enter it without being torn to shreds. I don't know whether you managed to get a look when delving into the mind of the Dark Alliance member that I interrogated, but I saw a rather large opening in the prison, one apparently not confined by magic. My guess is that Darvy blew up an entrance to serve as easy access for his followers. It will definitely be close to the graveyard, but I don't think that it will be quite in it."

Albus nodded, feeling slightly more comfortable. He tried to avoid peering into the graveyard as well, as the sight of the roaming monsters served to unnerve him greatly each time.

"So this trail was pretty safe after all then" Albus said lightly, trying but failing to keep the relief in his voice at a minimum.

Fairhart gave him a pensive look however, and Albus could see that he was now capable of opening his eyes fully. The pink around them had gotten lighter as well.

"So far, yes" he said. "But remember, Darvy is expecting an invasion by the United Ministry at any moment. Though he plans on unleashing his army on them, he may have arranged for other security measures, possibly even something from the island. We'll have to stay alert, only lessening our vigilance when we have actually infiltrated the prison."

Albus nodded, then, almost subconsciously, glanced in the direction of the field of Silhouettes. Walking by it almost passively, he thought that he may have made eye contact with one, but it didn't seem to register it.

"Can they see us?" he asked randomly.

"Good question" Fairhart said. "I don't believe so; the graveyard is probably bewitched so that it can be peered in to, but not out of. This too works in Darvy's favor. He could keep an eye on his army as it grows, and his creatures are also unlikely to get rattled by anything else on the island. He really does have an exceptional place to breed his army, there's no denying it."

Albus frowned, more questions popping into his head as they walked by, the buzzing still in his ears and the vibrations still under his feet.

"Do you think that the Executioner's Veil is in there?" he asked.

"Maybe" Fairhart said genuinely. "Or, at the very least, it's probably somewhere close by. But we'll worry about Darvy's objects once we free your father. And even then, like I've said, I'd like us to focus on the Foulest Book first."

Albus nodded in understanding, still finding it difficult to take his eyes off of the graveyard. It was laid out on his right, and he knew from the brief glimpse of the entrance that he'd seen that it was on the left of the prison that they were supposed to enter, meaning that they were thus far on the right track.

To purposefully distract himself from the disgusting, grazing creatures, he analyzed the prison as they neared it. The size of Azkaban was what made it so immediately formidable, but on closer inspection, Albus thought that the drab, simple design contributed just as much. The one massive wall that he was heading towards was the same solid dark grey wherever he looked, comprised of rectangular slabs of concrete that were all the exact same size, blended into one another seamlessly. Though the architecture was undoubtedly well thought out in terms of sturdiness, it didn't appear as though much effort had went into the aesthetics of it, which, Albus reflected, was probably intentional. Hadn't Fairhart commented earlier that Azkaban was largely a place of psychological imprisonment as well? One look at the gigantic, plain-yet-sullen structure would probably make a new prisoner abandon all hopes of freedom immediately.

"We should be coming up on the opening soon" Fairhart commented from next to him, blinking furiously.

"Right" Albus said, nodding in determination.

They continued going forward, but Fairhart eventually held out a hand to stop him.

"The trail ends here" he said, and when Albus looked around, he realized that the dirt path had indeed ended. They were back to walking through small patches of plant life, the graveyard directly to his right, the dangers of the island to his left. Without even noticing, he'd treaded back into dangerous ground.

He watched as Fairhart made a few complicated movements with his wand, and Albus gave an inward sigh of relief when he saw that the wand movements didn't seem troubled or marred in any way.

"Okay," Fairhart said, looking at him, "we must now rekindle the awareness that we had before. We are officially back in the open. Let's press forward, but do so slowly."

"Got it" Albus said, and he raised his wand fiercely, as though expecting an attack to occur at that very moment. Fairhart gave him a weak, proud smile, and together the two of them walked forward with assiduity.

"Careful to avoid the enchantment around the graveyard, Albus" Fairhart said, and Albus jumped slightly, realizing that he was standing much closer to it than necessary.

"Sorry" he said at once. "Would- would like an alarm have went off or something?"

"Unlikely" Fairhart told him. "Darvy's creations most likely meet the barrier frequently, I can't imagine him being alerted to it every time. What I can imagine, however, is something extremely painful happening. Remember, this enchantment was put up for prisoners hoping to escape. The reason no one has escaped Azkaban since the departure of the Dementors is not because they keep getting caught; it is because the extreme few who do manage to make it this far send powerful messages to those pondering escape themselves. Azkaban is not a place for those who committed misdemeanors, Albus. It is a place for the worst of society; the Ministry has no qualms with inflicting pain upon them, should it occur during an escape attempt."

Albus nodded, making a mental note of this. He wondered just how many people had gotten to the graveyard before; certainly not many, but of those who did, had any managed to even go further? That's what they would be attempting to do once their business in the prison was done. Albus had the terrible feeling that leaving would be an entirely different ordeal from what they were doing now.

"This is interesting" came Fairhart's voice from thin air, and Albus saw that he'd stopped to crouch down and examine something.

"Wha- oh" Albus said, seeing what it was that he was inspecting. He was holding a cluster of dead flowers in his hand, and Albus saw, when looking around, that a considerable chunk of plant life was resembling them as well. "I saw that earlier" he said. "I tried pointing it out to you-"

"Keep your eyes peeled for movement" Fairhart said sharply, rising to his feet and holding out his own wand in an offensive position.

Albus mirrored him, his own wand drawn identically. "Do you- do you think that those creatures are responsible for that? Maybe those birds we saw-"

"Perhaps" Fairhart cut him off, though he didn't appear to be paying much attention to what Albus was saying. "But there are other-"

He stopped at once, and Albus raised his wand. He had heard it too. Glaring into the dense shrubbery just by the wall of the prison, he saw slight signs of movement. He was too far away to make out from what the movement was from exactly, but he thought of the Boggart at once, and beyond that, the Chimaera. His experiences on the island thus far had told him to be prepared for anything.

"I saw movement" Albus said, his voice low. "Over by-"

"I saw it too" Fairhart said, his wand pointed in that general direction. "Don't lower your guard- *Avada Kedavra!*"

Albus' eyes opened in shock as the streak of green light erupted from Fairhart's wand, flying into the clump of dark bushes and setting a tree behind them on fire. Albus heard a cat-like growl, and at the next moment, whatever had dodged the curse emerged from the dense undergrowth, its position no longer crouched as though it were stalking prey. Albus' jaw dropped.

It was big; bigger than the Chimaera even. Like that beast, this one stood on all fours, but it did so with a greater sense of balance and poise. It resembled an extremely overgrown leopard, its large body a mustard yellow, but covered in muggy black spots. Positioned correctly, it towered over the two of them, and when it ran at them, Albus couldn't help but be astounded by its agility.

"Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!"

The green bolts flying from Fairhart's wand were well aimed, but ultimately unsuccessful. To say that the creature was exceptionally nimble would be a powerful understatement. It dodged each streak of emerald a second before it would hit, and when it leapt in the air it did so with so much grace and power that it seemed to hover momentarily.

"*Confringo!*" Albus blurted out, whipping his wand upwards. Unable to dodge in mid-air, the feline creature was blasted back through the air and into another clump of bushes, where it landed on its feet perfectly.

Albus watched as it snarled threateningly, and at the next moment, the once healthy green foliage near its mouth sagged down, turning brown with decay. The creature's breath appeared to carry disease with it.

"Stay away from its mouth!" Fairhart called to him uselessly; Albus had realized that long before he'd seen its breath.

The creature crouched low into the undergrowth, disappearing from sight in an instant; it was extremely good at moving silently, despite its size. But Albus was not focused on finding the shape of it; he'd already realized that there was a different way to track its movement.

"Look at the plants!" he bellowed, no longer caring to be discreet.

Though he was unable to see the prowling beast, he could detect its whereabouts by the life around it. Over to his left a shrub collapsed in a brown heap. A few more feet away another did as well. Then it proceeded backwards-

He heard a whipping noise, and the movement picked up. The gigantic creature leapt from its hiding point once more, and this time Fairhart and Albus both raised their wands into the air. The beast was too fast though; it had landed on the floor between them while their curses were still streaking through the air. It snarled once more and swiftly turned around, and Albus watched its massive paw take a swipe-

He ducked just in time to avoid what he was sure was decapitation. Fairhart seemed unwilling to fire a Killing Curse, lest it hit him instead, but he whipped his wand around expertly to conjure fire, which trailed itself like a whip from the tip of his wand, intent on frightening the creature away-

It didn't work. The beast ran into the fire, leaping again through it and extending its claws. Fairhart ducked just in time as well, then, while backing up, fired a silver spell that hit it in the face. It whelped in agony, thrashing around, its claws striking the air while its corrosive breath made Fairhart stagger back, coughing.

"No!" Albus yelled, realized that Fairhart couldn't see the slashing through the mixture of toxic haze and fire. He couldn't risk firing a spell either, he'd have to take a more physical approach-

Albus ran forward at the creature, which was still snapping and slashing away from him. He jumped into the air-

And landed firmly on the back of the beast. He realized how foolish it was the second that he'd done it, but he couldn't reflect on that now, not when he needed to clutch at the creature's fur

tightly to prevent himself from falling off and being trampled by it. He saw a purple curse whiz by his head and he realized that Fairhart was not aware that he was on top of the dangerous quadruped.

"Stop! I'm on it!"

The creature bucked, apparently just now realizing this fact itself. It turned away from the whirlwind of flames, Albus still attached to its back, his arms thrown around its long, furry neck. He was dangerously close to its mouth-

He needed a muzzle of sorts. For a single, outrageous moment he wondered if he could sloppily create one from things in the area, before he realized that he had, in fact, attended a wizarding school for more than five years. And he'd learned conjuring there, even if he'd never been good at it...

He saw Fairhart emerge from the flames, his wand lowering in surprise when he saw Albus atop the very monster that they were trying to subdue. Albus didn't pay much attention to his face though, he was too busy trying to concentrate, as difficult as it was while atop a rampaging feline-

He waved his wand over the head of snapping beast, and to both his surprise and relief an iron muzzle appeared from thin air around the beast's entire face, preventing its mouth from opening at all. Its nose and eyes were still quite visible however, and Albus saw these eyes, while upside down, widen in rage as it thrashed around even more violently than before.

Fairhart ran towards the creature, looking prepared to leap onto it himself. An unpredictable, sharp turn sent one of its front paws smashing into his face though, and he flew back several feet, landing just inches away from the enchantment around the graveyard-

Albus felt his heartbeat quicken as a solution entered his head. The creature was now thrashing around on two legs, standing upright every other second in an attempt to send him flying. He gave it its wish. Just as it was coming back down he relinquished his grip, being thrust forward sharply just as he'd expected. The vertiginous action didn't deter him from attacking though. Landing just underneath the beast, he aimed his wand upwards at its white underbelly.

"*Confringo!*" he shouted, and the Blasting Curse sent it flying backward, where it collided with a thick tree trunk. He felt pain rush through his chest at the same time though. One of the beast's back paws had briefly dug across his front while it was knocked back from him.

It recovered at once; their spells were doing nothing to harm it. Albus had counted on this though. He ran over to Fairhart, who was still trying to get on his feet, the normal side of his face already swelling up from the blow. They were just inches from the shimmering barrier that separated them from Darvy's army.

"Just stay still" Albus said, clutching his robes to hold him steady. "And when I tell you to, dive away!"

Fairhart looked at him, a small trail of blood leaking from his bottom lip.

"Just trust me" Albus said to him darkly, returning his attention to the leopard-like creature, which was already back on all fours and was leering at them viciously, unable to vocalize its aggression. It walked forward at first, slowly picking up speed-

It broke into a brisk pace, heading right for them. Albus kept his hand clutched tightly around Fairhart's robes while it happened, and then-

"Now!" he said, and Fairhart flung himself to the ground and out of the way.

Albus did the same, pointing his wand right at the ground where the monster was about to be-

"Terrakinisio!" he shouted, and a dark, moss colored spell shot from his wand at the ground. Less than a second later their pursuer landed on the patch of ground, which began to shake powerfully. Albus kept his body flat on the floor, while the creature danced around, unable to maintain its balance, eventually colliding with the shimmery wall that separated them from the graveyard.

There was a loud and explosive noise, and the next thing that Albus knew the creature had been thrown backward with much more velocity than what his Blasting Curse had done. It skidded along the dirt forcefully, unmoving and smoking, rendered completely immobile.

Albus felt relief coarse through him. Slowly, he brought himself to his feet, a shooting pain going through his chest. He grabbed at his shirt and felt warm blood, then looked down to see that his shirt had been ripped. A series of holes had appeared in it, droplets of dark red trickling from them, but it didn't appear to be too deep; he could walk anyway.

He cast a sideways glance at Fairhart, who was getting to his feet as well. Together, they walked over to the hulking, spotted fiend, which was now starting to shake slightly, indicating that it was definitely still alive. As they neared it Albus saw that the muzzle he'd conjured had been blown to bits by the force of the enchantment, and thus, the creature was free to breathe easily. It looked completely subdued however, laying there on its side in a spread out way, light steam coming from its fur, which was standing up slightly.

"Still alive" Fairhart said, wiping the blood from his mouth.

"But not doing anything" Albus said. "How's your face?"

Fairhart turned to him, and he got a full good look at it. The bit of blood by his mouth was the least of his problems. The right side of his face, though still not quite as grotesque as his left, was

certainly on its way. It was large and puffy, the light rings of pink around his eyes still visible as well.

"It's been better" he answered him dryly. "Let's get moving though..."

Neither of them spared another glance for the creature, though silently, Albus hoped that sparing it wouldn't come back to hurt them; it seemed unlikely though, whatever they'd just fought didn't seem like it would be able to attack for quite a bit.

Side by side they walked, not speaking at all. Albus had his hand pressed to his chest, Fairhart's to his face. They both inched their way over to the giant wall of the prison slowly, neither of them taking the lead this time.

After a few moments like this, Albus finally decided to speak.

"What was-"

"That was a Nundu" Fairhart answered him before he could even ask. "Native to East Africa, I believe. Again, you can see that the Ministry put a lot of work into ensuring that this place was as impenetrable as possible."

"Do you think that Darvy had that thing- that- the Nundu- guarding the prison?"

"I highly doubt that Darvy could control the creature, but he most likely did know of its existence, and probably did nothing to keep it away from the prison. Part of him probably counted on it serving as an additional protection of sorts. Nundus may not be territorial like Chimaeras, but they are attracted to anything moving, and his budding army most likely constantly attracts its attention. Nundus are also extremely rare however; I think that we have managed to get by the only one on the island."

Albus nodded, though he said nothing. At that very moment they'd become so close to the wall that Albus could make out an aberration in the appearance of the prison. Just a few feet to the left of the shimmering wall that housed Darvy's army, a massive hole was visible.

"We're there!" Albus breathed.

Still moving along somewhat feebly, they approached the hole in the wall only a few seconds later. Albus glanced upward and saw the prison for the vertical structure that it was; it extended well into the clouds. He placed his hand against the solid stone and felt the cold dust rub off on his fingers immediately.

"Azkaban" he said lowly, marveling at it.

"Yes" Fairhart said, his voice sounding distant. "Everything that we seek is through this opening, Albus. If you'll do the honors" he added, holding out his hand to allow him to go first.

Albus swallowed, a powerful chill going through him. He couldn't quite explain why, but as he walked through the opening and into the darkness, a feeling of dread flooded through him. Though he knew that Azkaban itself could hardly be more dangerous than the island that housed it, there was something much more personal about it. He was now officially in the same building as his father; the same building as Darvy.

Fairhart followed after him, his wand igniting at once with light. Albus did the same, and the twin beads of light danced around the area, revealing the room that they were in.

It was dusty and cluttered. Parts of what looked like old wooden chairs were littered around rubble; part of the room had caved in. A scorched desk was overturned against the wall as well, and Albus realized at once that there had been a struggle; this was the first place that Darvy had attacked. He felt suspense wash over him as he traced his wandlight across the ground. Sure enough, he saw a human hand protruding from bits of the concrete.

"You're bleeding."

Albus jumped as Fairhart turned to him, his wand pointed at his ripped shirt.

"Oh! It's not a big deal-"

But Fairhart had already started tracing his wand across the lacerations. Albus felt warmth over the area at once, and a most unusual sensation followed it; he felt the skin magically regrow over it.

"Thanks" he said, and Fairhart nodded in acknowledgement. Albus saw that he hadn't cleaned the small amount of blood from his own face, however, and he also noticed that the wound on his shoulder looked no better-though thankfully, no worse either-than it had back when they were walking along the trail.

"So what do we do from here?" Albus asked him quietly, still moving his wand across the ground. He turned and saw that, in the few moments since they'd entered the prison, it had started to darken slightly outside.

"First we take pride in ourselves, Albus" Fairhart said seriously. "We are, after all, the first two people to successfully infiltrate Azkaban since the new security measures were implemented, to my knowledge at least. Aside from Darvy, that is, but that hardly counts, considering what he had at his disposal..."

"Guess that says a lot about the Ministry" Albus said coldly.

"Or a lot about us" Fairhart said, the light from his wand revealing a smile that made his damaged face look absolutely repulsive. "You are doing extraordinary, Albus. I'm starting to feel like I'm slowing *you* down now."

Albus felt his cheeks burn red.

"Well...I'm still glad I brought you along" he joked, and Fairhart chortled for a moment.

"Come on" he said with a grin, walking forward. "We still have much to do."

Fairhart took the lead again, though it was only slightly. They walked through the darkness with diligence, the atmosphere wiping the smiles from their faces after only a moment. Together the light from their wands danced around the dirty, stone walls and onto the wreckage on the floor, and it wasn't until they found themselves in a narrow corridor that Albus realized that they had left the room that served as an entrance.

He knew at once that it would be easy to get lost. The thin passageway was virtually identical everywhere that his wandlight showed, with the concrete walls thick with dirt and decay. Their footsteps were padded softly from the thick coating of dust on the floor, and Albus had the strange feeling that, for the first time, Fairhart didn't know where they were going. He was simply leading him forward.

"I guess we should find...stairs?" Albus asked quietly.

"I agree" Fairhart said, his tone equally low. "But sadly, I'm not entirely sure where we are. We are definitely at ground level, but I also have the feeling that we're not quite at the bottom of the prison."

"You mean like- like there's a basement under us?"

"Exactly" Fairhart replied crisply.

"Where do you think my dad-"

"Your dad, like the rest of the prisoners here, is in a cell, and I'm fairly certain that there are floors full of them above us. So yes, we will be heading up first."

"Where do you think Darvy is?" Albus asked nervously.

"That's why I'm moving cautiously" Fairhart said. "He is probably with or near the Veil, and I don't know whether or not he'd be closer to the top of the prison, or bunked up in the bottom."

He kept to a halt as soon as he said this, and Albus could just make out why by the beads of light. They had reached stairs; two sets of them. Grey and chipped and covered with dust and dirt like everything else in the prison, one set led downwards steeply into an eerie darkness, the set right next to it leading upward.

"Should- should we split up?" Albus asked, remembering what they'd done briefly while on the island.

"I'd rather we stick together" Fairhart said, peering downward into the darkness from the first set of stairs. "There is no doubt in my mind that there are Dark Alliance members within the prison, and if they are alerted to our presence, I'd rather we be together to fight them off."

Albus nodded, waiting for Fairhart to make a decision as to which route for them to take. After a moment, he began sidling up the latter staircase, heading upwards towards the next floor. Albus followed after him with his wand held high to provide light.

It ended up being among the longest stairwells that Albus had ever walked, and that was saying something, considering the stairs at Hogwarts. Every time they reached a small platform they were forced to turn and go up another set. After a few minutes, Albus wondered vaguely just how high they were in the prison. Finally, right when his legs were starting to grow restless from their cramped movement, they came to an iron door, held slightly ajar. Cracks of light were seeping through it.

They both extinguished their wands nonverbally, and then, slowly, Fairhart pushed the door open. It gave a metallic creak as they walked through, and Albus felt a wave of nostalgia overtake him.

They were standing in yet another corridor, but this one was wider, as it was occupied by cells. On both sides of the dirty, musty floor cells were lined up, hardly spacious and far from lavish. Through the bars of each Albus could see only grey beds and sheets, scraps of newspaper and sometimes, the occasional personal trinket, like a grimy picture frame or a small mouth organ.

Albus had been in a corridor like this one before, but it had been in a memory. About three years ago he'd used Fairhart's Pensieve to view a memory of his father walking through Azkaban, and the walkway then had been very similar to the one that Albus was standing in now. One of the few main differences between them was that in the memory, the cells had been filled, lively yells of anger coming from them at every moment. Here, they all appeared to be ominously vacant.

"Where are all the prisoners?" Albus asked, and he realized that the cracks of light were coming from the end of the room, where, right next to another door was a barred window with moonlight sliding through.

"That's a very good question" Fairhart said, sounding very intrigued himself. Side by side they walked through the passage, peering into empty cells as they did so. It was Albus who noticed it first.

"There's blood on some of these walls!" he hissed, staring at a dark patch of red on the wall of a cell.

"There must have been a struggle of some sort" Fairhart said, walking by them slowly. "And Albus...they're not all empty."

Albus hurried over to where Fairhart was, and he saw that one cell in particular was indeed occupied.

By a dead, rotting body.

Albus felt ice water shower over him as he saw the twisted corpse, its eyes still open as it lay huddled on the dirty floor.

"What-"

"Starvation, most likely" Fairhart said softly. "Darvy probably has little reason to provide sustenance for his prisoners. My guess Albus, is that the whereabouts of the prisoners can be separated into a few different categories. Those cells without signs of struggle belong to those who joined Darvy as soon as he arrived; remember, Darvy did not bring many of his followers here with him, and thus needed to replenish his human servants. Those who didn't wish to join him...well that is most likely their blood on the walls, to say the least."

"And the- the guy on the ground-"

"I'm not sure, Albus" Fairhart told him truthfully. "But there must be some reason why certain prisoners were taken away and others weren't. Whatever the case, we should push the mystery from our thoughts; it is irrelevant. We need to find your father."

Albus stared down at the lifeless lump of flesh on the floor, and Fairhart seemed to realize what he was thinking at once.

"Your father will not have been in those categories" he said. "Remember, he has important information, and as smart as he is, he is undoubtedly making it necessary that Darvy keep him alive. Now let's go...we have several floors to work through."

Albus nodded, following along after him as he went through another iron door, which led to even more cells. These were identical to the former ones; blood smeared in some of them, but not in others. There were no bodies though, and at the end of the corridor they found more stone steps to go up, which brought them, predictably, to another iron door.

Fairhart opened it forcefully, moonlight pouring in-

They heard moaning; soft groans of anguish and discomfort that made Albus raise his wand at once. This was hardly necessary though. None of those making sounds appeared to be capable of doing anything other than what they were already doing.

The cells lining this corridor, though the same in appearance as those on the floor below, were different in that some of them were occupied by living individuals. For every two empty spaces it seemed, there was one with a prisoner in grey, ragged robes, laying on their bed or on the

floor, a dreary, hopeless expression playing on their thin, gaunt faces. None of them seemed to notice that they had visitors.

"Check that side" Fairhart said, nodding to his left and striding forward to peer into the cells on the right.

Albus nodded, doing the same on the cells to the left. He kept his eyes peeled for anything that could indicate his father; raven black hair, or a lightning bolt scar even, but every prisoner that he looked at didn't fit the description. He reached the last cell on his side with a feeling of restlessness, and he pressed his face into the bars for a quick glance-

He gasped. He recognized the man in the cell, but it was not his father. He'd known that there was a chance that they'd encounter this man while here, but seeing him through bars, laying flat on a grey bed with a blank expression on his face, was as far as possible from what he'd expected.

"San- San come here!" he cried out, staring into the cell with his eyes wide open.

A blank, bored face lifted itself up to stare back, the tired eyes squinting through bland, dull brown hair hanging loosely in front of them.

Fango Wilde was looking at him.

Chapter 27: Reunions

Albus heard muffled footsteps behind him.

"What? Did you find-"

But Fairhart broke off when he saw the contents of the cell. Wilde, who had been peering through the bars in some sort of stupor, widened his eyes in shock at what he was seeing, and then, in a swift movement, rolled himself off of the bed and stood up in a hunched over manner.

"San- San- Sancticus..." he stammered out, and Albus noticed that he sounded parched.

He looked up at the scarred man next to him, and saw that Fairhart's face-mangled from both previous events and his time on the island-was as blank as he'd ever seen it. It was expressionless; impossible to read. Albus tried sorting out his thoughts accordingly, attempting to figure out just what was going on, but Wilde had started to speak again, this time, while backing himself up into the corner of his cell.

"I- I- I- I thought that- I thought- I thought you were dead-"

"Oh you'd of known if I was dead," Fairhart shot out crisply, moving forward and pressing his face into the bars of the cell menacingly, "because I'd of made sure you were right there with me..."

"What are you doing here?" Albus asked Wilde, trying to control the situation somewhat; the spite in Fairhart's voice, and the fear in Wilde's, told him that he was going to be the only one thinking straight. Realizing that he was addressing an enemy though, he still raised his wand.

Wilde flinched dramatically, his tangled, dirty brown hair flopping in front of his sunken face.

"I- I am on your side!" he cried out desperately.

"What are you doing here!" Fairhart roared, raising his own wand now, and Wilde actually slid down the wall and put himself in a cradled position.

"I betrayed Death's Right Hand!" he cried out.

"Big surprise" Fairhart spat sarcastically. "Step aside, Albus" he added, pushing him away slightly and taking aim between the bars.

"Albus!" Wilde cried out in a raspy voice, turning to look at him. "Albus! He's going to kill me! Don't let- your father wouldn't- don't-"

"*Avada-*"

"No!" Albus yelled, and he forced Fairhart's arm downward.

"What are you-"

"Just calm down!" Albus said restlessly, panting heavily at the severity of the moment. Some of the other prisoners in the row were stirring and making feeble noises, apparently now aware that something was going on.

"*Calm down?*" Fairhart asked, his mouth hanging open in surprise.

"Just let me find out what's going on here!" Albus cried out, and he turned back to the cowering, pathetic figure of Wilde.

"You said you betrayed Darvy?" he asked. "How?"

"I gave information to Waddlesworth-"

Fairhart let loose a hollow, derisive laugh.

"*Our* side, Fango?" he spat out bitterly. "You think that Warren Waddlesworth is on *our side*?"

"He's against Death's Right Hand!" Wilde cried out. "I- I fed him information that I thought would help him defeat the Dark Alliance. When they found out they imprisoned me here-"

"Why not just kill you?" Albus asked, looking for potential inconsistencies in his story. "Why didn't Darvy just-"

"He needed my help!" he shouted pitifully. "To get here and navigate the island. I don't know exactly where the Apparition points are, but I knew where the safe Ministry trail was, and I knew every other potential point of entrance on the island. I was head of the Department for Magical Tran-"

"I know what you were" Albus said darkly. But before he could continue any further, Fairhart had already moved him away again.

"Albus, we're wasting time" he said callously, his face contorted with hatred. He raised his wand again. "I'll kill Wilde quickly, and then we'll resume looking for your father-"

"Wait-"

"You won't find him!" Wilde spat out, his eyes now as wide as humanly possible, his entire body shaking as he looked at Fairhart's wand. "You're looking for your father, you say?" he asked, turning his attention briefly to Albus.

Albus held out his hand to stop Fairhart, his eyes narrowing as he peered into Wilde's cell.

"What are you on about?" he said.

"Your father is not in a regular cell" Wilde said, shaking his head. "And he's nowhere close to here, I can promise you that-

"And how would you know that?" Fairhart said icily, his wand still half-raised.

"Because I used to be kept in the same place" he said, cringing. "Death's Right Hand needed anyone who was part of the Ministry to feed him information, and that included the two of us. We were only just recently separated. But I still know the way! And I'm the only that can lead you there!" he added, sounding, for the first time, as though he was in control of the situation.

Albus stayed quiet, soaking in this information. Everything checked out; all that Wilde was doing was corroborating what Fairhart had been saying this entire time, that Darvy was using his father for information. Fairhart had also been saying the same thing of Wilde, although, of course, they'd been assuming that Wilde was an active member of the Dark Alliance, rather than a traitor being kept just barely alive in order to provide information...

He looked between the two men who were staring at one another, a cold, hardened look on Fairhart's face, a petrified one on Wilde's. There was no denying that Fairhart wanted to murder the man in the cell; he'd even said so before, hadn't he? But if Wilde was telling the truth...if he was in fact the only one who could lead them to his father...

"You need me!" Wilde chimed through the bars, sounding very much like he was well aware that he was bargaining for his life.

Albus gave him an angry stare, then grabbed at Fairhart's robes.

"Come here for a second" he said, and he attempted to lead Fairhart a few feet away and out of earshot from Wilde; it was a difficult task, however. Fairhart was looking into the cell with ardent dislike, apparently having already made up his mind as to how the situation was going to play out.

Fairhart did follow him after a moment though, and the two turned to face each other as soon as they were sure that Wilde couldn't hear them.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Albus asked at once.

"No" Fairhart replied automatically.

"Can't you just use Legili-

"Wilde is an adept Occlumens" Fairhart cut him off bitterly, as if he hated admitting it. "He has developed the skill over time, his predilection for keeping secrets no doubt a great factor in his adequacy at it. I could attempt to penetrate his mind, but it is unlikely that I will be able to gain anything conclusive from it."

Albus tensed up slightly. "If he *is* telling the truth-"

"Albus," Fairhart said swiftly, and he placed his hand on his shoulder, "Wilde was never part of this plan. We had every intention of getting your father out of Azkaban without him; why do you suddenly think that we need his help now?"

"I'm not doubting that we can save my dad without him" Albus admitted. "But if he really does know the way, it'll make it a whole lot easier. And you said it yourself, " he added shiftily, "any help at this point is welcome."

Fairhart grimaced, looking as though he was severely regretting having said these words. He stood motionless for a second, and Albus knew exactly what was going through his head.

There may very well be nothing that Fairhart wanted more in this world than to kill Fango Wilde. No longer forced to live alongside him in a civil manner, his more barbaric instincts were most certainly to obtain recompense for what Wilde had done to him; for the scars on both his face, and those of a more personal manner. And yet, it had always been heavily implied that one of the conditions of Albus joining him on this mission was that his father came first and foremost, above even Fairhart's desire to relieve Darvy of the dangerous objects that he possessed; they'd even sped up their training specifically for this cause. Fango Wilde was a potential benefit to saving his father. And if Fairhart chose to kill him-no, *murder* him, now-he would be going back on this prerequisite.

"Fine" Fairhart said, his tone filled to the brim with ire, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief. "But if he tries anything, I will kill him-"

"-Absolutely-"

"- And once we do find your father, and have no more need for him, I kill him anyway" Fairhart added spitefully.

Albus hesitated for a moment; who was he to deny Fairhart his vengeance? He glanced over his shoulder at Wilde's cell though, watching him pace back and forth in his confined space and chew on his fingernails. Wilde was an awful person, and he had only his own treachery to thank for being in this predicament anyway. Everyone who trusted him, it seemed, ended up betrayed by him; Fairhart, the Ministry, even Darvy. But was this enough to warrant such a crass execution? Did these actions make him deserving of such a fate, of being strung along with his life dangling in front of him, forced to aid his captors until he was no longer needed, and then be simply disposed of?

"Okay" Albus said shortly, deciding to push the matter from his head; he'd work out a solution later, but right now, Fango Wilde's life was not the priority, his father's was. Fairhart seemed to take his word as an agreement of sorts.

"Well then go tell him his life is spared for now" he said bitterly.

Albus nodded, then walked back over to Wilde, trying desperately not to look into other cells as he did so; a man had started wailing randomly.

"Okay, this is what's going to happen" Albus said as he approached, putting on the most intense face that he could. "We're going to bust you out of here, and you're going to lead us straight to where my dad is."

He saw Wilde's expression soften at once. Intent on making the situation clear, however, Albus continued darkly.

"But if you try anything-"

"I have nothing to try!" Fango shouted out with a short laugh that seemed to derive from, more than anything, complacency. "Nothing! I have nowhere-"

"All the same," Albus cut him off sinisterly, "if you try anything at all-or even anything that could *resemble* something suspicious-and San will kill you. We'll fare better without you than we will if we constantly have to monitor you. Got it?"

Wilde winced, but nodded his head. Slowly, Albus pressed his face up against the bars and added to his regulations in a whisper that he didn't want Fairhart hearing.

"Listen, I'm trying to keep you alive right now" he said, and Wilde's bored, plain face turned chalk white. "But I need you to meet me half way. You *can't try anything.*"

"I understand" Wilde moaned, nodding his head.

"Good" Albus said, and he turned around. "Okay," he yelled out, "how do we-"

But Fairhart had already started marching towards him, an aggressive look on his half-scarred, half-swollen face. Albus stepped aside as Fairhart raised his wand, then watched as he made complicated movements with it. Albus understood that there must have been some form of powerful magic apart from the metal bars, as nothing visible was happening. Wilde backed himself up slightly with an uncomfortable look on his face; seeing Fairhart expertly maneuver his wand around must have been extremely threatening for him.

There was a loud, gong-like noise, and at the next second the bars to Wilde's cell had started to twist and contort themselves away, the sound of the bending iron making Albus cringe. After a few seconds of this, a gap of reasonable size had been created, and Wilde pushed his way through it eagerly. He tripped over the metal slightly as he did so, and Albus saw that his movements were feeble and void of proper coordination; Darvy had just barely been keeping him alive. With a pang in his chest, he realized that his father's health was probably along similar lines...

"Lead" Fairhart said, grabbing Wilde roughly and thrusting him to the front of their triangle. Wilde lost his balance slightly but said nothing. Albus too kept his silence; this really was not his ordeal with which to interfere.

Wilde turned to move through them, taking them to the door by his cell, rather than back the way in which they came.

"It's through here," he said, "on the other-"

Fairhart turned him around and struck him across the face with the back of his hand, hard enough to send Wilde down to his knees. Albus actually did move forward at this, completely bewildered as to why he'd just done it-

"You don't speak!" Fairhart growled hatefully. "Ever! You lead the way and you point your finger when necessary! That's it!"

"What if I see something!" Wilde squealed, clutching his face and rising up from the ground. "What if I see a Dark Alliance member coming-"

"Then you pray that Albus is willing to protect you" Fairhart said, loathing etched into every word. "Now move along!" he added, and he pushed him forward again with ferocity.

Albus held his tongue, the look of wrath on Fairhart's face enough to make him realize just how difficult this was for him. He'd come here knowing that he'd have the chance of maybe killing Wilde; he was instead being forced to trust him again.

Slowly, and looking as though he was dazed somewhat from the blow, Wilde pushed the metal door open, presenting them with, predictably, another grimy corridor lined with cells. Albus and Fairhart followed along after him as they jogged by another assortment of catatonic prisoners and walls stained with blood. Twice more they did this, the moonlight from the few scattered windows serving to illuminate the hall. Finally, they passed through a metal door that led them back into darkness, both Albus and Fairhart igniting their wands at once.

They had reached a staircase made of stone once more, and Albus realized that this was going to be all but endless. Considering the size of the prison, there were going to be rows and rows of prisoners to waft through at every turn, and as Wilde led them down a single flight of stairs, he began to wonder how he could even know in which direction they were supposed to be going-

But as they reached the concrete platform below, preparing to turn and go down more steps, Wilde came to a halt. He turned at an odd angle concealed by the darkness, and when Albus flashed his wand upon it, he saw that there was a battered, wooden door. Slowly, Wilde pushed it open-

A loud, high-pitched shriek overtook them all, bouncing off the walls and making them all plug their ears. It then stopped for a moment, but only to start up once more, as loud and obnoxious as it had been.

"What's going on!" Albus hollered over the noise, which had stopped once more, only to return a moment later.

"Caterwauling Charms!" Fairhart announced angrily, looking at Wilde with revulsion.

"I didn't know-" he started, but Fairhart had already raised his wand-

Albus pushed it down. "He didn't do it on purpose!" he barked. "And you know it! Now what do we do-"

"We move forward!" Fairhart said through bared teeth. The alarm continued as he pushed Wilde again, this time through the wooden door. They found themselves in a hall with no light, but the beams bouncing off the walls told them that it was narrow. Wilde had picked up the pace now and was leading them towards the end of it, where Fairhart's wandlight was showing another wooden door-

Which burst open. Two hooded figures stormed through it, wands raised, and Wilde dropped to the ground to avoid the onslaught of spells that would soar by him. A streak of green left Fairhart's wand, colliding with one of the figures and sending them to the ground in a huddled mess of robes. The other hooded figure had fired a lethal looking, dark red hex, but Albus had already started moving his wand in crisp, circular movements. A miniature shield of energy reflected the curse back effortlessly, where it collided with his adversary, who fell down right next to the other Dark Alliance member.

Fairhart went to force Wilde back onto his feet, but their guide had already crawled towards the men on the ground, scratching his fingers across the ground as he did so. Finally, he got what he was looking for; he had managed to remove the wand from the dead one's clutched fingers-

There was loud banging noise, followed by a sickening crunch. Wilde shouted in pain, and the light that Albus had just reignited revealed that he'd dropped the wand that he'd just picked up, grabbing his hand with his other. Fairhart was aiming his own wand downward, a murderous look on his face.

"You don't get a wand!" he roared.

"I need to be able to defend myself!" Wilde whined, the still active effects from the Caterwauling Charm unable to mask the pain in his voice.

Fairhart slashed his wand through the air. There was a flash of white light, and Wilde had been blown back to the floor, looking as though he was seeing stars.

"San stop it!" Albus called, and he actually pushed him away. "I don't care how much you hate him, this isn't helping anything!"

And he reached down and helped lift Wilde to his feet, scooping up the wand that he'd dropped as well and pocketing it for potential later use.

Fairhart gave a deep breath, but said nothing, apparently unwilling to escalate the situation. Wilde, who was now cradling his broken hand, took the lead once more and led them through the now ajar wooden door. They found themselves in a giant stone stairwell again, but this time the wandlight from Albus and Fairhart showed that they weren't alone. From the platform that they were on there were two winding sets of stairs on each side of the room, one leading up and one leading down. From the stairs below two hooded figures were making their way up, wands drawn. The same could be said for the descending stairs above them, two men storming downwards and preparing to attack.

Albus and Fairhart instinctively went back to back. Albus pointed his wand at the stairs leading up from them, adrenaline helping to calm his nerves at the thought of having two Dark Alliance members in striking distance.

"*Glisseo!*" he cried, and the stone stairs turned flat and smooth at once, creating a slide of sorts. The two Dark Alliance members gave identical yells of surprise as they slipped forward and began tumbling downward.

Albus turned and saw that Fairhart had already made quick work of the two ahead of them; one cloaked enemy was unmistakably dead, the other on his stomach, howling in pain and sporting a bloody face. Following Wilde, Albus and Fairhart started up the stairs, stepping over the bodies nonchalantly as they did so. Albus caught sight of Fairhart absent-mindedly firing a jet of green downwards as they walked, and the man stopped yelling at once.

They proceeded up two more flights of stairs, mostly feeling around in the darkness as they did so. Wilde came to yet another halt and pushed open another battered looking door, and Albus' stomach did a flip-flop as he realized what was going on.

Each large set of stairs provided access to a particular set of prisoners, and each of these doors took them into a hall that connected to a different section of the prison. How many more aisles of stairs and rows of prisoners would they have to go through before his father was found? If he was indeed in his own particular section, then surely he would be in some obscure portion of the prison that was far off the beaten path. How much longer could they keep this up?

But this wasn't the case. Wilde opened the wooden door slowly, but unlike the other one, which had led to a connecting hall, this one led to a large, stone-cut chamber, dimly lighted by floating candles and containing a row of filthy doors on each side of it. Albus watched as several of the doors were knocked open simultaneously, Dark Alliance members flooding the room

determinedly, some of them fastening red masks on their faces to present themselves in a pretentious manner-

Albus lost count at eleven of them. All that he knew was that the defenceless Fango Wilde had dropped to the floor once more, still cradling his hand. Albus moved forward boldly, making circular, defensive movements with his wand, watching as Fairhart did the same next to him. An eruption of different colored spells flew from the Dark Alliance members, and though Albus was forced to move his body slightly to dodge the emerald green ones-to literally dodge instant death-the other hexes and curses rebounded automatically, ricocheting off of the grimy, concrete walls at odd angles, occasionally hitting an unsuspecting Dark Alliance member and sending them to the floor.

Albus broke free of his circular movements when the amount of opposition thinned, taking a more offensive route. He saw Fairhart whip his wand around his head from next to him, a series of red Stunning Spells firing from it in a staccato fashion, all of them swerving in different directions and chasing down their targets, shattering their shield charms with ease. Albus fired his own Stunners, one at a time but with perfect accuracy, cleaning up the rest. Only when they were completely free from danger did he realize, with a surge of pride, that he and Fairhart had, together, just made short work of an entire group of Dark Alliance members; his training had paid off.

Wilde got to his feet, his body shaking as he stared around at the unconscious, or otherwise maimed Dark Alliance members that littered the floor. He then glanced around the large chamber with a pensive look on his face. There were about ten doors in the room in all, five on each side, each identical.

"Which one do we go through!" Fairhart barked at Wilde, who jumped.

"Give him time to remember!" Albus shouted, and inwardly, he felt a strange mixture of emotions go through him. They would not be here if not for Wilde, whose direction was proving to be quite instrumental in their navigation of the prison. Just how close they were to his father, Albus wasn't sure, but they'd left the repetition of before and were at least making progress. Joy swept over him at the prospect of being reunited with his father.

But at the same time, he wasn't sure where things would go from there. Confusion plagued him as he thought of the four of them-he, Fairhart, his father, and Wilde-all being together. What would happen to the dynamic then? He hadn't considered what would happen once his father was free. Fairhart still intended on putting a dent in Darvy's power, by taking, at least, the Foulest Book from him. Would the four of them proceed through the prison together, aiming to accomplish this task as a team? It seemed unlikely...

"This one here!" Wilde called out, leading them forward and over to the third door on the left, the sound of the alarm still blaring in all of their ears.

Albus and Fairhart followed along behind him, wands still raised, then watched as he pushed the decrepit door open. Walking through one at a time, they found themselves in a waiting room of sorts, or at least, the ruins of one. It, like nearly everything else in the prison it seemed, was made of stone. Splinters of wood that may have once been a desk were piled in the corner, a few metal chairs littering the floor, coated with dust and dirt. This place too seemed strangely familiar to Albus-perhaps he'd seen it in a memory before as well-but there was no time to dwell on it. Wilde led them forward to the only way that they could go in the cramped space; to a small door in the corner that they most certainly would have overlooked had one of them not had prior knowledge of its presence.

Wilde pushed this one open too, revealing, as Albus could have guessed, a corridor full of grimy cells. The long pathway had, if possible, an even drearier air to it than the others that he'd walked through, and Albus noticed that it looked to have been, more than anything else, abandoned. No cell was occupied, and the walls, though thick with dust and other signs of having been worn down, had no blood splattered on them either.

Albus stared straight ahead, the moonlight entering through the minute windows allowing him to squint and make out another door at the end of the row. The three of them all hurried along to it, but as it came into focus, Albus distinguished that this door was different than any other that they'd seen while in the prison. It was made of iron, yes, but it was also sleek and thick, a metal plaque stretched across it as well. Once close enough, Albus was able to make out what it said.

High Security

It was Fairhart who approached the door, pressing into it with his shoulder. It didn't budge though.

"There are many charms around it!" Fango told him, looking over his shoulder, paranoid.

"Yes I know that, thank you!" Fairhart spat at him, enraged that he'd spoken out of turn. He aimed his wand at the door and slashed at it a few times in rapid succession, then went to push it again. Once more, nothing happened.

"Can you get through?" Albus asked him tensely, sure that his father was nearby; possibly even just beyond this metal door.

"I'm trying" Fairhart said grudgingly, still making complicated movements with his wand.

Albus heard Wilde give a shriek, then turned around to see what had caused it. It took only a moment to register why. At the other end of the long hall a stream of Dark Alliance members had entered, single file due to the little space allowed.

"San!" Albus yelled out, turning back briefly. "They're coming-"

"Hold them off!" Fairhart roared, still slashing rapidly at the door.

Albus didn't need to be told twice. He turned back around, and then, in a single moment, realized it was time to utilize Wilde as much as possible. He reached into his pocket and removed the wand that he'd confiscated earlier, then handed it over to him.

Wilde took it without a word, and together, the two of them raised their wands for battle. Albus realized at once that the compressed nature of the duel was going to affect them negatively; with little room to move, they'd be unable to dodge curses-including the Killing Curse-effectively. They would need to find some way to block them...but what could he use, in this environment, as a shield?

"You attack, I defend!" Albus told Wilde, who started firing Stunners at once, a barrage of different colors heading their way from a distance.

Acting on a whim, Albus pointed his wand at the ceiling. "*Deprimo!*" he cried. "*Deprimo! Deprimo! Deprimo!*"

Chunks of stone began to drop from the ceiling at once, gravel and dust sprinkling down from above them. Albus whipped his wand through the air, concentrating on the larger chunks of rock, keeping them in the air. Slashing his wand for each one, he hurled them through the air with precision, where they met the few streaks of green in the air, the collisions shattering them and reducing them to powder, but also negating the Killing Curses entirely.

After each rock sent spiraling back, Albus flung his wand around to create a shield charm from the other hexes being thrown their way; he could still hear Fairhart behind him, muttering as though in a trance and making sharp movements against the door.

One after the other, the Dark Alliance members fell, blasted in the chest by one of Wilde's Stunners, unable to defend as they'd been preoccupied with firing a curse of their own, which was either deflected back or, in the case of the Killing Curse, blocked by a hunk of solid stone. Albus watched them all funnel through, trying not to lose his grasp on the situation and slip up, though he was sure that at least a few hexes were making it passed even his shield charms.

He couldn't focus on it though, all that he could do was keep up what he was doing, remaining attentive to Fairhart's movements to detect if he'd been affected in anyway by the spells that were getting by. Wilde's aim was far from completely accurate, but he was firing Stunners at such a quick rate that they too were deflected with other spells, creating flashes of brilliant light in between the two groups, the injured and desperate party trying to get through the door, the looming, seemingly infinite number of masked and hooded figures progressing a few steps forward every second-

He heard what sounded like a clicking lock, and then felt the force as the iron door was swung open. Fairhart had succeeded. Albus and Wilde backed up through the doorway, wands still

raised, and Fairhart slammed it shut, the sounds of the hollering Dark Alliance members blocked out entirely.

At once Fairhart aimed his wand at the sealed door again, jabbing it through the air and muttering just as he'd been on the other side of it. Albus knew that he was adding to its protection however, possibly even using the same spells that he'd just gotten through, and indeed, he even caught a few incantations.

"Colloportus Ultimataadre! Salvio Hexia!"

Albus exhaled deeply, bending over and clutching as his knees as Wilde went to move passed him. He then turned around, expecting another hallway, or more cells, or more stairs, or something-

But all that was there was a cell. Larger than any of the others that Albus has seen, and filthier too, Albus peered into it, seeing that it was occupied by a dark shape that was moving slowly, as though it were fragile. He felt his heartbeat quicken. Wilde and Fairhart, who had just finished placing the spells, walked in front of him, obscuring his view slightly. From in between them, however, he could see the prisoner's face come into view, and it was a face that he hadn't seen for months, a face that he'd longed for, for so long now-

His father was staring through the bars, his face thin and ghostly white, his brilliant, emerald eyes sunken and tinged with pink, the green in them looking almost lost amidst red lines due to sleep deprivation. He slowly got to his feet, his entire face now more illuminated by the light seeping through a single window, and Albus saw that his hair was even longer than it had been when they'd last met, face rugged and dirty as well.

But he didn't care. He felt jubilation swoop through him as his father glanced back through the bars, clutching them loosely and not speaking, apparently perplexed as to what was going on. Only when Fairhart and Wilde stepped aside did his eyes widen, and Albus looked back, beaming-

"No!" his father yelled piteously, the second that he'd seen his face, and Albus felt his body go rigid.

"Dad-"

"No!" his father screeched again, and his eyes welled with tears as he sank down slowly, hanging his head grievously.

"No...no.. no..." he added again and again, the misery clear in each lament, his untidy, black hair bobbing up and down with every powerful sob.

Chapter 28: A Separation of Fates

"Dad!" Albus yelled through the air, rushing forward passed the motionless shapes of Fairhart and Wilde. He slid to the ground on his knees as he approached the cell, then reached his arms through the bars to grab hold of his father.

"Dad it's okay, we're going to get you out-"

His father looked up at him, his eyes somehow both alive and dead. He seemed to peer right through the face of his son, a furious expression stretching across his sallow skin.

"You!" he roared, the tears fresh on his face, and he pointed a shaky finger through the bars. "You brought him here!"

Albus turned and saw that his father was looking at Fairhart, who was looking quite unperturbed. He didn't bother responding, though Albus saw that he was standing in an odd way, his hand pressed up against his abdomen.

"Dad it's okay" Albus repeated softly, unsure as to why his father was being like this. His seclusion must have affected his thinking, but Albus couldn't worry about that now. "San's on our side, we're busting you out of here- San!" he yelled, jerking his head over.

Fairhart made his way over to the cell with a bit of a limp, but as soon as he neared them he brandished his wand. Albus' father seethed as he watched Fairhart strike his wand through the air rapidly, a crazed, enraged look on his face.

The metal bars soon began twisting themselves slowly just as they had with Wilde's cell-

Albus jumped back as his father tossed himself through the gap in the bars, his hands raised as if to throttle Fairhart. Fairhart grabbed him and threw him back with considerable ease though, looking affronted.

"Dad what are you doing-"

"You brought him here!" his father yelled out at Fairhart again, and Albus noticed from the corner of his eye that Wilde was pressed up against the metal door, looking quite out of place.

"You- you- you-"

"I forced your son into nothing" Fairhart said, looking irked himself; perhaps he thought that some appreciation was in order.

But seeing the rabid look on his father's face had enlightened Albus as to what was going on. His father, even in his deteriorated state and looking as though he was on the brink of death, was most concerned with the safety of his son; a safety that had been thrown out the window the second that they'd boarded the boat.

"You- you- you brought him here! He's just a boy-"

"Dad!" Albus yelled, annoyed himself now. "I'm not just a kid anymore! And I'm here to get you out! Now let's go!"

His father looked at him oddly for a moment, but then, as if the previous few moments hadn't even happened, he stood up.

"How did this happen?" he asked darkly, sounding at once as though he was in charge. "How did you get here, how did-"

"I'll explain later" Albus said, turning around and eyeing the metal door nervously. "We've got people to worry about now."

His father's expression flickered, and in an instant it became sharper; more astute.

"How many?" he asked.

"A lot" Fairhart said, and he walked over to Wilde, who flinched as a swift movement was made his way-

But Fairhart had simply ripped the wand from his hand, then threw it over to Albus' father, who caught it and examined it at once, looking surly.

"Who here has their own wand?" he asked.

"San and I" Albus said.

"I have Ares" Wilde chimed in, and all three of them looked at him incredulously, the tension in the air evaporating slightly by this revelation.

"Red Ares?" Albus' father asked him. "Why do-"

"He gave it to me back when he first started using the Dragonfang Wand" Wilde said with a shrug. "For safe-keeping-"

"Do you have it on you?" Albus' father asked, sounding very much as though he'd prefer that one to the entirely unfamiliar one in his hands now.

"No-"

"Useless" Fairhart commented acidly, and he turned to the door. "Everyone get ready" he said hoarsely. "You, get in front" he added to Wilde.

"No!" Albus' father yelled, and he stepped forward, nudging Fairhart out of the way. "Me and you take the lead" he said aggressively, and Fairhart eyed him with interest, his mangled face darkening.

Albus watched the exchange with apprehension, catching on to what was happening. Both Fairhart and his father were natural leaders, and they both wanted to be in control now.

"Look let's just- just take this one step at a time" Albus said lowly. "And map out where we're going-"

"Back to the chamber with all the doors, of course" Wilde suggested. "From there we can-"

"Shut up!" Fairhart cut him off, sparing him a glance and then turning back to the metal door.

Wilde went quiet, and Albus, sensing that Fairhart was in more of a hurry than anything else, braced himself and headed towards the door. He stood next to his father as Fairhart began making slashing movements, and he couldn't help but notice that his father was eyeing the scarred wizard with an intense dislike; though Albus could hardly blame him. It was Fairhart's murder for which he'd been imprisoned, and he'd willingly taken that blame to keep his son safe; a safety that Fairhart had actually ignored in bringing him here.

But still, it felt good to be next to his father again; to know that he was alive, and safe, and now had just as much a chance of getting off this wretched island as the rest of them, except for perhaps Wilde, who's fate Albus wasn't entirely sure he could control. Even as he stood shoulder to shoulder with his dad, now nearly the same height, he felt the knot in his stomach ease up, the sensations that he'd been postponing now flooding through him with a vengeance. He realized that he was hungry and thirsty; that he had to go to the bathroom. He realized that he'd had only a few hours of sleep in the last day or so, and that his body was ready to shut down once they were safe from harm, which, he realized with glee, was starting to look like a very big possibility.

He heard the sound of a clicking lock, and, knowing at once that he had at least one more battle to get through, he raised his wand-

"Get behind me, Albus-"

Albus stared forward blankly, intensity squeezing its way through the air. Both his father and Fairhart had said the same thing at the exact same time. Albus watched as his father moved forward with his wand raised, throwing a glare Fairhart's way. Fairhart, Albus noticed, looked down at the ground, but just then the iron door swung open-

Albus prepared to fire a spell, but he couldn't even see anything. Both his father and Fairhart had marched into the corridor with their wands raised, and Albus could hear the yells of Dark Alliance members as they fired curse after curse through the filthy hall. Albus was forced to crouch and maneuver his head around to spectate the battle, and he saw what looked like twenty hooded and masked figures lining the walls, raising their wands to attack and being defeated almost immediately.

It was like watching two unstoppable, but unrelated forces at work. His father and Fairhart walked forward with something resembling arrogance as they slashed their wands through the air with tenacity and precision, both of them whirling their instruments overhead to create among the most complex looking shield charms that Albus had ever seen; they were making sure that nothing got by them to hit him.

Had a stranger been watching, it would have been impossible to tell which was his father.

He kept his own wand raised needlessly, Wilde cowering along behind him with his hands over his head. Albus watched the expertise of the two powerful wizards in front of him with awe, noticing that while Fairhart was mostly firing jets of green, his father was slashing his wand like a sword.

"*Sectumsempra! Sectumsempra!*" he was roaring, and large gashes were sending the Dark Alliance members to the floor, their shield charms unable to block the power of the curse, blood splattering down their fronts from wherever they'd been hit. Albus realized that this was the same curse his father had used on Ares about two years ago, and acknowledged that it seemed to be reserved for only the most desperate of situations.

But still, watching his father plow through helpless masked victims was a simultaneously horrifying and awe-inspiring experience. He was sure that the incantation would be burned in his head for years to come.

The shouting stopped, and Albus understood this to mean the danger was over. He watched as Fairhart and his father moved along slowly, stepping over bodies that were either dead or huddled in blood. Albus and Wilde followed along after them diligently, reaching the end of the corridor and then going through the small door that led to what Albus had surmised before as a waiting room of sorts. It was then through only one more battered door that they found themselves again in the chamber with different ways to go. They'd only been in it for a second when his father strode over to a random door with confidence.

"Through here" he said gruffly, and Albus realized that he probably had a much better idea of the prison's layout than even Wilde. He cringed inwardly at the thought; this meant that Wilde was no longer needed, and that Fairhart could get rid of him...

They followed him through the door, Fairhart right behind him, with Albus just behind Fairhart and Wilde, predictably, at the end of the line. They found themselves in another corridor of cells, but strangely, this one was shaped more like a labyrinth; at various points the rows of bars stopped to allow turns to be made, and Albus understood this to be a general area for prisoners, as opposed to one specifically designated for those who were most dangerous. The Caterwauling Jinxes had either ceased or could not be heard in this area, and the silence that surrounded them was unnerving to say the least; he could hear all of their footsteps as they treaded the stone.

"How does Darvy have so many people at his disposal?" asked Fairhart sternly, sounding as though he was mostly talking to Albus' father.

Wilde went to answer, but Fairhart turned and silenced him with a grave look.

"His forces increase everyday" Albus' father answered despondently, still bringing them to gaps in the cells and making them move through the maze of prisoners intricately; it seemed as though even he was getting a little confused.

"I expected his ranks to grow once he invaded, but not to this degree" Fairhart said icily. "And why do some of the cells show signs of struggle?"

Albus too was curious of this, but he was more interested in the way Fairhart and his father were speaking. It seemed that despite whatever bitterness was there, they had both realized that they were better off collaborating.

"When Darvy first overtook Azkaban he made an offer to all of the prisoners" his father said lowly. "Join him or continue to rot in their cells. About half adorned masks at once, but many objected."

"Why?" Albus asked.

"Not every prisoner here is an advocate of what Darvy does" his father answered him almost automatically, still navigating his way through the rows of cells. "Many of the Death Eaters followed Voldemort because they were pure-blood enthusiasts, not intent on killing as many people as possible. Not considering Darvy to be in the same league as their old master, they neglected to join. And beyond that, many prisoners in here are Renegades; they would rather rot than pledge their service to the Dark Alliance."

"So why doesn't Darvy just killed them?" Albus asked.

"He does" his father told him. "But he uses them first."

"How-"

"Darvy is breeding his army in the graveyard" his father said, and Albus nodded from behind him. "But he seems to be having trouble controlling it. Every day, he experiments in ways to exhibit more control over them, and so he randomly selects a prisoner and throws them into the graveyard to be ripped to shreds alive."

Albus widened his mouth in horror, and indeed, he even saw Fairhart tense up as well. He looked over his shoulder to see Wilde's face, and saw that it bore grim support for this claim.

"But why-"

"He often forces other prisoners to watch" his father answered him before he could even ask. "Often times, this more than coerces them to change their minds about their allegiances. Many who became Dark Alliance members while here did so out of fear of being made an example of like the individual that they'd just seen being torn to pieces. The first time warranted the most results. My prison guard...the one you met before. He was the first one thrown in with those monsters. An entire row of prisoners pledged themselves to the Dark Alliance within the hour. This door up ahead," he added, indicating a door that, like so many others that Albus had seen today, looked ancient and worn.

But Albus had stopped walking. What he'd just heard was now sinking in, and as he stared around at the cells in the labyrinth, he saw that many of them were not as vacant as those from other floors. Many of them were occupied by gaunt faces, and bodies that were strewn on the floor carelessly, all of them apparently oblivious to what was going on around them.

"We have to free them" Albus said at once, and his father and Fairhart both turned.

"Albus-" Fairhart started, but it was his father who took over.

"Albus we can't save these prisoners" he said sternly. "I know what you're thinking-"

"Why not?" Albus asked, turning around and eyeing one at random, where sure enough, a grizzly looking man who appeared inches from death was laying on a decaying cot. "We would just have to-"

"Albus there's no *time*" his father told him pressingly.

"And no point" Fairhart added seriously. "They can't fight, they'll just slow us down-"

"Stay out of this!" Albus' father spat, turning to him briefly with a venomous expression on his face. Fairhart narrowed his eyes but said nothing. "Albus, I want to help these people too, but we can't. We'll die in the process, there's too many, and we don't have much time; Darvy is already aware of what is going on. The best that we can do is get off of this island and get help for them-"

"Dad there is no help!" Albus yelled. "Waddlesworth took over the Ministry and any day now his lot is going to invade here-"

"Then we need to get moving!" his father barked at him. "Albus I agree with you, and I *know* that you want to save these prisoners, but it is counter-productive for everyone, even them-"

"I'm helping them, I don't care-"

And then his father did what he least expected; he raised his wand at him.

"Albus, you are coming with me if I have to sling you over my shoulder and carry you out-"

"Lower your wand" came a hoarse voice, and Albus saw that Fairhart had pointed his own at his father.

"No!" Albus yelled out, raising his own wand at Fairhart; whatever his adamance at freeing the prisoners, he didn't want to see his father get hurt either, not when he'd just retrieved him.

It was the most peculiar triangle fathomable, with his father aimed to attack him, he himself ready to attack Fairhart, and Fairhart bearing down on his father. Only when Fango Wilde spoke up from outside of their stand-off did they all snap back to their senses.

"If I may speak-"

"No, you can't!" Fairhart snapped at him, but Wilde, strangely enough, continued anyway.

"This is getting us nowhere!" he said loudly, having apparently found some courage in the last minute or so. "And we are still being chased."

"He's right" Albus' father said. "And that means that we have to keep going" he added darkly, and Albus took this to understand that he'd lost.

They all lowered their wands in unison, progressing towards the door in more of a group than their typical straight line. As they neared it, however, Albus heard his father remark something Fairhart's way.

"And don't you ever point your wand at me again Sancticus" he said icily, but Fairhart didn't respond.

Albus couldn't help but admire his father's audacity. He wasn't entirely sure if he could take on Fairhart even on a good day, and yet here he was, malnourished and depleted, using a wand that wasn't even his, and sending threats Fairhart's way. At the same time, however, he realized just now that he hadn't accounted for the fact that his father was not going to be willing to cooperate with his scarred friend. Though Fairhart had made no mention of it yet, he was fairly certain that they still had another job to do while in the prison.

They passed through the door and found themselves, again, on the platform of a staircase. Strangely though, these stairs only led downwards, and it appeared as though they did so in a straight manner; Albus could spot no turns of any sort.

"Where are we going?" he asked his father.

"These will take us straight down to the bottom floor of the prison. Then it's just a few more doors and we're out the prison, on the right of the graveyard. We can get on the Ministry trail from there-"

Fairhart came to a halt, and did Albus. They exchanged a quick look, and Albus knew that his fears from a second ago were coming to fruition. Likewise, it seemed that his former professor was expecting him to be the one to deliver the news to his father.

"Dad we- we can't go yet" Albus said, and his father turned to him, their green eyes meeting at once.

"It's fine Albus, I know how to get back on the trail. I helped design it-"

"No dad- n- no" he said, shaking his head, and he inhaled deeply while his father stared at him. "Dad I can't leave yet. Me and- me and San still have something to do here."

His father's eyes widened into an expression that suggested he was nothing short of baffled.

"What are you- what are you talking about? Albus-"

"It's okay Al" Fairhart said from next to him. "Go with your father. I'll get the Book on my own, and see if I can get the Wand too-"

"The Book?" Wilde asked, his ears perking up, but before he could say anything else Albus' father had already started to holler.

"What's going on here!" he roared, and he rounded on Fairhart. "What- what did- what did you tell him! What nonsense-"

"Dad stop it!" Albus yelled out. "San's trying to help! He thinks that we can stop Darvy if we just-"

"No!" his father roared, looking back and forth between them as if they'd be conspiring behind his back. "No! Albus you are coming with me! If Sancticus wants to stay behind then-"

"Dad I had a deal with him!" Albus yelled out, his throat now sore. "He- he helped me get to you, just like he said, and now I'm going to keep up my end-"

"Harry, listen to me," Fairhart started, "Albus is much stronger than you think he is. I have trained him, and we did have an agreement. It is up to him if he-"

"Shut up!" Albus' father roared, spit flying from his mouth, an explosive look on his face. Fairhart made to yell back, but what came his way next stopped him at once.

"You're not his father! If you were a father, you'd understand!"

Silence overtook them all at once. Albus cast a sideways glance over at Wilde, whose eyes were wide open, his entire body rigid; he could have been a statue. He knew that his father had no way of knowing the effect that his words would have on Fairhart, but either way, the blank look that had stretched itself out on Fairhart's hideous face was enough to make him speak up.

"Dad...dad just- just- just calm down-"

"You're coming with me!" his father roared, turning to him frantically. "You are sixteen years old, and I will not allow-"

A streak of red light connected with his father from behind, and he toppled over at once, unconscious.

"No!" Albus yelled out in surprise, and he crouched down to grab hold of him. He looked up and saw that Fairhart had his wand raised.

"Why did you-"

"Albus listen to me" Fairhart said, his voice crisp and hollow. "Your father is not in charge of this mission-"

"-I know, you are-"

"No, I'm not" Fairhart cut him off, shaking his head. "You are. What you do now is up to you. I am at least going to try and get the Foulest Book; I do not want to leave this island empty handed. If you want to come with me, then come with me, if you wish to leave with your father, then go. I will hold nothing against you."

Albus said nothing, absorbing Fairhart's appearance. His face was still swollen from the Nundu encounter, his shoulder still raw and purple from the Silhouette. The pink around his eyes was no longer prominent, but this would be a difficult task considering all that it was up against. And, Albus realized just now for the first time, there was a tear in his robes by his lower left side.

"You were hit by a curse back there, weren't you?" Albus asked him quietly. "When I was fending them off..."

Fairhart didn't answer. He instead reiterated what he'd said before.

"I will hold nothing against you if you choose to-"

"I'm coming with you" Albus cut him off. "I just- I just don't know what to do with my dad-"

"You" Fairhart said, turning to Wilde, who blinked foolishly at being addressed.

"Take him back to the trail" Fairhart told him, and together, he and Albus scooped up his father and leaned him on Wilde's shoulder. "Get to the Apparition point and-"

"I don't know exactly where the Apparition point is" Wilde said at once. "I- I- I-"

"Figure it out then!" Fairhart growled at him. "If worst comes to worst, revive him, he'll know" he added, nodding his head at the unconscious figure leaning on him, and he bent down to scoop up the dropped wand and hand it over to him.

Albus watched the exchange tensely, realizing that there was a lot more to it than what was on the surface. For starters, Fairhart was trusting Wilde.

Wilde nodded obediently at what he was being told. Fairhart stared him down as he started to walk down the stone steps, supporting Albus' father as he did so, but he stopped while on the top step.

"You're going after the Foulest Book?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?" Albus asked.

"Do you know where it is?"

"We think it's below ground level" Fairhart said, sounding annoyed. "We'll head back to where we first entered-"

"No!" Wilde shouted at once, shaking his head vigorously as he did so. "No- no. The Veil is at the bottom of the prison, and Darvy is with it. The Book- the Book is closer to the top. The chamber with all the doors, it's the last door on the right. Follow the stairs up, it'll take you to another chamber."

"Thanks" Albus said, relieved that they wouldn't have to wander around any longer than necessary.

Wilde nodded, then turned to Fairhart, who said nothing. They simply gazed into one another's eyes for a moment, and Albus felt his insides squirm at the delicacy of the situation...

Wilde turned and began heading down the stairs with his father, not looking back for so much as a glance.

"Come on, let's go" Albus said, tugging at Fairhart's shirt. Fairhart turned to him with a dazed expression on his face, as though he'd been lost in thought briefly.

"Right" he said. "Let's go..."

They stormed back through the door and into the labyrinth of cells once more, the final stages of their mission commencing. It was just the two of them again, jogging along briskly through dirty corridors and staying shoulder to shoulder, wands raised in preparation at what their next challenge would be.

It was still Fairhart leading the way though. Albus had no idea how to move through the maze of cells, but Fairhart, it seemed, had been paying a considerable amount of attention as they'd

walked through them before. He was turning and leading them around corners with even more confidence than Albus' father had, and Albus took this brief respite of navigation to say what was on his mind.

"You let Wilde live" he stated firmly, staring straight ahead as he spoke.

"Someone had to help your father get to safety" Fairhart told him, and Albus detected a hint of disappointment in his voice.

Albus looked down. This was now the second time that Fairhart had let his revenge elude him, both because it profited Albus' father-and really, Albus himself-in some way. This time, however, it seemed unlikely that Fairhart was going to get another shot at it.

"Erm- I'm sor-"

"It's fine, Albus" Fairhart said, sparing him a glance as they turned sharply. "Their fate is separate from ours now. We must focus on what lies ahead for us, not on what may have happened before."

"Do you trust him?" Albus asked pointedly. "With my dad?"

"I really had no choice" Fairhart said. "But to be honest...there is no reason for Wilde to not get your father off this island, and beyond that, he my need him as well. I believe that your father is as safe as can be right now, Albus, all things considered."

Albus nodded his head appreciatively, then stopped in his tracks along with Fairhart. They'd successfully made it back to the beginning of the labyrinth. They opened the door, preparing to enter the chamber filled with more of them-

"Over here!" someone snarled.

Albus took aim with his wand, sizing up the ten or fifteen Dark Alliance members that had been waiting in the chamber. Before he could even fire a spell however, Fairhart had grabbed him by the robes roughly.

"After me!" he yelled, and Albus ran with him by the wall of the large chamber, hexes of all different colors being fired at them rapidly.

They both made identical, circular wand movements as they strode forward, just as they had before. The streaks of light caught in their peripheral vision were all bounced back jaggedly, the miniature disks of energy propelling them at odd angles. Albus kept this up with fierce concentration; it was much harder to do so when moving so quickly. He watched as Fairhart broke free from his own movements to knock open a door that must have been the one that Wilde had indicated. Albus followed him through it-

They found themselves in front of a straight line of stone-cut stairs similar to the ones that Wilde and his father had just went down. These stairs ascended instead though, and Albus followed Fairhart up them while aiming his wand over his shoulder, firing stunners ferociously at the group that he knew was now chasing them up the steps. A streak of red whizzed by his ear, nearly hitting Fairhart as well, and he realized that it had been his own spell deflected back at him.

He turned around and took aim with his wand at the Dark Alliance member that was in the lead.

"*Fracturus!*" he cried, aiming his wand down at the man's knee. There was a powerful banging noise, followed up by the crunching of bone and the wailing of the Dark Alliance member, who toppled over, clutching at his shattered knee in pain.

"*Fracturus!*" Albus yelled, his feet still moving upwards but his body turned to the side so that he could look at his pursuers. "*Fracturus! Fracturus!*"

He fired each curse with deadly accuracy, making sure to concentrate hard on what he was aiming for. Two Dark Alliance members attempted to create Shield Charms, but the curse was too powerful, breaking their wrists and making them fall over from the pain. Another one was caught right at his hip bone; he gave a high pitched shriek and slumped himself against the wall in agony.

But there were too many of them, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to keep it up forever.

"How many more stairs!" he yelled up at Fairhart.

"We're about to hit a platform now!" he yelled.

Albus aimed his wand at the ground, preparing to do exactly what he'd done earlier. He reached the platform just a moment after Fairhart had-

"*Glisseo!*" he exclaimed, and the indentations in the stone that served as steps flattened at once. The Dark Alliance members slipped and fell down, yelling furiously, all but one who had leapt into the air and who seemed intent on making it to the platform as well-

"*Peis Progressius!*" he yelled, aiming his wand at his adversary's feet and thinking of the heaviest thing he could at the moment, like a Chimaera or a Nundu-

The wizard gave a yelp and dropped on to the slide-like floor at once, weighed down immensely by his shoes. Slowly, his arms flailing, he slipped backwards and into darkness...

"The Book should be in here" Fairhart said, and when Albus turned he saw that they were facing yet another wooden door, though strangely, this one didn't appear to be in too bad of shape. Indeed, it looked as though it had been fixed up a bit recently.

"So we just get the Book-"

"And then we go" Fairhart told him. "I will be satisfied with taking away just Darvy's instrument of the future, I can worry about the Wand and Veil at a later point. Let's just get out of here alive" he added, and Albus thought that he detected a wheeze in his voice. Albus saw that he was gripping his side, where the curse had hit; it was causing him more pain than he'd like to admit.

"Right" he said, nodding, and together, they pushed open the door.

They were met with immediate darkness. Though Albus could see nothing at first, he knew at once from how the darkness extended that they'd entered a large chamber, larger even than the one that had contained all of the doors from before. A chill had entered the air as well, and for a wild moment, he considered that maybe they were outside-

And then he saw it. Squinting, he saw what looking like a fluttering movement, something that reminded him of-

"The Veil..." he whispered in confusion.

A bead of light erupted from Fairhart's wand, and to Albus' surprise, it turned upwards, illuminating his face. It looked panic stricken, as though a terrible thought had just crossed his mind-

"San-"

"Albus listen to me" he said lowly, and the silence contained within the darkness started to ring in his ears. "Back at the cabin there is a silver box. You must open-"

"San I don't-"

A screech entered the air around them, a shrill battle-cry that made every hair on Albus' body stand up. He felt the fear manifest itself on his own face, and he went to light his wand as well, but there was no need, for at that very moment what sounded like twenty other shrieks echoed through the air simultaneously, and light filled the room at once, as easily as if a switch had been hit. The light blinded him momentarily, but the second that he'd regained his vision he looked straight ahead, and he saw that they were in a chamber; a dirty, dusty, massive chamber with torches on the wall. And sitting in the middle of the chamber majestically was, not the Foulest Book, as they'd anticipated, but the large and looming Executioner's Veil, billowing ominously before them.

And then he saw movement. From both sides skeletal creatures had advanced on them, tall and menacing, the bits of skin on them hanging off sloppily as they dashed towards them, screeching ferociously.

"*Confringo!*" Albus yelled, and he heard Fairhart do the same. "*Confringo! Confringo!*"

He uttered the spell as fast as he could, but his curses were barely effective; all that they did was blow the Silhouettes back, and only once did any real damage occur, with one of the creatures being blasted into a pile of bones. He ducked a swipe from one of the creatures and rolled underneath the grip of another, then turned to look at Fairhart, who was whipping his wand around fiercely, his Blasting Curses powerful enough to reduce each and every Silhouette that they met to dust-

But he was not as healthy as he'd been when they'd first reached the island. His movements were slow, and his body weak. Albus raised his wand to help but failed to get there in time; a Silhouette behind him had already slashed him in the back. Fairhart gave a cry of pain and sank to his knees as dark red blood splattered from behind him, and he dropped his wand-

"No!" Albus roared, and the Silhouette that was attacking him stopped at once, as did the others around him.

But they didn't stop around Fairhart. Another one gave a screech and slashed him across the chest, sending him toppling over onto the ground-

"Stop!" someone called, and the Silhouettes all ceased moving at once. Albus didn't even need to turn to see whose voice it had been, but he did so anyway.

It was Darvy. From the corner of the chamber he was emerging, his long blonde hair filthy and matted as though he was one of his own prisoners, his expression maniacal. He was smiling widely, his electric blue eyes lively, as though he was enjoying what he was seeing a great deal. His long black robes billowed just like the Veil, and it was only at this moment that Albus realized that his analysis from before had been nearly correct.

They were somewhat outside. The wall behind Darvy had been removed, revealing nothing but crisp air and the whistling of the ferocious wind. Albus didn't need to guess why. However high up in the prison they were, Albus was sure that if he gazed down right at the opening where Darvy was standing, he would see the graveyard; see the army of Death's Right Hand.

This is where he was breeding his army, and he was keeping an eye on it all at the same time.

The Silhouettes had all stopped as soon as Darvy had called for them to, and Albus saw that he was holding the Dragonfang Wand up high as he walked, a malevolent sneer playing on his twisted face as he approached. Albus raised his wand-

A streak of light hit his hand, and the Disarming Spell knocked him down to the floor as well. Albus glanced up and saw his wand fly through the air, and he realized that Darvy was not alone. A few, unmasked Dark Alliance members were in the chamber as well, all of them grinning. The one nearest him, who had his wand raised, caught Albus' wand and pocketed it at once.

"Hold him" Darvy said loosely, and Albus felt a sharp blow to the back of the head. Dazed momentarily, he was grabbed onto under each arm, then brought to his knees by two Dark Alliance members.

He couldn't take his eyes off of Fairhart. Laying in a pool of his own blood, he was writhing around slightly, apparently too weak to do much else other than groan and squirm. His wand was laying a few feet away from him, his hand outstretched as though he was reaching for it, the silver ring on his finger glinting just a few inches away from it.

"Bring him to me" Darvy ordered sharply, and Albus watched as two more Dark Alliance members hurried over to the clump of blood and robes on the ground. They grabbed him roughly by his legs, one each, and drug him across the stone floor slowly and carelessly, creating a trail of blood as they did so.

Albus felt sadness wash through him as he watched them drag his friend along, his moans of pain intensifying as his wounds were subjected to the friction of the ground. But his sadness was nothing compared to his rage. Anger was coursing through his veins, and he wanted nothing more than for his voice from weeks ago to take over. To transform into a monster far worse and much more powerful than any Silhouette. To kill them, all of them, with little more than a breath...

They drug Fairhart all the way over to Darvy, who was standing by the Veil, the smile stretched on his face the most vile that Albus had ever seen it. Once they brought him over they dropped his legs and went around to the top of his body, seizing him by under his arms and bringing him, just like Albus, to his knees.

Albus felt tears stream down his cheeks when he saw him. Blood was trailing from Fairhart's mouth; he'd been coughing it up. His torso too was splattered with it, the deep wounds of the Silhouette's sharp claws open and leaking red copiously. His eyes were half-closed, and he appeared to be slipping into unconsciousness from blood loss...

Darvy crouched down so that he was eye level with him. For a moment he simply stared at him viciously, an almost hungry expression on his face, and then-

He struck him across the face with his fist. Fairhart's head snapped to the side, but then shot right back, as though he was asking for another. His eyes were wide open now, even the one on the disfigured side of his face, and they showed nothing but hatred in them; not even fear.

"Sancticus Fairhart!" Darvy crooned, and he stood up and lightly pointed a finger down at him, as though he were presenting him as a gift. Several of the Dark Alliance members chortled, but Albus didn't understand. How did Darvy even know who Fairhart was?

Darvy crouched down low again, and Albus felt the Dark Alliance members grip his shoulder tightly, as if they were just suddenly realizing that he wasn't as injured as they thought. He also

felt movement behind him, and realized that at least one more of them now had their wand raised at him.

"You know, I know you" Darvy said daintily, his mouth curling into another sneer. "Did you know that?"

Fairhart said nothing, but Albus saw that his entire body was shaking, blood dripping down his chin violently as it did so.

"Fango Wilde was always *so* frightened of you" Darvy continued, and Albus saw Fairhart's eyes widen even further, if such a thing were possible.

"But he was worried for nothing, wasn't he!" Darvy shouted loudly, and he cackled, turning to aim his question at the Dark Alliance members, who all laughed along with him.

"Let go of him" Darvy said lowly to the Dark Alliance members holding Fairhart up, and he fell over at once, unable to support himself. There were a few more chortles from the figures holding Albus, and he felt his blood boil.

Slowly, and with the Dragonfang Wand still raised up in one hand, he grabbed Fairhart by the back of his robes and drug him a few inches over, towards the Veil. Lightly, he placed him against the side of the giant archway, so that he was literally inches from going through it.

"There you go," Darvy said mockingly, "now you can sit up without help!"

The Dark Alliance members all laughed again, and Albus felt his own body shake with fury. If only he could get to his wand. But he wasn't even sure which of the Dark Alliance members holding him had it, and even if he did start to fight back, there were always the Silhouettes as well...

Darvy crouched back down to speak to Fairhart again, apparently still not quite finished with his routine.

"Fango always warned me about what a skilled wizard you were" he said, as though there had been no interruption. "I just- you know- I *don't get it*" he added, sniggering, his grin wide and malicious. "I mean, he went on about it for years! Even used to tell my brother to watch out for you! Ha!"

The Dark Alliance all chortled again, but when Albus looked at Fairhart his stomach churned; Fairhart had glanced back at him.

What was he saying, in his second-long glance? There had been a hint of betrayal in it, but Albus knew that it hadn't been directed at him. He knew what was going through Fairhart's mind right now, and it had nothing to do with Darvy, or the pain he was in, or the blood spilling from his body. He was thinking of Fango Wilde. Fango Wilde, whose perfidious nature knew no bounds,

and who had purposefully sent them in the wrong direction for the Book. Who had, inexplicably, betrayed him yet *again*.

"Don't believe me?" Darvy spat sweetly, and Fairhart gazed back at him with flared nostrils, wearing what Albus was sure was the most hateful face that he could muster. "Oh yes, me and Fango go way back" he said, his grin not flickering for a moment. He was enjoying every second of this.

Albus watched the scene with hundreds of thoughts racing through his head. First and foremost was saving Fairhart and getting them out of here; but that was shaping up to be the first task on this island that seemed truly impossible. But his next thoughts were of a dreadful curiosity. Where was Darvy going with all of this?

Darvy lowered the Dragonfang Wand slightly, holding it up to his face so that Fairhart could gaze at it.

"Did you know that it was Fango who first got me this wand?" he asked, sounding as though he was genuinely inquiring something. Still, he answered his own question at once. "Oh yes, me and Fango used to be good friends, good friends indeed. Why, before I caught him sneaking around with that pompous fool Waddlesworth, we would even do favors for one another! It was Fango who told me where I could find this delightful wand!"

Fairhart kept the same expression on his face while Darvy ranted, but Albus saw that Darvy was just getting started it seemed. He shifted his weight a little to get more comfortable, then grinned even wider than before, showing his yellow teeth.

"I lent it to my brother for a bit," he went on, gazing at the golden wand with a look of infatuation, "but Red didn't know what to do with it, so I took it back" he said icily, and the Dark Alliance members all laughed once more.

Darvy then leaned in a bit, his gaze now completely on the wand, a nostalgic expression playing on his beaming face.

"I remember it like it was yesterday" he said reminiscently. "Wilde telling me where I could find the wandmaker who owned this wonderful creation. We were such good friends at the time, you see, that Wilde wasn't even beyond asking a favor of *me*. Which of course, I did, out of the kindness of my heart and out of the good spirit of friendship" he said smartly.

Albus continued to watch, his heart pounding. Darvy's face transformed once more, and what Albus saw terrified him more than perhaps anything he'd seen since they left Lambshire. A glint of insanity flashed across his blue eyes, and suddenly, he was looking at Fairhart like a predator that was right about to deliver the final blow to its prey.

"Did you ever wonder why you couldn't find your little girlfriend, when you went looking for her?"

Albus' felt his insides squirm. His heartbeat-which had just been beating quickly-slowed down considerably as Darvy's words, uttered softly and sardonically, played themselves over and over again in his head. He saw Fairhart's expression-once hard and fierce-slowly soften as confusion overtook him.

"She was a smart girl" Darvy said, his eyes still glinting with madness. "She knew what I was the second she saw me. She had a very unrealistic idea of wizards though; seemed to think that calling your name would just somehow bring you there to save her."

Albus felt tears slide down his cheeks once more, and he nearly closed his eyes to avoid the look on Fairhart's face, the look of misery that played on every inch of it. Darvy cocked his head to the side slightly as he continued, all in the same innocent, almost careless tone.

"So many times she called out for you" he said casually. "And the look on her face when I performed the finishing blow...she just seemed so...disappointed. What a pity," he added, a false, wry smile forming on his lips, "she died...knowing that you never...truly...cared..."

He put particular emphasis on these last few words, and Albus watched with what he knew was a look of anguish as Fairhart stared ahead blankly, an abashed, pathetic look on his face, a single tear sliding down the side that was disfigured-

Darvy stood up swiftly, and with a single, powerful kick, he knocked Fairhart backwards, sending him tumbling through the Veil. Albus screamed in horror as his body vanished from sight, his yell covered by Darvy's uproarious laughter.

Chapter 29: The Fortress Of The Dead

Albus watched the Executioner's Veil waft back and forth menacingly, Darvy's powerful shouts of laughter now merging with the jeers of the Dark Alliance members to create a cacophony of malice. He was forced to sit there, his entire body shaking, his shoulders gripped tightly by the hooded figures behind him, a swirl of emotions coursing through him. His mind was blank at what he'd just witnessed.

And then he nearly laughed. A miniscule, throaty squeak of laughter pushed itself from his lips, audible only to himself due to the noise around him. He laughed because he realized that he'd seen this before; that he knew this trick. Fairhart had faked his death again. He'd provided the illusion of his demise, and when Darvy was least expecting it, he would make his presence known again. Yes, that's all it was, a trick. Just like the one that he'd pulled with Blackwood's assistance...

He gave a groan of pain as he came to his senses, the truth piercing him sharply as though attempting to drive his doubts away. Fairhart was gone. After everything that they'd fought through, after the whirlpool and the Nundu and the waves of Dark Alliance members...it was Darvy who had killed him. Darvy who had stolen the satisfaction...

Darvy's laughter faded first, and the Dark Alliance members followed suit almost immediately. It was now only the whistling of the wind that Albus could hear, and this reminded him that he had no time to dwell and grieve. Darvy was already heading towards him.

He walked slowly, swaggering along with his arms outstretched as though he'd just presented a masterpiece of sorts. His filthy blonde hair danced in front of his face as he moved, his crooked smile fixed as though it was going to last forever.

"And the Right Hand of Death squeezes the life from one more!" he announced proudly, showing his yellow teeth. Albus felt the rage surging through him hit an acme. How dare he...how dare he claim that as though he'd been victorious, as though under any other circumstances he would have been able to kill a wizard like Fairhart...

"And yet, it still has one more life to claim" he added, his leer lowering and falling on Albus, who felt no fear, no, not this time. Every fragment of his being was now focusing on revenge, and his fury was only intensified by the knowledge that he could do nothing to satisfy that thirst. He instead stared forward boldly, doing his best to shape his face into an expression of contempt that accurately conveyed what he was feeling, if such a thing was even possible.

Darvy held the Dragonfang Wand high as he approached, the Silhouettes that had littered the room now standing still like bony statues, large, motionless fiends that had not even realized what they'd just done. Most of them had their heads turned and appeared to be peering out of

eyeless sockets towards Darvy and the wand, but a few of them-the few that Albus had told to stop, he was sure-were looking at him instead.

"Albus," Darvy crooned to him, and Albus snapped his gaze back at the man that he loathed more than anything else in the world, "you've grown up so much! Coming out here, so far from home, and for what? To save your daddy? Well you can breathe easy...I really don't give a damn about that has-been of a wizarding hero. No, I'm very well pleased with the exchange that's been made..."

Darvy was now so close to him that Albus could smell his breath, could see the flecks of dirt in his hair. He impulsively made to rise up, to remove himself from his knees, but the two Dark Alliance members holding him applied pressure automatically, and he sank back down at once. Darvy noticed his slight movement and commented on it at once.

"What, are you going to try and fight me?" he asked incredulously, his voice high and drenched in sarcasm. "Dear me, I knew, or at least I figured, that the ugly freak had trained you up a bit before bringing you here, but I didn't realize that he'd of instilled his arrogance in you as well."

Albus winced at the insult against Fairhart, and Darvy's smile widened at once.

"I've touched a nerve" he started. "But you're not going to do anything about it, are you Albus? No...of course not. So foolish of me to think that you'd grown. You're still the same frightened little boy aren't you? The one absolutely *desperate* for a role model, for someone to fight your battles for you, and once that person is gone," he looked back at the Veil with a sneer on his face, "you don't know what to do, do you?"

Albus said nothing. He simply allowed Darvy to face him, his lips curled upwards unnaturally high, like some sort of demented jester. Their eyes held for several moments, and then the familiar, crazed glint overtook Darvy's face.

"You don't respect me, do you, Potter?"

Albus again held his silence. He wasn't even sure if he was completely processing what was being said to him at this point; every facet of his being was in a frenzy. Darvy continued smoothly.

"No...you don't. Just like the rest of them. *No one* respected me. My mother...who left me as a bundle of blankets in the street from birth, so I've heard, determined to make road kill of me. *She* certainly didn't. The wizards and witches who took me in on the streets...using me as a pawn, some child to do their dirty deeds. No respect there. My own brother...promising me greatness, claiming we'd rule the new world together...and then turning me into some potion-brewing *servant*" he spat the last word fiercely. "I'm sick of trying to *earn respect*. I don't care for it anymore. Now... *I demand obedience*."

His words grew quiet as they went on, his eyes sliding out of focus somewhat as though he was lost in his own private world. And then, randomly, his face lit up, some errant thought apparently invigorating him. Slowly, he backed up.

"Well, as nice as it's been to catch up, I daresay that I have an army to tend to" he said, his voice almost bored in comparison to what it had just been. "And while such a topic is on my mind," he continued, "I think that it's time to *really* take my army to the next level."

He turned to face the Silhouettes, an authoritative look on his face.

"Kill the boy" he said lamely, and he turned around as though he wasn't going to watch.

Albus felt terror course through him, revenge no longer the entirety of his thoughts. The Silhouettes all started to walk towards him in a drone-like manner, and despite his fear, he started to count them for the first time, as though preparing to feel each of their claws against his flesh. There was two, four, six, eight, ten...

The Silhouette closest to him started to raise its arms up as though to attack, its sharp and slender fingers flexing, black slime dripping from them. Albus stared directly into the hollowed out eye holes of the skull, and a strange sensation filled him, just like it had back when they'd been maneuvering the island...

"Stop!" he yelled out, wincing as the creature came close enough for him to hear its rattling breath.

The Silhouette stopped dead in its tracks, as did those behind it. Albus felt a knot loosen in his chest, his confusion nothing compared to his relief. Darvy too had stopped walking, his back to the scene, and the Dark Alliance members had started to whisper, a small panic setting upon them. Slowly, he turned around, a vein popping in his forehead.

"Get him!" he roared at the Silhouettes, and he held his magnificent wand out high.

The creatures saw it, and at once they continued to shuffle their feet towards Albus as though they were slaves-

"No!" Albus barked, and they stopped again. Slowly, he turned his head to Darvy, his eyes darkening. "Get *him*."

They all turned around with an identical sharp movement, now facing Darvy, who was looking furious. He jabbed his wand through the air again, as if to reinforce his control over them, and it worked; the group of Silhouettes stopped mid-step, waiting for their next command.

But Darvy didn't issue one. His face had turned red with embarrassment, the Dark Alliance members littered about the room still whispering to one another at what had just happened. Albus too found himself curious, but not nearly as much as he would have been before; a powerful

connection had just went off in his head. He could, for some reason, control these creatures, just as Darvy could. He had controlled them before, back in Hogsmeade two years ago, and he was controlling them now. And that put he and Darvy at a stand-still...

Or so he thought. Mild wind encircled him as the scene went silent, Darvy's eyes glittering madly as he stared back and forth between the Silhouettes and Albus. The Dark Alliance members all drew their wands, apparently realizing that the Silhouettes weren't going to do the job. But Albus had no one there to draw a wand for him, and Darvy seemed to realize this too, as he'd raised his own wand and pointed it directly at him.

"Fine" he snarled viciously. "Then I'll do it."

Albus swallowed, his fear from just a moment ago rekindled. He watched as Darvy opened his mouth, and at the same time he felt his body break down slightly, an intense buzzing filling his ears, though not quite enough to obscure Darvy's words-

"*Avada-*"

The ground shook violently. Albus heard the buzzing in his ears disappear at once, his brief meditation apparently disturbed by the tremor that went through the floor. He saw Dark Alliance members fall from across the room; felt the pressure of those holding him increase as they used his shoulders to support themselves. Darvy had lost his balance completely and had fallen over onto his backside.

"What the-" he started from the floor, but then the ground shook again, and the force actually made Albus lurch forward on his knees-

He picked himself up and turned around from his hunched over position, just in time to see streaks of blue light soar through the open space where a wall of the prison had once been. The jets of light flew through the open space like they were shot from a cannon, each collision making the ground rumble.

Darvy stood up and ran towards the large opening fiercely. The other Dark Alliance members followed him, and even the two holding Albus turned to see, hoisting him up and dragging him over to the edge with them.

The first thing that Albus saw was the dark, starry sky. It was one of those rare moments where there was no powerful torrent to speak of, but the wind was still strong and cold, making snapping noises and whipping Albus in the face, stinging his cheeks. He then looked down, his insides squirming at what he saw.

They were not as high up as he'd expected; high enough so that a fall would kill you, of course, but not so high that you couldn't make out details of what was going on below. As he'd predicted it was the graveyard that sat below them, occupied by hundreds of Silhouettes and fiery

Necrosteeds. Blue spells whizzed by their heads as they all surveyed the ground below, lost in the moment, and Albus realized that screeches and squeals were coming from the deadly army; they were riled up. Gazing a little further ahead, Albus saw why.

There were hundreds of people in white cloaks, marching forward in an orderly, militaristic fashion. Adorned in their new robes, the United Ministry members pressed forward with their wands raised up high, streaks of light soaring over the army and colliding with the prison, which was still shaking with every powerful spell that met it. They walked forward with dignity, heading straight for the army, and Albus knew that the invisible barrier that separated the two would not be there for long. Waddlesworth had sent these men in to defeat Darvy and his army, and today was the day of action; a fight was about to begin, the graveyard in front of the wizarding prison serving as the battleground.

A streak of blue collided just at their feet, and the resulting tremor sent nearly all of them to the floor. Albus felt adrenaline rush through him. Realizing that he would not get another chance, he stamped his foot on the shoe of one of the Dark Alliance members clinging to him, then elbowed him in the ribs. The man hunched over in pain, and Albus spun around and reached his hand into the man's robes, hoping that he'd guessed right-

He had. He removed his wand quickly, warmth spreading through his fingers at its touch; he could attack once more. He heard Darvy give a shout of rage as the other Dark Alliance members all raised their wands to act, and Albus spun back around, whipping his wand through the air with determination, no real spell in mind. The result was a flash of light that sent the other hooded figure holding him to the ground.

Albus's eyes swept over the chamber at once; he saw the Silhouettes standing there idly, unable to take part in the battle, saw the Dark Alliance members trying to regain their footing and fire hexes his way. And then he saw Darvy, his teeth bared and his face twisted, and his wand raised simultaneously with Albus', his mouth opening to snarl out an incantation-

"Avada-"

"Sectum-" Albus started back, thinking of the most ferocious curse that he could at the moment-

A large streak of blue hit the chamber again, this time the ceiling, and chunks of rock started to fall from it, one sizeable hunk in particular landing on a Dark Alliance member too slow to evade; he was crushed underneath the slab of stone silently.

The force threw both Albus and Darvy to the ground, their curses canceled in the middle. Albus made to stand up again, to complete the incantation this time, he was half way there when another spell met the chamber, this one right at the edge where Albus was standing. He felt the ground underneath him break, and looking down he saw the stone give way, his feet sliding with them, and he staggered back into the air, his entire body flipping upside down as he was tossed

from the chamber. He saw a Dark Alliance member fly out with him, heard Darvy's cackle of triumph-

He flipped through the air silently, the cold, rushing air biting into his skin as the free fall commenced, gravity forcing him downwards at an alarmingly fast pace. He kept his wand clutched tightly in the palm of his hand, but he could do little to concentrate. His constant flipping forced him to view the scene below from different angles, and he watched as the United Ministry stormed into the graveyard, wands brandished, streaks of all different colors accompanying them as the Silhouettes tore into them, and many of them branched off and went to run through the mess, to not be on the front lines and meet their demise immediately-

He felt himself stop. Hanging upside down in mid-air, the wind still in his ears and tears frozen to the sides of his face from the fall, he saw a United Ministry member pointing his wand upwards from ground-level, and he realized that he'd just been saved by a stranger. Slowly, Albus felt himself float downward, the Dark Alliance member who'd been falling with him being granted no such kindness. He fell the whole way down screaming, his back landing on the dirt with a painful thud, the noise in his throat vanishing along with his life.

Albus felt himself hit the ground, though his landing was much nicer. His knees and hands hit the dirt first, and he looked up to thank his savior, realizing that it was an Auror who probably recognized him as Harry Potter's son. It was the Aurors being sent in first, after all.

He rose to his feet just in time to see the white robed man crumple to his knees and fall over face first, his back splattered with blood. A Silhouette was standing behind him, hunched over and snapping its jaw wildly, the man's flesh still clutched within its fingers. It caught sight of Albus next and lunged at him-

"Stop!" he called out, and while the battle going on around him continued, the Silhouette fell still at once. Albus aimed his wand. "*Confringo!*"

Hitting a still target was much easier than hitting a moving one, and the end result had the Silhouette crumble to the ground as a pile of slimy bones and grey flesh. Albus looked around wildly, nearly tripping over a nameless headstone, and eyed the slaughter going on around him.

Silhouettes were leaping and slashing in every direction, United Ministry members casting spells that did little to effect them. Albus saw a blonde one fire two Killing Curses consecutively, and they flew through the Silhouette he was squaring off against as though it was intangible. The beast then screeched and made furious slashing movements, and the United Ministry member fell over as a bloody pulp. Just a few feet away a Necrosteed galloped over a headstone, charging through two United Ministry members and sending them to the ground. It then neighed, its thick black body soaring upwards as a stream of brilliant fire issued from its mouth, sending another United Ministry member into a fiery frenzy.

Albus allowed instinct to take over completely. He fired a Blasting Curse at the charcoal colored horse, but this only knocked it back down onto all fours. It charged ahead at him, and a sinking feeling in his gut told him that he wasn't going to be able to tell it to stop-

He leapt out of the way, and the Necrosteed collided with a Silhouette instead, sending them both to the ground. Albus looked up from the dirt and saw two United Ministry members attempt to double team another skeletal beast, but their spells were missing, as the creature was so quick that it dodged them all. Albus jumped to his feet and ran over to the exchange.

"Stop!" he yelled at the Silhouette, and it stopped moving at once. "Use Blasting Curses!" Albus added to the United Ministry members, who shared looks of confusion on their faces. Nevertheless, they both raised their wands up high, and at the next second the motionless creature had been reduced to a pile on the dirt.

Albus grinned at their success, but at the very next moment his smile thinned. He heard a screeching from up above, and the next thing that he knew the black birds that he'd seen before had swooped down, pecking at the two unsuspecting wizards with their long beaks-

Another United Ministry member approached from behind them, and he whirled his wand around, creating a stream of orange light. The spell, whatever it was, sent the soaring creatures flying away, but at the next moment a Silhouette had approached the man, swiping one of its massive claws along. The United Ministry member raised his wand and created a shimmering, bubble like shield, but the blade-like fingers passed right through it as though it were air, connecting with his face and sending him falling over, convulsing.

Albus spun around in all directions, raising his wand to blast away at anything that came near him. He was surrounded on all sides though, and being in the midst of this battle was quite different than any other that he'd been in. They were overwhelmingly outnumbered, and by creatures that showed no signs of slowing down. At every spare glance that he got he looked down at the ground, finding fresh faces at every turn. There was a woman there, her brown hair tangled around her gashed face. A few feet away was a young man, his face clear but ghostly white, his hands resting on his chest where his robes had been torn to reveal raw flesh, dry, sticky blood coating purplish skin.

Albus ducked just as a Silhouette aimed to take off his head. He yelled at it to stay still, then blasted it to smithereens, doing the same with the scraggly beast towering behind it. The chaos that enveloped him continued despite his close shave though, and he again left his position, searching for more pockets of Aurors, but they were becoming increasingly more difficult to find alive, most of them strewn about the floor, having died believing that they were making progress...

He watched it all as if it was in slow motion. An elderly woman was firing Killing Curses at a Silhouette to no avail; it went to attack at her but she ducked underneath its arm, only to be

knocked to the floor by a passing Necrosteed, which trampled over her aimlessly and proceeded to shoot a stream of flames from its mouth. The wizard that it met created a formidable looking, icy blue shield of energy that met the flames, preventing them from reaching him. His success was short lived however, as at the next moment a Silhouette had torn into him from behind. Just a few feet away another United Ministry member was scrambling on the floor clutching at his bleeding leg; one of the bird-like creatures swooped down on him at once to finish the job. And just a few feet away from that, off in the distance, Albus caught sight of a face that he recognized from having once went to the Ministry with his father, a man with long brown hair who was now unmistakably dead.

And with a pang in his gut, he realized that they were all dead. That none of them would make it out of here alive, that they'd been brought to this island like lambs to a slaughter, that fathers and brothers and mothers and daughters were all being torn to shreds, unaware that Darvy's army was unbeatable, that the small amounts of damage that they were doing were only against lifeless, expendable shells anyway. That the Dark Alliance was spared from it all, but these brave men and women were dying, dying for nothing, just like Fairhart...

And then, quite suddenly, he sank to the floor. The buzzing in his ears from before returned, but it did so with such force that it actually caused him pain. He glanced up and saw the army of Silhouettes continue to decimate its opposition, and then he felt power course through him. But this was not any ordinary power. It was not even the power that he'd felt when he'd lifted the train. It was an unsettling, yet invigorating power, a charge that surged through his entire body. He felt himself shake on the floor as though he was about to vomit, sweat dripping down his face as his head started to burn up. He jammed his eyes shut due to the sudden agony that overtook him, and from behind his eyelids he saw waves of gold. And yet he knew, somehow, that this transformation wasn't going to be like any other that he'd ever went through. He was with his army now, and their presence cleared his mind entirely. Eventually he felt the pain disappear, and the next thing that he knew everything was light and soft, and when he opened his eyes everything was tinted by a brilliant shade of gold, and all thoughts were wiped from his mind. There were no conflicting voices this time. All disputes were gone. He was no longer Albus. Whatever he was now, he was channeling all of his power into a single vessel, and as he started to raise himself up he felt his feet lift from the ground, the disarray around him just a precursor to the carnage that would soon come...

Fango Wilde walked forward slowly, his feet tired and his breathing thin. The unconscious body of Potter trailed along behind him, hovering in mid-air, and though it was difficult to use a wand that he wasn't familiar with it, he knew that he simply couldn't abandon the man behind him. They were nearing the end of the trail, and he'd need to revive him soon, to find the precise location where Apparition was possible...

He kept the Foulest Book tucked under his arm as he walked, its burly, rectangular shape hard to grip by his broken hand. He glanced down at it pensively as he walked, still relieved that he'd managed to avoid alerting anyone as he'd went after it. It had been a simple task, really-the Book was just a floor under where San and the Potter boy had left them-but he had still needed to be cautious while leaving the prison. Matters had grown slightly more complicated when he'd seen the United Ministry members launch their attack on the towering structure, but sneaking by them hadn't been that difficult, considering the state of things. And now here he was, on the same trail that what looked like at least hundred United Ministry fighters had just taken towards the prison, each step that he took putting more and more distance between himself and San.

He felt somewhat guilty for his misdirection; for having sent he and the Potter boy to Darvy, instead of leading them away. But San was not stupid, he knew that the Book would have either been very high or very low in the prison, and it was essential that he go the wrong way. He could not have allowed San to have it; could not have given him the opportunity to speak to her. No, it was he himself who needed that chance, needed it to tell her everything, and to apologize for so much...

He kept pace on the trail, Potter floating along behind him loftily. A line of light had risen up ahead, and he saw that daybreak was nearing. The Ministry trail was quaint, the sounds of his tired feet dragging along the dirt the only real noises to distract him from his thoughts. How long he'd been walking for he wasn't quite sure, but as he gazed on either side of him, taking in the endless green beyond the enchantments that saved him from the dangers of the island, he knew that he wasn't going to be given any visual cues of where the best point to stop was. He'd have to wake up Potter now.

Fango flicked his wand sharply, and a thud behind him told him that Potter's unconscious body had dropped to the floor. He turned and frowned, reflecting on the position that he was in. He remembered having served Potter years ago. Though he hadn't been in his office, there were few who didn't answer to him or his obnoxious brother-in-law, and he recalled having liked the wizarding hero very much. But still, he would have to be assertive now. Much had changed in the past few years. He'd cheated death enough to know that it always came down to playing the role right. Slowly, he raised his wand, organizing his thoughts to help him decide the best way in which to force Potter to get him off the island.

"*Rennervate*" he said, his voice dry and scratchy. Potter's emerald eyes blinked open at once, but never far enough to indicate anything other than bewilderment. The lightning bolt scar of legend on his forehead crinkled as he lifted his head up slightly, and Fango crouched down over him, the sunlight allowing him to see his own shadow on the dirty road.

"You're on the Ministry trail" he said lowly, as Potter hoisted himself up on his elbows, looking around in confusion. "I need your help-"

Crack!

Fango felt a fist collide with his face with such power that he was forced to stagger back, his nose leaking blood and his head pounding. He went to raise his wand and aim it blindly, his eyes jammed shut from the moment of pain, but he felt Potter squirm around beneath him, and at the next moment a fist had collided with his stomach. He felt the air leave his lungs as he dropped the wand to the ground, and before he could recuperate for even a single second he'd been forcefully grabbed and thrown down into the dirt. Through the pain that riddled him he felt Potter climb on top of him, pinning him down, one hand clutched around the front of his robes.

He opened his eyes slowly, just in time to see another fist connect with his face.

"Where's Albus!" Potter roared, spraying Fango with spit as he did so. He opened his eyes again and saw the outline of Potter in the sunlight, his face wild and berserk, his jet black hair a tangled mess.

"I- I don't-" Fango started, but Potter's knuckles met his eye with tremendous force again.

He was starting to feel light headed now; being knocked around was taking its toll on him. Salty blood leaked down into his mouth, and he had just enough cognizance to wonder how Potter's blows were so strong after he'd been kept only barely alive for weeks. Through his thoughts he heard the question barked again.

"Where is he!"

"I don't- I don't- I don't know-"

Wham!

This blow hit him in the mouth; he felt something slide down the back of his throat and realized a second later that it had been his tooth.

"WHERE IS MY SON!"

"Fairhart!" Fango gasped out desperately, hoping that the boy was indeed still with his former friend. "With Fairhart! The- the prison-"

He closed his eyes again, in preparation for another hit, perhaps on principle, but he felt the weight shift off of him as Potter stood up.

"Wand!" bellowed Potter, and Wilde raised his hand and pointed to his right absently, where he was sure that he'd dropped it. He wasn't even going to bother putting up a struggle for it.

He listened as Potter scraped the instrument up from the dirt, and the sounds of furious footsteps told him that his attacker had marched off briskly back towards the prison.

Fango merely lay there on his back in the dirt, listening as the sounds of Potter's running disappeared. Once more in the silence, his face now aching all over and his mouth full of blood,

he stared upwards into the sunlight, wondering if he would even be able to get back up. His legs felt loose and weak stretched out on the trail, his head stiff and heavy.

How had he gotten himself in this position? He was on the island that housed the notorious wizarding prison, his life dangled in front of him by Death's Right Hand the entire time. He remembered when that psychopath had discovered his treachery; had discovered that he'd fed information to Waddlesworth. Fango had been at peace then, been almost relieved when he'd thought that he would be killed for his betrayal. But the thought of leaving this world without making amends had been unbearable. He gave the Right Hand all of the information that was asked of him, and even the daily torture had been unable to finish him off, his determination had been so great. The idea that he could somehow get off the island with the Book had been a spark of hope; that he'd be able to speak to her had been his one reason for keeping himself alive.

The Book!

He picked his head up, glancing around the ground as he did so. He slowly pulled himself into a sitting position, disgusted with himself for having been unaware that the thick treasure had slipped from his hands during his pummeling, and his breathing slowed down as the object came into focus a few feet away. Potter had walked right by it, caring for nothing but getting back to his son.

He crawled towards it on his hands and knees, grabbing it and pulling it close as soon as his fingers could scrape against it. He still had the Book. Now he just needed a way off the island.

Fango rose to his feet, nearly toppling over as he did so. He still had no idea where the actual Apparition points were on the trail; he supposed that he could guess, but the idea of splinching himself and leaving half of his body in the North Sea was just as comforting as the idea of staying period. He glanced over his shoulder, back at the prison. Streaks of light had been hitting it before, but they'd all stopped now. There was but a single, albeit large ray of gold there now, a beam of magnificent light that Fango did not think could be brought about by Death's Right Hand, or even his army...

Had the United Ministry won? Would they perhaps be leaving soon? That would be his chance to get off this wretched island, his only one left it seemed. He began jogging back towards Azkaban, the large beam of light hovering in front of it acting almost as a star designed to lead him in the right direction.

His weak gait was made all the more poor by the weight of the Foulest Book, now clutched tightly in both arms and pressed up to his chest. It felt ridiculous to move in such a manner; he was forcibly reminded of a schoolgirl carrying her things through a hall, but he was unwilling to simply hide the Book on the trail somewhere, lest he be unable to return to it. He instead gritted his teeth and pressed on, the pain in his face for some reason intensifying with every step now, the warm blood dripping from down his chin and landing on his bare knuckles.

For at least ten minutes he kept his speed up, his desire to leave the island overtaking his fatigue. The trail began to transform itself before him, shrubbery and other forms of plant life becoming more visible the closer that he got to the massive hunk of stone that he'd resided in for so long. The beam of golden light was becoming clearer as well. Starting from ground level and shooting upwards into the clouds, he realized something most peculiar about it. There was a shape inside it; a small black star. It almost looked like a person...

The graveyard came into view, and what Fango saw actually made him stagger backwards and fall over, the heavy item in his hands crushing his ribs painfully. From ground level he bore witness to a fortress of the dead.

There were bodies everywhere. White robes splattered with red littered every inch of the dirty soil, many of them slung over nameless headstones, all of them unmoving. More strange was that their killers weren't moving either.

The Silhouettes that had terrified Fango for so long were all standing quite still, their lanky, slimy arms resting at their sides, their lopsided bodies planted firmly on the ground. They were not the erratic, bloodthirsty beings that he had seen tear a man limb from limb so many times in the last few weeks, but rather skeletal statues, all of them staring upwards at the beam of light as though it fascinated them, or as if they were afraid it, or even as if...they worshipped it.

The ferocious horses had stopped moving as well, their heads facing downwards as if they were void of purpose. The black birds that Fango had rarely seen were motionless as well, perched atop the occasional Silhouette as though a loyal pet. Only one figure that Fango could see in the graveyard was moving, and it was a man rather than a beast, and he was not wearing white robes either.

Potter was waving his arms in the air back and forth, he too staring up at the golden beam of light. Fango stood back up and watched from a distance, unable to listen to his words; without even realizing it, a ferocious wind had started to blow around him, and indeed, the gust carried through the graveyard as well, the powerful noise preventing him from understanding what Potter was yelling towards the light.

But what was Potter doing here anyway? Certainly, he should have been using this diversion to enter the prison, to find his son-

And then it hit him. Slowly, Fango gazed upwards in the cylindrical ray of light, now aware of the identity of the black star in the middle of it...

The Potter boy was dangling within the light as though by strings. Raised high above them all, at least a hundred feet up, his arms were hanging loosely by his sides, his body hunched over, his head pointed down. Fango could barely make out the details of his appearance, the light was so great, but the similarities between his posture and those of a marionette were so great that he

could do little to dispel them. And it was with this idea that he made his speculation. Glancing up at the figure of the Potter boy, he understood that the adolescent was controlling nothing; was possibly even unaware of his actions. He was just a vessel now, a body, a being possessed with a great power, a power that was now being harnessed effectively, just as Fango had once heard Death's Right Hand claim...

And then, even from ground level, Fango watched the movement that took place next. The Potter boy raised his right arm as though it was being pulled upward by some invisible force, then struck it through the air. An arc of golden light shot from the beam rooted in the ground, so magnificent and large that it was blinding, and the stream of energy collided with the prison-

A clatter like no other that Fango had ever heard entered his ears. It was as though a thousands bolts of lightning were mocking solid rock. Just as the arc of blinding light had made contact with Azkaban chunks of rock had started to fall from the clouds above, and Fango understood that the blast had destroyed an upper portion of the prison; the debris now raining down on the graveyard in all different shape and sizes. The Potter boy flung his other arm through the air, and an identical streak of light made the exact same sound, and the wind was now so fierce that Fango was nearly knocked off of his feet, he could hear it clear as day-

Again and again the waves of light slammed into the prison, until stone was falling from the sky incessantly, often times crushing the Silhouettes and sending them into the dirt. And the Silhouettes...something outrageous was happening to them. Fango could still see Potter flailing his arms through the air, could still see his jaw widen and close with every indiscernible yell, but the scene going on around him was what was truly to behold. The Silhouettes had all lowered themselves down to one knee, their disgusting skull heads bowed as though in prayer. They were like peasants in the sight of a king, or slaves to a master. For a single second the Potter boy high above stopped swinging his arms to mutilate the prison, and had instead extended both of his arms as if to welcome the creatures down below-

And then he made a sharp movement with both hands, and the entire army of the undead started to deconstruct. Each and every skeletal being seemed to age a thousand years, their bones exploding into bits and pieces, then transforming into dust, which blew away with the whirlwind that had overtaken the graveyard, the whirlwind that was now lifting the bodies of the United Members from the floor and was tossing them around. The charcoal colored horses and the winged creatures followed suit with their companions, reducing themselves to dust silently, disappearing as though they'd never existed, and soon enough there was no army, none at all. Now it was just Harry Potter standing alone in the graveyard, calling upwards to his son in vain, clutching a headstone to not be swept up by the cyclone. And then-

Just near the entrance of the prison several figures emerged, all of them wearing red masks and black cloaks, their wands raised. These were the Dark Alliance members who had been ordered to eliminate the threat, and Fango thought that he'd never seen a more unfair fight. They all fired

jets of light into the air-mostly green-but the curses never made it far. The prison was still crumbling from above, slabs of stone still showering the ground as though meteorites, and the curses all collided with these portions of rock, unable to meet the target still hovering in the sky like a second sun. The unfortunate masked wizards were forced to dodge the rocks as well, and many of them proved unable to, instead being crushed into the soil, their lives ending in a most quick and harsh fashion.

Fango didn't know what to do. His instincts told him to run back, that nothing would be accomplished here, but he was unable to take his eyes off of the boy, who was still hovering up high, surrounded by the eeriest shade of gold imaginable-

And slowly, he started to descend. He was not falling however, but rather lowering himself, his back more straight and his head now raised; he appeared to have at least marginal control over his body. He floated downward as though sliding through a tube, and when his feet touched the ground, the light around him vanished at once, the wind dying down with it.

His father ran to him, grabbing him by the shoulders, and with no noise throughout the graveyard now, Fango could hear his yells clearly.

"Albus!" he was shouting, shaking his son, who was standing hunched over in a stupor; Fango tilted his head to the side and saw that though the boy's aura had vanished, his eyes were still glowing ominously. "Albus, Albus look at me! Look at me! You have to stop-"

And then Fango saw another figure emerge from the entrance to the prison, this one wearing no mask. His filthy blonde hair flowing over his shoulders, a primitive expression on his face, Death's Right Hand had crept into the graveyard like a thief in the night, the Dragonfang Wand raised high. He pointed it right at the two Potter's, the elder of whose back was turned and who would surely take the hit-

A streak of green light shot from the wand, soaring through the air in a straight line over at the father and son. Fango wanted to call out in warning, but he was still too shocked at what he had just witnessed, and now the burst of light was seconds from Potter's back-

In a swift motion, the golden-eyed boy snapped his head upwards, then grabbed his father and moved him aside, holding him tight as if it were he doing the protecting. He extended his hand forward, and the Killing Curse met it-

But the boy didn't die. Fango watched with his mouth agape as the beam stayed stationary pressing up against the boy's palm, eventually encapsulating itself as a ball of menacing green light. The Potter boy squeezed his fingers around the green sphere, his father looking at it with a look of horror on his face.

And then it disappeared. The green light vanished within the boy's hand, leaving it smoking. Fango caught sight of the caster, who had been grinning a moment ago, and saw that his face was

now blank, his blue eyes wide open and his wand still raised, as though he simply didn't understand what had just happened.

But Fango did. He stared at the boy, who was standing firmly upright, one arm still wrapped around his father in a protective way. His eyes continued to gleam, and Fango understood that, at this moment, the boy was not one person; he had more than one soul in him. Red Ares had spoken of this to Fango before, had told him years ago that this was a power that he craved, to have hundreds of souls within him, remnants of the previous owners of the Dragonfang Wand; he had said that the Silhouettes would obey that owner, just as they had moments ago. The boy had had hundreds of beings within him when the Curse had been fired at him; it would have thus taken hundreds of curses to kill him.

And then, the boy collapsed. His father gave a wail as he shrunk to his knees as well, shaking his son grievously, not understanding the situation himself. Fango saw Death's Right Hand standing quite motionless at the edge of the graveyard, and then, slowly, he turned and ran for the prison, apparently too terrified to attempt anything else. Debris was still falling from the top of the prison, but not nearly as much now, and the cowardly tyrant vanished behind it all, no doubt returning to the confines of the structure and intent on finding his remaining supporters and leaving with them.

Potter continued to cradle his son on the ground, rocking him back and forth and holding his body, which suddenly looked feeble and languid; a stark contrast to the presence that had shone through the sky minutes ago. And then Fango heard more noises. He turned and saw an array of white robes, all of them running forward along the trail, and he knew that the second wave of United Ministry members had arrived. Another hundred of them, their wands all raised, expecting a battle that was already over.

Fango seized his chance at once. He looked around wildly, spotting a deceased United Ministry member laying roughly thirty feet away. He ignored the moans of Potter and ran towards the corpse, nearly vomiting when he saw the bloody mess that lay before him. Quickly and adroitly he removed the bloody robes from the United Ministry member, who was unrecognizable behind the gash in his face. He fastened the white, bloody robes around himself, concealing the Foulest Book within them, then threw himself to the ground, the soggy garments pressing and sticking to his skin as he did so.

"Help!" he yelled out at the oncoming United Ministry members, and he propped himself up against a headstone, as though he'd been gravely injured. "Help!"

"We've got a survivor over here!" one of them yelled, and Fango felt relief wash over him.

The first to approach him was a middle-aged woman with thin lips and straggly brown hair.

"Where are you hurt?" she asked, crouching down next to him. More white robed wizards and witches were marching by them, several of them yelling out. Fango caught one of the phrases.

"Merlin's beard, it's Harry Potter! Over here!"

He returned his attention back to the woman. He gave a grimace of pain-which he didn't really need to exaggerate, considering the state of him-and clutched on to a particularly drenched piece of fabric near his chest.

"Everywhere!" he said. "Need- St. Mungo's..."

"You're okay now" she said, and then she turned and glanced over her shoulder. "Get this man back on the trail, and Apparate him out of here! He needs immediate medical attention!"

She clapped him on the shoulder, and at the next moment, two burly United Ministry members had raised him up gingerly, grabbing him by the shoulders to keep him steady.

"Can you walk?" one of them asked, and Fango nodded, the Foulest Book still concealed underneath his robes. Together he and the two men bustled along through the wave of white robes, heading straight for the trail.

Fango glanced back over his shoulder as they walked, catching sight of a crowd of United Ministry members, who had all encircled Potter and his son. Through the cracks of legs he could see that the boy wasn't moving, though his father was still speaking to him, an expression of anguish on his face, occasionally shaking him as if to wake him. Fango couldn't help but wonder if the boy ever would, but as he turned back to face the dirt pathway that would lead him off the island, he realized something else; something that he couldn't believe he hadn't already noticed.

The boy had been in the graveyard...but San had been nowhere to be found.

He smiled ruefully, a wave of different, sometimes contradictory emotions overtaking him. He attempted to push them all away though, his imminent freedom the only thought on his mind now.

Chapter 30: The End Of Unity

Everything was soft. Warmth spread through him, and though he was able to move fluidly, he felt sluggish, as though he was ensnared by the source of his comfort. Albus trudged along through the blinding light, one hand held in front of his face to shield his eyes, his footsteps echoing along after him as he walked across the floor, which was every bit as white as the light. The fear that had overtaken him before was gone now; replaced by a child-like curiosity and a few fragments of thought. The graveyard was gone. Those creatures were gone. Where was he now?

It scarcely matter where he was though, as he couldn't stop even if he wanted to. He pushed himself along further into the light, and yet, it never seemed to get any closer. He didn't understand where he was, or why he was feeling this way. He felt empty. And yet, he was cozy too. Nestled up somewhere, he was sure, but still walking forward nonetheless...

He opened his eyes slowly. The light was hanging above him, but it seemed artificial; a far cry from the blinding force that he'd been drawn to before. He tried moving his arms to rub at his eyes, which were exceptionally blurry, but found himself struggling against some sort of bonds. He tried his feet next, but they were just as trapped. He was locked in his warmth, comfortable but frightened. He wanted desperately to move-

"You're awake!"

Albus lifted his head up forcefully, his shoulders freeing themselves from their restraints as he did so. He looked around wildly, his alertness helping the scene around him come into focus. It was all vaguely familiar to him, but what he recognized most occurred when he turned his head sharply to the right. Pale and pointed, someone was staring right at him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

"Scorpius?" Albus blurted out.

"Not quite" replied Draco Malfoy. "But dear me..."

Albus looked around again, finally having the sense to look down at what was preventing him from moving his limbs. As it turned out, they were blankets; thick and soft, dramatic improvements over the last covers that he'd used, back when he'd been sleeping in Fairhart's cabin-

Fairhart. Azkaban!

His heartbeat quickened as he looked around frantically.

"Where- where- where am- what-"

"You really don't know?" Scorpius' father asked, and Albus saw that he was sitting in a comfortable armchair, looking as though he'd been there for quite a while. "Isn't this your room?"

Albus ripped his arms from underneath the blankets and rubbed at his eyes. Blinking furiously, he soaked in the walls around him. He was indeed in his own room...but this was impossible. He couldn't be at his home, the Potter household was so far away from the looming prison, and the dense jungle, and the monstrosities there...

"I don't- I don't-"

"Settle down" Scorpius' father drawled, frowning. "Of course *I'm the one* on watch duty when you wake up" he added to himself in an undertone. "As if they could have picked anyone less prepared..."

"Who picked what?" Albus said, his chest pounding up and down as he sat up straight. "Watch duty...woke up. I- woke...? How long was I-"

"Lay back down" Scorpius' father said shortly, and he actually pushed him back somewhat. "It would be just my luck if you knocked yourself back out under my watch too...or actually," he continued, pressing his finger to his chin in a thoughtful manner, "I *could* just say that you'd never woken..."

"What's going on?" Albus said, and his Potions professor rose to his feet.

"I really shouldn't be the one explaining all this" he said, sounding somewhat nervous. He held up his hands as if to declare innocence. "I was only standing guard because I thought that poor girl needed some sleep-"

"Mirra..."

Scorpius' father gave a tremendous sigh of relief, as though pleased that Albus had caught on so quickly.

"Oh yes" he said. "That poor girl spent many a night sitting in this chair here, whispering to you; crying over you. Nearly as much as your mother, I'd say..."

"Many a night..." Albus repeated, and he rubbed at his head. "How- how long have I-"

"Nearly two weeks" he was answered, and Albus' jaw dropped.

"I- what the- no-"

"Calm down" Scorpius' father said, and though his tone was soothing, it sounded as though he was slightly unnerved. "Just lay back down now-"

"What happened!" Albus snapped, looking around once more as if the answers would be found in the room of his childhood. "What- how did...?"

Scorpius' father scratched behind his ear, looking exasperated.

"Well seeing as how you're not going to stop asking me things, I guess I'll be the one to tell you after all" he said lightly. "As best I can, anyway. Now what do you-"

"How did I get off that island!" Albus said shrilly, feeling his body shake somewhat. The warmth and benevolent atmosphere around him now was such a stark contrast to what he'd endured before that it was rather difficult to assimilate himself. He thought of the creatures in the graveyard, the streaks of fire, the giant, leopard-like beast that had nearly took his head off. He glanced towards the door to his left in a paranoid manner, as though expecting something dangerous to barge through it.

"You were Apparated off" Scorpius' father told him, sounding very much as though he wanted to add the word "obviously" to the end of it.

"By- by who-"

"By your father" he was answered. "And the other-"

"My dad" Albus breathed, and he felt a weight lift from his heart that he hadn't even noticed before. "My dad..."

But how was this possible? That last time that he'd seen his father, they'd actually been in the prison, hadn't they? He'd been unconscious, being led away by-

Wilde. Albus clenched his fists in rage, his teeth baring. Fango Wilde...

"Are you okay?" Scorpius' father asked him, sounding generally concerned.

Albus snapped his gaze back up. "How did my dad- I mean..."

"Well help arrived soon after you destroyed the army, and from there it was just a matter of finding the right place to-"

"What?" Albus asked, this sentence going over his head completely. "Army? Destroyed...who destroyed it?" he asked. The last portion of the battle that he could remember had involved white robed wizards dying every second. Had there been enough waves of them to actually succeed in what Waddlesworth had promised?

But Scorpius' father had cringed, and when he spoke next it was in a fragile, delicate tone.

"*You did*, Albus" he said. "You destroyed them."

"*What?*" said Albus, bewilderment flooding his head. What was Scorpius' father talking about? "No, I- well- I mean- yeah" he said, nodding his head up and down, now aware of what was being claimed. "Yeah, I destroyed a few- two or three at least- but there were- there were so many...and-"

"No" Scorpius' father said, shaking his head and giving him a blank look. "You destroyed *all of them*, Albus. And from what I've heard, you did it with relative ease too."

"That's impossible" Albus said, shaking his head adamantly. "I- I couldn't have-"

"Your father watched you do it" Scorpius' father said quietly, his blonde eyebrows furrowing.

Albus gawked at him. "H- how...?"

Scorpius' father shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine as to the intricacies of it. But from what your father claims, it bore more than a passing resemblance to what I saw you do the day the train was attacked."

Albus looked downward, searching through his thoughts desperately to cling to any memories of the graveyard that he could. It always ended with him seeing United Ministry members slaughtered however; from that point on there was nothing. When he'd levitated the train, at least, he'd been somewhat in control of himself. Had fought with himself. But for some reason seeing those creatures in action had led to a transformation that prevented him from being aware of any of his actions.

"Did I- did I kill anyone?" he asked slowly, trying not to let the worry show in his face.

"Probably" Scorpius' father answered him with another shrug. "But to be fair Albus, you didn't really seem to know what was going on at all. The way your father described it, you were quite out of sorts, all the way up until- wait, you don't remember anything?"

Albus shook his head vehemently; frowning at the question. Scorpius' father eyed him with a steely expression as he spoke his next words.

"Check your hand, boy."

Albus immediately held up his right hand, but saw nothing noticeable. He heard Scorpius' father give a groan, then checked the other. Staring at the back of it, he again saw nothing, but then he turned it over-

He felt his insides writhe. Scar tissue covered his left palm. His scar was not nearly as pleasing to look at as his father's lightning bolt however, or even the sword-like mark across James' chest. Albus' scar resembled, more than anything else, a cloud; a blotchy wad of white flesh that felt thick and course as he curled his fingers.

"How did this-

"If I can't explain how you obliterated an army of ferocious creatures, Albus," he was told plainly, "what makes you think I can explain how you survived the Killing Curse?"

Albus' eyes widened in shock. For a fleeting moment, he thought that an image would surface in his mind's eye; that this statement would bring something back. But no recollection came, leaving him to glance at the palm of his hand blandly.

"You're all in good health though, don't worry" Scorpius' father assured him. "We've been taking care of you in your sleep, and apart from nearly- well, dying from exhaustion- you've been well fed and the like. The curse doesn't appear to have had any adverse effects."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Albus asked him, looking up. "Who else is here-"

"Well like I said, Ms. Tunnels has made it a priority to sob over you at every chance that she gets. My son is here, of course, as is Mr. Vincent. Nearly your entire family as well, though they've mostly been popping in and out-not really residing here-and then there's some good friends of your father. Professor Hagrid and Professor Longbottom among them-

"Wait what?" Albus asked, confused. "Why aren't- why aren't all these people at the school?"

Thoughts of Hogwarts had flashed through his eyes so often on the island that the idea of his loved ones not being safe within it was rather disheartening. Had all his friends and younger cousins left the school to be with him? But certainly, the teachers had obligations to remain...

But then he saw the grim expression on Scorpius' father's face.

"Hogwarts is...closed. For the time being."

"*What?*" Albus asked, stymied. "Wh- why would-"

"I suppose you weren't able to keep up with the news much after the Hogwarts Express was attacked, were you?" Scorpius' father said, and he took his seat once more, as though realizing that he was going to be doing a lot of talking.

Albus made to say that this wasn't entirely true; that Fairhart had given him tidbits about the state of the school, but this seems like a foolish answer, considering that he obviously didn't know enough. Instead, he merely shook his head.

"Hogwarts became more of a safe haven than a school. Students died, Albus. Professor Handit died. The attack took life, but beyond that, it also took away the sense of security that people had had beforehand. And though Hogwarts is undoubtedly one of the best places to be during such a time...many parents didn't see it that way. Children were withdrawn every day. Rumors began circulating that the school would be attacked next, and frightened parents decided they were

better off in hiding than bunking their children up in a designated battlefield. The school remained open to all those who sought safety there however; and seeing as how it was still protected by the United Ministry at the time, it still remained rather populated."

"Then what happened?" Albus asked, worry rising in the pit of his stomach.

"Well you know what happened next, Albus" he was told bluntly. "You watched it."

"I don't-"

"Hundreds of people were killed before your very eyes, were they not? You saw the battle by the prison."

"Yeah but that was just- that was Waddlesworth's plan, wasn't it? To send Aurors in and then-"

"Waddlesworth is finished, Albus" Scorpius' father cut him off, and something resembling a smile actually crossed his face. "He was sacked the day after you left the island."

Albus' jaw dropped. What he was hearing was impossible...Waddlesworth had so much favor with the people, within the Ministry, with everyone. How had he been knocked down from his pedestal?

"Who sacked him?" Albus asked.

"We did, Albus. The people."

"We can do that-"

"Damn right we can, we elected him! When every single person who voted for you is marching outside the Ministry of Magic rioting and issuing death threats, there's not much else to do but step down, is there?"

"Then who- then who's Minister of Magic?" Albus asked, baffled by this revelation.

Scorpius' father gave him a wry smile. "I still don't think you're getting it, Albus. There is no Minister of Magic. There is no *Ministry*."

The words seemed to hang in the air after they were spoken, and it took Albus a moment to fully process them.

"There is...no...Ministry?"

"That's right" Scorpius' father said matter-of-factly.

"That doesn't make any sense" Albus asked, shaking his head as though to rid himself of such preposterousness. "there has to be *someone* in charge, some group of people, Ministers get sacked all the time, or they die-"

"The situation was much more precarious than that" Scorpius' father said. "Waddlesworth had no immediate successor; nor did he follow the normal path that a Minister takes. When a Minister of Magic is, for any reason, out of the picture, their collection of advocates takes over the reigns. Waddlesworth ruled over the United Ministry only by merging it with his own organization of vigilantes. Who is his second-in-command? That big bald bloke? What, should he be Minister?"

Albus stared at him. "I- I don't-"

"Waddlesworth's leadership, despite all of the hype, has ended up being among the least successful in history. In a single month, he declared war, a train full of children was attacked, and he marched hundreds of people off to certain death. Rumor has it that Waddlesworth is a smart man, but he bit off more than he could chew this time; he was better off leading ravenous Renegades, not an entire country."

But something had just clicked in Albus' head. Waddlesworth had led hundreds of people to their death, yes, but the end result had been as promised...

"But the army's gone!" Albus said, and why he was defending Waddlesworth, he didn't know; maybe it was because he liked the idea better than having no government at all. "Just like he said, right? He said that they'd defeat Darvy's army, and they're gone now, aren't they? It doesn't matter how-"

"Waddlesworth did not deliver on every promise, Albus, and those that he did left a bitter taste in many mouths as well. Waddlesworth promised the fall of Death's Right Hand, who escaped the island...taking much more with him than previously anticipated."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked. "How did Darvy get off the island-"

"The first wave of United Ministry members fell at the hands of his army. The second wave-the wave that comprised more of his own lot, his Renegade brethren-showed up with no army to fight. But Darvy was far from outnumbered. Waddlesworth had not counted on Darvy having so much pull over the prisoners there. He may have lost his army, but the Dark Alliance grew exponentially. The prisoners joined him, attacked the United Ministry, and eventually all left the island; Darvy was obviously aware of the Apparition points. Waddlesworth had counted on this being the first and last true battle of the war, but in the end, all that he ended up with was hundreds of dead bodies, a destroyed prison that can no longer contain prisoners, and an entirely new threat. That island is barren now. The prisoners who were still alive have all joined the Dark Alliance; all that's happened is that his actual manpower has gotten stronger. And so what if his army is wiped out for the time being? What's stopping him from-"

"-making them again" Albus finished for him, and he felt disdain overwhelm him. This is what Fairhart had been talking about; separating Darvy from his objects. But it seemed very likely that he'd gotten off the island with all three of his immensely powerful items. All that he would need

is a new place; somewhere where he could breed his army again. And now he had even more supporters to help him...

And Waddlesworth, it seemed, had nothing. Scorpius' father echoed his thoughts.

"Waddlesworth has become a wreck; a shadow of his former self. Oh he still has his supporters, but they remain loyal primarily out of the hopes that he will rise again. But the truth is that Waddlesworth is now nothing more than a joke, and he finally knows it for himself. He lost his power over the Wizarding World because of his poor decisions, and he could never obtain power in the Muggle world because he simply didn't have the allure. He's finally starting to understand that he can't be a step ahead of everyone."

"I thought for sure that if the army was destroyed...it wouldn't matter how many people died in the process."

"It's very easy to claim that you support war when you're thinking is that it will be final, absolute, and that your loved ones won't have been involved. But those men and women who you saw die were fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. Some of them had parents of their own. Perhaps their sacrifices would have been more well received if the end result had been Darvy's capture and the end of the Dark Alliance. But those people died for nothing Albus. At the most, they served to postpone the fight; and who will Waddlesworth send to their death on that day? Who can still support him, and be willing to hand over their son or daughter, or brother or sister, after what just happened?"

Albus was sure that the question was rhetorical, but he made to speak anyway. The words got caught in his throat however; he was unable to articulate his next question, and so, Scorpius' father went on seamlessly.

"Do you know why Waddlesworth could never have been a proper leader?"

Albus shook his head; he could think of several reasons, but he was sure that none of them were correct.

"Because he doesn't value human life" he was answered shortly. "Everything is a tool to Waddlesworth; a piece of a puzzle. All with a different value, assigned by himself. Those men and women that he sent in-

"-were pawns on a chessboard" Albus croaked, closing his eyes in understanding.

"Exactly" Scorpius' father said. "Until you can appreciate what it is you're leading, you can't be a leader. Waddlesworth didn't think for a single second about who he was losing, he just thought about *what* he was losing. A few trained Aurors. Not people, pawns. He crunched the numbers. Told himself that he had enough people at his disposal to wipe out Darvy's army, storm the prison, and bring 'Death's Right Hand' back to him as a corpse. He didn't account for the

variables; for things like emotion or choice. He didn't think that the prisoners would join Darvy. He didn't think that the public would care that their loved ones had been mowed down. He only cared about the results, and even when he got the ones that he desired, the intended effect was way off. Your Uncle Ron was nearly in that first wave, Albus."

Albus' eyes snapped open.

"But he left the Ministry prior to the attack; started getting together a search party to find you. But I ask, what if he'd been in it? What if he'd been slaughtered like the rest of those who Waddlesworth had ordered to the island? Whether Darvy was dead or not, would you have supported the action?"

Albus said nothing. He simply stared straight ahead, and he didn't turn until a sharp movement was made by Scorpius' father; he'd swiftly rolled up his sleeve.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked, and Albus looked at his arm. Just as he'd expected, there was a scar there. It wasn't a scar like the one on the palm of his hand however, it was more detailed; a remnant of dark magic that had once been welcome, the muggy outline of a skull.

"The Dark Mark" Albus answered him crisply.

"And do you know what that means?"

"That you- that you were a Death Ea-"

"That I was a slave" Scorpius' father cut him off sharply, an intense look on his face. "That I was a symbol, not a person. Do you think that Voldemort would have given a damn had I died? At any point? Waddlesworth may pretend to be a righteous ruler of those Renegades who still cling to him, but the fact of the matter is that few of them are more than the pawns that he used when attacking Azkaban. They don't need marks, or need to torture muggle-borns to be what I was more than twenty years ago. Now that the United Ministry has been disbanded, WAR has reformed, but they're smaller than ever, and they'll only continue to thin. Their leader has been exposed."

Albus didn't remove his eyes from the mark burned onto the arm, but he still took in every word that was being said.

"I know that the thought of there being no Minister frightens you Albus, but you have to understand, with the state of the world now, it hardly matters. Let the people look after themselves for a little while; it's better than having Waddlesworth play with them like toys. And besides, the aftermath of the United Ministry's fall had everything in the past few years being thrown into question; your father's imprisonment, for example."

"Really?" Albus asked, astounded.

"Oh yes" Scorpius' father said. "The amount of hatred that the Ministry-or the bits and pieces left of it-is getting has pushed forward the ideas that women like Janine Fischer and men like Harry Potter were placed in a game orchestrated by a corrupt government body. Details are scarce of course, but they hardly need to be fleshed out; all that people know is that the Ministry was bad, and thus, people who operated outside of it couldn't have been all that bad themselves."

"I still don't understand what's going on" Albus said with a sigh. "I mean, Darvy's on the run isn't he? If there's no Ministry, then who-"

"The Renegade movement started from good people taking the law into their own hands. Even I-someone who would have been killed by them-can attest to that. Though what it became is now a twisted reflection of former ideals, the fact remains that people who oppose evil will always seek to stop it, regardless of whether instructed to or not. Your father is already back on his feet, and my guess is that soon enough, he'll have a plan worked. Have some faith in the man, Albus. He knows what he's doing."

Albus nodded, but then Scorpius' father added hastily, in a dark voice, "But don't ever tell anyone I said that!"

Albus nodded again, and this time Scorpius' father turned to leave.

"I've more than overstayed my welcome" he said. "I should have gotten your mother as soon as you awoke; do me a favor and pretend like you're just coming out of it, okay?"

For the third time Albus nodded, but Scorpius' father didn't leave just yet. Instead he turned back, a curious look on his face, as though he himself was now expecting a question to be answered in great detail.

"You weren't exactly drug to that island, were you?" he asked, and Albus found himself unable to answer. His silence was apparently taken as confirmation however. "To free your father?" Scorpius' father asked.

Slowly, Albus nodded. Scorpius' father clapped him on the shoulder lightly, a crooked smile on his face.

"You are very brave, Albus" he said, and Albus tried curling his own mouth upwards. "Stupid though," he continued, "I mean *really* stupid- like- wow- but still...very brave."

And with that, he exited the room, no doubt to inform the entire house of Albus' awakening.

Albus merely sat there upright, staring ahead with a blank expression on his face. He was sure that at any moment his mother would come bolting through the door, wailing, but these being his first moments alone after the island, he concentrated on other things.

All that he'd witnessed there...all of those things that had occurred more than a week ago, though it didn't seem like it to him...it was all over. He was safe. His father was safe. He'd done it; the mission was a success.

And yet, he felt disappointment stir within him. Two weeks ago, this end result *would have* been a success. Merely getting his father off the island alive had been more than he could hope for. And yet...now he felt himself shake with fury at all that hadn't been done. Darvy was still alive, and though he was short an army, he was as equipped as ever to continue his tyranny. The only changes had been that now there was no Ministry to oppose him. The Wizarding World was in the grasp of Death's Right Hand...

And Fairhart was dead. He felt hot tears burn behind his eyes at the thought, the image of Fairhart tumbling backward through the Executioner's Veil replaying in his head again and again. All of those people who had died on the island that day...they'd been sent there. But not Fairhart. Fairhart had went because it was the right thing to do, and he'd been the only one who'd come even close to doing something right. The tears leaked from his face as he realized that his former professor was gone forever.

And then he felt his blood boil. Now safe from Darvy and the Dark Alliance, Albus was left to stew in his own anger, his depression morphing into full blown rage. Fairhart, who had no obligation to go to Azkaban and attempt to stop Darvy; or at the very least, to weaken him, was now dead. And to be mourned by who? Where had Fairhart been in the discussion he'd just had with Mr. Malfoy? He hadn't even been mentioned. No one cared. There wasn't going to be any funeral, no heads hung low. How many people even knew that Fairhart was dead? And from those who did, what would it matter to them?

The tears slid down his face freely, his entire body suddenly feeling cold and empty; hollow. Fairhart was gone. And his last moments had been painful, Darvy had seen to that. He remembered Fairhart's words from before, about how he wanted to choose how he'd die. To carve his own name in stone, rather than have someone else draw it in the sand. And that's when he realized it.

Fairhart never had a chance. Albus had been given two options; hand him over to WAR, or go to the island with him. Either way he'd have ended up dead. But Fairhart had selected the latter, because he knew that if he died in that way, it would be doing what he wanted. And Darvy spoiled that. Before killing Fairhart he'd snatched away any hope of finding his former love; divulged that he'd failed her. And then, bloody and weak, Darvy had killed him. Stolen from Fairhart the only thing that he'd had left in this world, the only part of his miserable life that he could still latch on to; his choice of how it would end.

And only he, Albus, would truly mourn for him.

At the very next moment, he felt arms clasp around him. He went to look up and found that it was impossible; his mother had entered silently and had pressed her entire body into him, smothering him carelessly. He heard her soft whimpers, and the next thing that he knew his vision was obscured by a coat of red hair, his cheeks suddenly wet from both the tears in her eyes and the sloppy kisses she was giving him.

Albus said nothing, instead putting his arm up and stroking her hair.

"You're awake..." she was whispering again and again. "And you're safe now..."

Albus continued to stroke her hair, realizing that his mother was not fully aware of the situation. Her tears were a product of rejoice; she had her son back, and he was safe. His tears were of grief, at the friend that he'd lost on that island...

He felt additional movement, and as he peered around his mother's shaking shoulder he saw another shape swarm around him; another cut of red hair. Two more arms wrapped around him, and he knew that his sister was now crying too.

That meant that James was nearby as well. Albus caught sight of him in the open doorway, standing slouched, hands in his pockets and a peculiar look on his face. It was something between a scowl and an ebullient smile, and he knew that his older brother was unable to decide between hugging him as well, or thumping him across the head.

"How long have you been awake?" his mother asked, relinquishing her hold slightly and tilting up his chin. He eyes looked extremely red; it was as though crying had been common place for quite a while.

"Just woke up" Albus lied. "I saw someone leaving the room in a hurry and that- that was it."

His mother gave a weak nod, and then Albus saw two other people move by the door.

Scorpius looked as he always did; a miniature of his composed father, his blonde hair combed back and his leer calculated. Next to him was Morrison, tall and goofy looking, and Albus saw that he'd grown some facial hair back. Apart from this he looked just as he had on the train though.

His mother turned and saw them, then stood up, wiping at her eyes. Lily rose as well and did the same, and Albus saw that her complexion was even more pale than he remembered; the absence of her brother had taken a huge toll on her.

"I guess you'll be wanting to talk to your friends" his mother said with a weak smile.

Albus made to object; he was sure if he was honest on the matter it would upset her, but she'd already shaken her head.

"Your friends have spent just as much time looking after you as I have" she said. "Talk to them. I'll see you later; I have to go tell your father anyway."

And without further ado she left, giving a pleasant nod to Scorpius and Morrison as she did so. James and Lily followed along behind her, the latter first giving Albus a brief hug before she went. And a moment later, it was just he and his two friends.

The silence was nothing short of unbearable. Albus watched them closely for a movement, and it was Morrison who did so first, striding around his bed and sitting in the comfortable chair that Scorpius' father had just been occupying. Scorpius simply leaned back against the wall, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"So how've you guys been?" Albus asked, not looking at either of them.

"Good-" Morrison started at once, but Scorpius silenced him at once.

"Mate," he said, shaking his head, "how do you get yourself in these situations?"

Albus sighed. "I- I don't even know-"

"You feeling okay?" Morrison asked him, and Albus nodded.

"That's good-"

"What were you thinking?" Scorpius shot out abruptly, a sharp expression on his face. He was now standing straight up.

Albus swallowed. He knew what Scorpius was talking about; knew why he was angry. It may have been very easy for others to assume that Albus had been kidnapped following the attack on the train; whisked away by the scarred Renegade in a situation out of his control. But Scorpius was one of those few who knew better; was one of those who had been aware of his opportunity to leave, the opportunity that he hadn't taken.

"What was going through you head mate?" Scorpius asked in the same tone, when Albus failed to answer him at first.

"Give the guy a break!" Morrison said testily. "He's been through-"

"I was thinking that I needed to get my dad out of Azkaban" Albus said, thankful for Morrison's sentiments but unwilling to let them postpone the inevitable quarrel with his other friend. "And it worked, didn't it?"

"That's not the point Al!" Scorpius hissed. "Do you have any- do you- how could- you know you weren't the only who had it rough!" he said. "After you went missing. It was difficult enough wondering where you were and what you were doing...trying to explain it to others was awful."

"How is she?" Albus asked, catching on to his words at once.

"She's been in a right state, what do you think mate?" Scorpius told him, and Morrison was now watching them converse, his head turning as they each spoke. "I mean she was a mess when you went missing...we all tried being there for her, me, Morrison, Mel, Eckley. Your family was lost in their own world I reckon, a different thought process entirely. And after your dad got you out of there it only got a little better...we didn't even know if you were going to wake up..."

Albus nodded solemnly. He couldn't imagine the way things had been, but he still had more to ask.

"But she's okay though, right? Like, healthy? I remember when the train got attacked..."

He trailed off. The last time he'd seen Mirra she'd been hit in the chest by a lethal looking curse, and it felt awkward saying it aloud. Scorpius waved his hand with a dismissive look however.

"Yeah yeah, she was fine. Healed up in a week or so. It's just her mental state that we've been worried about."

Albus said nothing, scratching behind his neck to distract himself from the piercing look that Morrison was giving him. He still felt warm and safe in his bed, but the atmosphere had changed immensely since the arrival of his two friends. As he was now used to, he waited for them to ask for details. And predictably, Morrison rose to the occasion.

"What was it like mate?" he asked quietly, leaning forward and folding his hands. "On the island- what- what happened-"

"I have some questions for you guys first" Albus said swiftly. His friends exchanged a glance- that damn glance that they'd been exchanging since first year- and then slowly nodded, neither of them appearing too taken aback by his declaration.

"What happened right after the Dark Alliance attacked the Hogwarts Express?" he asked.

Unsurprisingly, Scorpius spoke up first.

"Once all of the students were at the school safely, the entire place went into a lockdown. McGonagall said that no one was to leave their dormitories, and apparently, United Ministry guards were stationed everywhere."

"From there news just slipped in" piped up Morrison. "We learned about who'd died, who was in the Hospital Wing. Parents were notified, and everyone was scared. After a few days though, when it seemed like no attack was going to happen, they finally started to let parents come in and claim their children."

"At what point did people notice I was gone?" Albus asked them both.

"I told the Headmistress straight away" Scorpius said. "Told her that- that you'd been taken away by who I believed was our old professor. That was it. What happened from then on I only know scraps of. Search parties and the like, but the only real one was led by your Uncle Ron."

"Did anyone ask what happened to me during the actual battle?" Albus asked tensely. "About- about what I did-"

"Battle was nearly over by that point" Morrison commented. "Not too many people saw it, and those who did didn't question much. Not that I heard, anyway."

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. For some reason, his experience on the island-and the knowledge of what had happened to him there-had him concerned about details of these situations being leaked or questioned.

"And then what?" he asked. "Just- just business as usual at the castle?"

"Not exactly" Scorpius said. "Classes resumed, but it was more to keep order than anything else; kids were being pulled out everyday."

"Classes went on?" Albus said. "Who taught Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

Neither of them questioned how he knew of Handit's death, but it was Morrison who answered him.

"That Larson fellow" he said wryly. "And he wasn't bad, just a tool, you know what he's like..."

Albus nodded. He recalled having fought along the prominent WAR member during the battle, but apart from his assistance then, he wasn't too fond of him.

"And then...?" Albus asked, knowing that, timeline wise, what happened on Azkaban couldn't be very far away.

"One day the students were all sent home" Scorpius said. "We were told that the United Ministry was finished, that Waddlesworth had stepped down, and that the security around the castle was to be removed. Apparently they didn't feel as right having the students there without the additional security measures, especially after what had happened on the island. That same day we learned you and your dad had winded up here though."

"And naturally," Morrison said, "we wanted to be here. Scorpius was going to be anyway, 'cause of his dad, but I convinced my mum that there was no safer place, and soon enough just about everyone was here looking after you, just...you know. Waiting. Hoping, I guess."

Albus said nothing. Scorpius had touched on the part about the United Ministry being finished. Albus wanted to hear more about this, from someone who wasn't pressed for time as Scorpius' father had been.

"What's going on now?" he asked. "What do the people know happened-"

"Well the *WAR Weekly* is dead" Morrison said plainly. "It's all back to the *Prophet* now, but everything's muddled. With no Ministry, they have to get all of their information in pieces. Basically, everyone just knows Azkaban is battered, that Darvy got away and took a load of prisoners with him, that the army that he was breeding was destroyed, and that a whole bunch of Ministry people are dead."

So then they know everything Albus thought bitterly for a brief moment, before it dawned on him that they actually knew nothing. The people knew the stories, not the circumstances. They didn't realize that Darvy had only really been set back a bit; that Waddlesworth had counted on nearly all of those things, just with a different result.

"And Waddlesworth is finished now, right?" Albus asked.

"Sort of" Scorpius replied. "WAR is back together, but it's in ruin. We've heard your dad though; he says that Waddlesworth might end up taking one last swipe at the Dark Alliance, try and rally enough support to finish the job."

"Where is my dad?" Albus asked, his heart slowing slightly; he'd been hoping to see him by now.

"Getting people" Morrison said. "We see someone new everyday. We reckon that he's getting together people to create his own little Ministry, and that he aims to go after Darvy and the Dark Alliance with it."

"So it's down to my dad and Waddlesworth then" Albus said lamely. "Both of them want to go after Darvy..."

"It's a bit more complex than that mate" Scorpius said with a steely, almost sad smile. "There's more people in the picture now."

"What?" Albus said, startled by this news. "Who?"

"A whole bunch of people" Morrison told him. "Now that Waddlesworth doesn't have the same pull, there's new Renegade factions popping up everywhere. The entire Wizarding World is in rebellion; they all want to take on Darvy, and they're banding together into groups to do it. You have your dad's lot, and you have WAR, but now there's people even separate from them. Even...well...the Protectors."

Albus twisted his face into a skeptical look. "The Protec- wait a minute..." he said, a short, brittle laugh overtaking his words. He couldn't even voice the idea, it was so ridiculous.

But the expression on Scorpius' face made him realize just how serious things were.

"When the students were all sent home Larson extended an invitation to anyone in the Protector's Club that wanted to make a difference" he said. "My dad talked a few out of it but...a lot of them are so hard-headed. A lot of them didn't leave Hogwarts with their parents, they left with Larson."

"And chances are, the numbers are only going to grow" Morrison said, sounding exasperated. "Everyone's picking a side, joining some new vigilante group, all of them thinking that they're the ones that are going to take out Darvy. Waddlesworth's bile about 'letting the people defend the people' really stuck to them, it seems. Now you've got WAR, the Protectors, all sorts of Renegade groups popping up."

"Even what your dad's putting together is technically one" Scorpius told him. "What with no actual government."

Albus shot him a dark look.

"What, it's true! I didn't invent logic-"

"And the worst thing is," Morrison interjected, keeping up with his explanation, "they're all going after each other just as much as they're going after Darvy."

"*What?*" Albus asked, shaking his in disbelief.

"It used to be Darvy against the world" Scorpius said stiffly. "Now it's the world against the world, over who gets to take on Darvy. No one trusts each other, because now there is no clear cut 'good guys' to follow. I guess two wars in three decades will do that..."

Albus shook his head, disgusted at what he was hearing. Inexplicably, he thought once more of Fairhart. Fairhart, who had left it all and went on his own to stop the threat of Darvy, Fairhart, the only one who really had it right...

"The only really good thing about it all is that with the world in disarray, no one's paying any attention to your dad" Morrison said, and Albus looked up at him.

"Yeah, explain that for me, is his name cleared or-"

"Not exactly cleared" Scorpius said. "But everything's been thrown into question since Waddlesworth was disgraced. Shackbolt stepping down due to your dad's imprisonment, then Waddlesworth subsequently campaigning...everything in that time period is sort of pending further investigation."

"Not that any investigation is going to happen" Morrison said, rolling his eyes. "There's no Ministry...everything's a mess. Not that it matters, even if he was found guilty, they'd have no prison to put him in haha..."

"And hopefully by the time it's all resolved, they'll have Fairhart pinned for it instead" Scorpius said coarsely. "Let everyone know what a cold-blooded killer he-"

"Watch it!" Albus shouted out, before he could stop himself. "Fairhart's dead" he added.

Scorpius and Morrison both stared at him, neither of them asking how he knew this with such certainty. Morrison shifted in his seat however, indicating that he was ready to do some questioning; no doubt to ask about the island, and if the rumors that he'd heard about Albus and Darvy's army had been true. Before anything could be said, however, he looked towards the doorway and squealed. Albus looked over as well and knew at once that any further discussion would have to wait.

Mirra was standing there, in muggle clothes, her face blank and blotchy, her hair a mess. Albus had still never seen her more beautiful though; after everything that he'd just endured, just seeing her at all had warmed his entire body. They stayed staring at each other, Albus' green eyes meeting her grey, and Scorpius strode forward accordingly.

"I have to go to the bathroom" he quickly lied.

Morrison jumped up from his seat. "I'll go with you" he said stupidly, and Scorpius shook his head slightly as they went to leave together.

"See you later Al..." they both said, walking right by Mirra with their heads down, as though children who wanted to avoid the eyes of their surly parent.

The second that they left Mirra walked forward tenderly, her lips thin and quivering slightly. Albus watched her slender figure move towards him, realizing that even he didn't know what expression was on his face now.

"Are you hurting anywhere?" she asked him softly.

"No" he said at once. "I feel fine-"

She slapped him across the face. Albus felt his cheek begin to burn, and was forcibly reminded of a memory that he'd once seen, two memories actually, but before he could think on it any further Mirra had started to cry. She leaned forward onto his bed and wrapped her arms around him, and he instinctively did the same.

"I know" he said. He stroked her hair slowly, just as he'd done with his mother, and her low sobs gave him the chills. He heaved a sigh as he rested his head on her shoulder. "I know" he said again.

Chapter 31: The Departure

Pleased though he was to have proper sense of time, Albus found himself unable to keep track of the days as his recuperation flew by. He hadn't realized it after first awakening, but his entire body was strained and tense, and he found the majority of his movements either weak or extremely rigid. It was as though-despite knowing otherwise-he'd fallen asleep in a cramped and stiff position. And on top of that, he still found himself frequently drifting off as though he'd gotten no rest at all.

Nightmares frequently plagued him, but they were not the nightmares from before, involving struggles with some ominous, identical enemy and confusing surroundings. His dreams now returned him to the island, the rain so real that it seemed to drench him in his sleep, the imagery so vivid that the details were all alarmingly precise. They jumped around however, skipping from situation to situation, sometimes streaks of fire ending with he and a shadowy figure running through the narrow, stone corridors of Azkaban. And for some reason, he always awoke to the feeling that he was losing consciousness, a most peculiar feeling indeed.

But when he wasn't sleeping, he found his convalescence aided greatly by visitors. Morrison and Scorpius were frequent guests in his room, often attempting to bring him cheer with what Albus knew was forced banter. These moments often evolved into deep, intense conversations about the outside world, and Albus almost always asked for a newspaper as soon as they entered.

As he was all but bed-ridden, his visitors were often forced to meet him in shifts, meaning that he often had his family separate from his friends, with his two siblings usually paired together. Albus felt himself enjoying it most when it was simply his mother doting on him though. He knew that it was childish, but being served hot meals and having his pillows fluffed every thirty seconds served to relax him greatly, especially considering how normally jumpy he was after coming to from his light slumbers.

Other visitors were more sporadic, including some of his professors. Neville and Hagrid both stopped by randomly every few days, though their presence normally consisted of only a few small words of greeting and warm smiles. Even Professor Flitwick had stopped by once, squeaking with delight when he saw how "healthy and full" Albus looked, and Professor Bellinger paid him a short visit too. He had so much extended family that their shifts were normally placed all in one day, with various aunts and uncles and cousins (and his grandparents as well) coming into his room, often using the excuse of bringing him food to check up on him and make sure that he was okay. One particularly noticeable moment had come when Uncle Ron had entered, grinning broadly, his wife and children at his side. Both Rose and Hugo had made no noise at all, simply giving mild waves, but Albus was certain that Hugo had looked as though he'd desperately wanted to say something, though the opportune moment never came.

No one asked him about the island. Nor did they say a word about the battle in the graveyard, or indeed, the events leading up to it all. Albus was sure that news of Fairhart's death had been

passed around by now, but he was also fairly certain that no one was aware of what had happened with Fango Wilde; except, of course, for his father, who probably knew more than even he himself.

He had not seen his father once since awakening that one day; his mother dutifully assuring him that it was simply because he was extremely busy.

Mirra's visits were among the strangest. She came to him infrequently, but when she did, she tended to linger. Albus' mother turned a blind-eye to the sight of his girlfriend crawling under his covers to fall asleep next to him, and Albus was quick to realize that the events on the island never haunted his dreams when she was breathing softly next to him. By the time that he would awake, however, she would always be gone.

"Here's more for you" Scorpius said, tossing a crinkled newspaper his way.

Albus caught it without looking, too busy sitting upright in his bed and gazing out the window. He turned his attention to it a moment later, flattening it out and skimming over portions of it that seemed important.

Very little had changed though. Articles were always about remnants of the Ministry trying to formulate; often paired together with rumors of "Death's Right Hand's" whereabouts, as well as small pictures of noticeable prisoners who were now a part of his Dark Alliance. Waddlesworth was mentioned two or three times, but it was often done almost sarcastically. Albus couldn't help but shake his head at how capricious the general public was. Weren't the people lambasting him now for attacking Azkaban the same ones cheering him on as he'd declared war?

"Any news from my dad?" Albus asked, rolling the paper up and tossing it into the bin expertly; he'd gotten pretty good at throwing things away from his bed.

"I haven't seen him in two days" Morrison admitted from the chair next to his bed. "But to be fair, I was home for one of them."

His friends and some of his extended family had taken to alternating between places over the past few weeks. Albus was sure that much of it had less to do with his health now though. It was common knowledge that he'd made huge leaps since he'd first awoken-he was even getting up and walking around his home a bit, when necessary- and if he had to hazard a guess, he'd say that the vast majority of people entering the Potter residence now were doing so for business-related matters; specifically, aiding in whatever coalition they'd established behind the leadership of his father.

The vague newspaper articles, the people flowing in and out of his home unexpectedly; it was all forcibly reminding Albus of the stretch of time years ago, when his father had banded together with other individuals to deal with the threat presented by Ares and Darvy, Waddlesworth rallying people in the backdrop. Now it had all been tweaked however; the people were rallying

themselves, at the expense of the unity that Waddlesworth had once tried to establish, and it was now just Darvy looming in the back, and Albus knew that he didn't care in the slightest about what was going on in the world now...

Albus returned his gaze to the window. They were in the middle of February, but Albus didn't get much sense of the cold or barren. The field that extended away from their residence-the backyard of sorts that once served as a field for pick-up Quidditch games in his youth-looked beautiful to him, the trees swaying to the breeze gracefully as if to suggest peace that wasn't there. Albus was fairly sure that in those trees was where the Anti-Apparition charms ended around his home; Albus imagined it all as a big circle, going all the way around to the front of the Potter mansion and away from the garden. What kind of world would someone enter, if they Disapparated away over in those trees?

There was a light knock on the door, and Albus turned sharply, watching as Hugo crept forward, peering his pointed face through the door.

"Sorry" he said, and Albus noticed that his tone was timid and meek, a far cry from the confidence that Albus had become accustomed to over the past few years. "I'll come back later-"

"It's fine" Scorpius said placidly. "We're about to leave anyway."

And just as they always did, he and Morrison rose in unison, striding passed Hugo while giving gentle waves to Albus, who acknowledged them with a gesture of his own. After a moment, it was just he and his younger cousin in his room.

Albus stared at him blankly, wondering why he'd been sent here. He tilted his head to look for a tray of food, but Hugo didn't seem to be carrying one.

"Can- can I come in for a second?" he asked, sounding nervous.

Albus raised his eyebrows, intrigued by his demeanor. "Sure" he said.

Hugo practically lunged through the door, his feet moving towards the chair by the bed so quickly that it seemed as though he was walking across hot coals. He settled himself in it with a shifty, loose grin, and Albus stared back at him blandly, trying but failing to conceal the confusion on his face.

"What's up-"

"How're are you feeling?" Hugo asked him quickly, his expression softening.

"Good" Albus replied. "Erm- why?"

"Just asking" Hugo said, avoiding eye contact. "I haven't- I haven't really had the chance to stop by and ask yet so..."

"Well I'm good" Albus said. "Is that- is that all-"

"You saved me when the train got attacked" Hugo blurted out, immediately scratching the back of his neck so as to occupy his hands.

Albus continued to gawk at him. "Yeah?"

"So- so thanks" Hugo said, still unwilling to look him in the face.

Albus could only sit there in his bed, staring at the fidgety boy in front of him. Where had this all come from? He recalled earlier in the year, when Rose had spoken to him with politeness, and he remembered being, as sad as it was, generally taken aback by it. This went even beyond that however. Hugo had once admired him; but this admiration had quickly shifted away after Albus had endangered him years ago, to be replaced by indifference and rebellion. Had this single act during the attack on the Hogwarts Express altered his opinion that much?

But then Albus remembered something else; Hugo had been part of the Protector's Club.

"Larson offered to drag you out of Hogwarts didn't he?" Albus asked. "To join his little group?"

Hugo smiled weakly, then finally looked up at him.

"I was an idiot" he admitted. "And I'm sorry for- for being so..."

"It's fine" Albus said lamely. "Don't worry about it" he added.

Hugo nodded, but when he went to speak once more, Albus cut him off.

"Hey could you do me a favor?" he asked. "Could you get my mum for me? And ask if she could bring me something to drink?"

"Oh!" Hugo said, and he shot right up, looking mildly crestfallen at the abruptness. "Sure!"

And with that, he strode out of the room, closing the door slowly behind him. Albus simply slouched back in his bed, rubbing at his forehead. For some reason, he felt agitated with his younger cousin. He closed his eyes and tried to relax his body, but he suddenly felt very energized, his legs twitching as though he wanted to get up and do something, though what that was exactly he wasn't sure. Images of the dark confines of the prison came rushing into his head from behind his eyelids, as they always did, but on this occasion he also bore witness to the fluttering of a veil, the sight of a dark shape tumbling through it...

He felt his heart wrench as his thoughts went to Fairhart. They were thoughts that he'd been suppressing for days, always postponed the second that they cropped up, but ultimately, it always lingered, hanging over him menacingly, a loud, sinister cackle sometimes randomly entering his ears as the memories grew clearer and clearer.

He'd spent every night for weeks learning and laughing from his scarred friend. And for the last few weeks, there had been no such thing. And for weeks to come as well, and months, and as far into the future as he could see...

He rolled over sullenly. Maybe if Hugo had come to apologize to him a few months ago, he'd have been more satisfied. But now, the sentiments of his younger cousin seemed trivial; unimportant. He knew that no one noticed the absence of the Renegade, but of every terrible thought that wafted through Albus' head now, none was more poignant than the idea that Fairhart was gone, and that his death-already crude and twisted, due to Darvy-was further marred by the fact that Fairhart had just started to rekindle his broken life. There had been an intense desire to aid in the battle against the Dark Alliance, and to end the tyranny associated with it. There had been hopes of one day finding his former love, though of course, as Fairhart had learned just prior to his death, such a thing was impossible anyway.

Albus curled up under his covers, and when his mother entered with a tray of food and a large glass of pumpkin juice, he pretended to be asleep.

It wasn't for at least a week later that Albus finally caught sight of his father, even if it had only been a fleeting one. He'd been on his way out of the door, just as Albus was heading down the stairs, and by the time that Albus had realized who it was, the door had been closed.

"I get the feeling that he's mad at me or something" Albus said, sitting down at the breakfast table, Morrison and Scorpius at his side, his Uncle Charlie-who'd just arrived the previous day-sitting across from him.

"Mad at you?" Uncle Charlie asked incredulously, looking up from the newspaper that he was eyeing. "Don't be ridiculous. He's just busy."

"Very busy" Albus' mother said, turning around from the stove with a skillet and sliding eggs onto all of their plates. The four of them thanked her, but when she left the room to call for James and Lily, Albus continued the conversation.

"What are you reading about?" he asked, toying around with the food on his plate.

"Just stuff" Uncle Charlie said, absent-mindedly, a frown on his face.

Albus sighed and started eating. He felt restless sitting at the table though, his two best friends sitting next to him and eating alongside him silently. A year ago-or even a couple months, actually-Albus had been able to sit with his friends and eat in comfort, the thought of the chaos in the outside world irking him, but doing little to directly effect his mindset. Now however, his seemed almost lost in his own home. The lack of danger unnerved him more than if there had

actually been any to speak of, and now that he'd all but fully recuperated, the pleasure that he was deriving from his luxuries had thinned. It was almost as though he missed Azkaban.

Nearly gagging on his food from the thought, he realized that this wasn't the case. It wasn't that awful island that he missed, or that towering, now ruined structure. It was his purpose for being there. The entire time he'd been there he'd been alert, aggressive, and more than anything else, eager. Years ago he'd sat back and watched as older and more skilled wizards had done the fighting; had risked their lives to protect their loved ones. And when Albus had been there, slashing his way through Dark Alliance members and scouring the prison, he'd hung onto the chance that a true difference could be made. He and Fairhart had not left after freeing his father, had they? No, they'd stayed, stayed to take the fight to Darvy, to separate him from his deadly, powerful possessions. And had it not been for the deception of Fango Wilde—a man whose fate Albus wasn't even entirely sure of now—they might have succeeded. And in a way, he longed for that opportunity again.

Was this what Fairhart had felt? Fairhart, who had no obligation apart from doing what he knew was right. Fairhart, who had not been sent to that island, the place of his eventual death, but had chosen to go because he knew that he could *make a difference*.

And now, Albus realized, he could even say the same of himself.

"Got some egg dangling from your chin mate" Morrison piped up, and Scorpius and Uncle Charlie snorted with laughter when they saw it too.

Albus wiped it away, grinning, taken away from his serious thoughts. Uncle Charlie left for the bathroom a moment later, leaving an issue of the *Morning Prophet* folded on the table. All three of them snatched for it the second that he was gone—a bit ridiculous, considering that they were all going to read it together anyway—but it was Scorpius who came away with the prize.

Rather than holding it up for them all to read however, he simply glanced at it, rolled his eyes, then slid it away.

"What?" both Albus and Morrison asked.

"WAR propaganda" Scorpius said, a steely smirk on his face. "Blimey, this is getting redundant. I wonder how many people cave into it all this time."

"I actually kind of feel bad for all of these people" Morrison spoke up, glancing over at the paper.

"Why?" Scorpius asked, sounding disdainful. Albus said nothing, merely listening to the exchange.

"Because, they have to side with *someone*" he said. "All these people...they're frightened, aren't they? I reckon most of them are picking sides because they're too afraid to go at it alone."

Everyone wants to take Darvy down, but they're afraid to be by themselves. WAR, the Protectors, this new 'Lions' group I read about yesterday, or whatever they're called...they're all just made up of people who don't want to be alone when the fighting starts back up."

Scorpius seemed to be at least a little satisfied by this answer, as he didn't argue with it, but his shrug of indifference told Albus that his sympathies weren't going out nearly as much. Albus simply continued to pick at his breakfast however, left in wonder at Morrison's words. Who would *he* side with? Scorpius had said awhile ago that Albus' father, and the crew that he kept now, was among those like WAR; now acting independantly of any government. Surely, if Albus had to pick, he would side with them...

But would he? How often before had he really sided with his father? He remembered back before he'd loathed Waddlesworth, when the affluent snake had made so much sense when he talked. Albus recalled his speeches about the inadequacy of the Ministry of Magic; recalled agreeing with them, even if it had been begrudgingly. His father had been part of that Ministry, and those ideas would certainly linger. Albus would never be able to release a murderer off of a technicality, or through a negotiation. He just didn't have it in him.

But he could hardly side with WAR either. Of all the things that Albus knew he couldn't do, he was sure that manipulating simple-minded people and slandering others to gain support were high up among them. And their ways were so barbaric, so void of morality. The one thing that Albus was positive that he was incapable of doing was hurting a child, an innocent child no less, just as he'd once seen the Hammer do.

And what of these other groups? These all but insignificant clans, like the Protectors, who were nothing more shadows of WAR? The only thing that Albus really knew about them was that they were willing to fight with each other, as if that was what the world needed most right now. Albus could never join any of them. He wasn't that stupid.

If only there was a group for people like Fairhart; like how Fairhart had been after he'd left WAR. Battle hardened perhaps, but also mindful of what was proper. But even if there was a group like that, Albus realized sadly, he himself would probably be the only one in it.

But that doesn't mean it's not right, he said to himself a moment later.

At that very second James and Lily came rushing in for their breakfasts, and Albus rose up at once with his friends to leave so as not to crowd the kitchen, dropping their dishes in the sink silently. Together they exited the room and made for the upstairs, to Albus' room, but they were forced to slow down as the front door opened. Albus looked at it expectantly, eager to see his father, but it was only Rose. Albus could see Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione out in the front garden, bickering about something, Hugo standing by his father.

"Hey!" she said breathlessly, and they all answered back with a plain "hello."

"There's some breakfast left in the kitchen" Scorpius added, jerking his head behind him to indicate it.

"Oh" Rose said, her smile faltering slightly. It seemed as though she thought that she was being asked to leave their company. "Okay" she added, nodding, and she disappeared a moment later, into the kitchen.

The three of them said nothing as they continued up the stairs, but the second that the door to Albus' room was closed, he asked something that had been bothering him for a quite a while.

"So whatever happened there?" he asked, taking a seat on his bed.

Scorpius slouched himself up against the wall, as he was now prone to doing, his hands in his pockets and his face bland. "What do you mean?" he asked, though something in his voice told Albus he was well aware of what the discussion was about.

Albus scoffed. "Come on mate...you know what I'm talking about."

Since Albus had been off the island, he'd rarely seen Scorpius and Rose together. The two of them had few meetings together that didn't involve tons of other people being around, and even when there weren't, exchanges were always brief. One thing that Albus had noticed, however, was that Anastasia Anifur was nowhere to be seen, nor had she been mentioned. Melonie Grue had stopped by a week or so ago to bring him well wishes, an indication that she and Morrison were still going strong, but Scorpius seemed quite girlfriend-less, strange, considering that the last time Albus had checked, he'd had two different options.

"He thinks it's embarrassing" Morrison spoke up from his chair. "A bit dumb really..."

"I'm not embarrassed" Scorpius shot at him, eyes narrowing. "I just think that a lot of people would think of me as well- well, I don't know, a loser or something..."

"What happened?" Albus asked again. "Come on, don't leave me out of the loop, I'm just getting used to you guys again..."

"I picked neither" Scorpius said. "Just like you mentioned."

"I said something about that?" Albus asked, searching his head for when that might've happened.

Scorpius nodded. "I don't know...over winter break I thought about it a bit. I thought of how you and Mirra were together, enjoying one another's company. The same with Morrison and Mel. And I realized I didn't want something fake; I didn't want an illusion for a relationship.

"Anastasia wanted to be with me for status, and Rose because someone else had me. In two years, where would that be, you know? So I gave Anastasia her present over the holidays as a good-bye gift. And Rose...I sent her a letter."

"What was in it?" Albus asked quietly.

"Just what I felt" Scorpius said, shrugging once more, his mouth curling into a mild scowl. "I told her about how I liked her for the longest time...but that it just wasn't meant to be. I gave her my side of events on that debacle with Lance, told her all about my stupid plans to get her to feel the same way...and I told her that all in all, none of it was really worth it."

Albus cringed. "That must have stung her a bit" he said, but Scorpius shook his head.

"I didn't word it exactly like that" he said. "I just made it clear to her that those feelings were gone, and that with them gone, there was no reason for either of us to imagine that something was there. And I told her that I was ending it with Anastasia too; that I just didn't want to be in a relationship."

"And that was it?" Albus asked.

"Well I left some things out" Scorpius said, somewhat hoarsely. "But nothing I'm telling you guys" he added, and Albus nodded in compliance.

"Are you really not looking for a relationship though?" he asked, curious.

Scorpius gave a slight sigh, his mouth shifting around slightly as though he was trying to word his next thoughts carefully.

"Not really" he finally said. "I've just kind of realized that relationships while in school aren't...I dunno. Maybe they're not all that they're cracked up to be. Too much drama. You guys were lucky," he went on, casting a glance at both of them, "you found people that you knew you wanted to be with. But the way I see it...if you don't find that person, there's no point in trying to force it with anyone else. I'll worry about getting an education first; starting my life. And once I have that, I'll worry about the girl. Rather than having 'getting the girl' *be my life*."

A silence followed these words, in which Scorpius avoided eye contact with both of them. Finally, after a moment, he added to his explanation.

"Look I'm not *afraid* to date or anything-"

"I get it mate" Albus said, and Morrison nodded as well. "You picked neither..."

Albus sat there on his bed, thankful for the silence that followed these words as well. He was now absorbing Scorpius' rationale, realizing, every second, just how much sense it made to him.

Scorpius had been given options, but dissatisfied with them both, he'd opted for the less obvious route. And, in a way, Albus was sure that his current situation bore more similarities to his friend's than most would care to admit. He knew that it was outrageous to compare the two, but it was not about the nature of the content; it was about the nature of the decision. Scorpius had

reached a fork in the road, and unwilling to take either, he'd moved along to find a different road; one that suited him. Albus' fork may indeed be more dangerous, and more complex as well. There was certainly less romance, and more risks, anyway. But in the end it was the same thing. Albus didn't want to side with anyone. He didn't want to fuss about ignoring the Dark Alliance for as long as possible, and he didn't want to play it safe at every moment either. He knew what needed to be done to stop Darvy. And more than that, he *wanted* to do it. And the more that he thought about it...the more he realized that was the best man for the job.

By the time his friends had left the room, he knew what he wanted to do.

The last days of winter were bitter, but as February passed into March, Albus was pleased just to be able to roam around outside again. His body now no longer felt stiff, and he was finally able to go more than a few hours with dozing off. Whatever toll Azkaban had taken on his body-and Albus was sure that his mysterious transformation had accounted for a lot of it-he was fully recovered from it. He still found himself eyeing his scarred hand from time to time, holding it close to his face when others weren't around, examining its pale color and blotchy shape. No one-not even his best friends-had said a word about the mark, and Albus knew that it was because they were unwilling to recount the tale that had presumably been passed down by his father. He was at least certain that they were aware of it though; he could always feel Mirra give a slight jump of surprise when they held hands now.

Uncle Ron's birthday had been on the first of March, and as nearly everyone was there anyway, a small celebration had been held in the large backyard, with tables and chairs set up in rows for a delicious feast concocted with only a days notice by his mother, Aunt Hermione, and his grandmother, as well as with bits of help from Morrison, who seemed to thoroughly enjoy cooking. The party carried an odd form of enthusiasm to it; the conversations between all of the adults present were always low and sullen, the younger ones eating at a table furthest away from the guest of honor, unable to hear much of what was going on at all. Albus had watched his father from afar the entire time, studying his profile as he nodded his head and picked at his food, speaking to both familiar faces and strangers alike. Albus *still* hadn't had a proper conversation with him.

It wasn't until two days later that the cleaning up of the party actually started. Albus noted disdainfully that many of their guests over the past few weeks seemed to vanish when it came time to clean up the mess, though admittedly, it wasn't too difficult considering that they were all allowed to do magic-as Morrison was quick to point out, it was very unlikely that they'd be given a formal reprimand by anyone.

"Just be thankful to be up and moving about" Scorpius said, waving his wand lazily. Metal chairs that had been folded and scattered over the grass all rose into the air and pressed themselves together with a clanging noise, then landed in an organized stack. Morrison attempted to do the

same with another cluster of seats, but inadvertently sent them spiraling through the air dangerously.

"Watch it!" he yelled towards James, who was on his way into the house. Albus' brother ducked just in time, gave them a patronizing glare, then vanished from sight.

Albus gazed around the yard absently, flicking his wand-which he'd heard had been recovered from the graveyard by his father- to fold table cloths neatly. With James and Lily back in the house to do dishes, it was just Albus and his two friends left in the yard doing the brunt of the work; Mirra was beyond the yard in the thick trees that served as an exit to their property, having promised to find a doll that Roxanne had lost during the party.

His father was also in the yard, but he was standing away at a distance idly, his back turned to them. Albus knew that he was waiting for Aunt Hermione, who he'd been speaking with a moment before, to return from inside the house to continue their conversation.

Albus felt his body tense up, and it had nothing to do with the table cloths. His father was on his own...and there would never be a better time to talk to him. Indeed, this might be the *only* time to talk to him, considering what it was Albus was planning to do.

"I'll be back" he said shortly, rising from his seat.

Scorpius gave him a suspicious look, as though there was something dodgy about Albus leaving, but Morrison said nothing, too preoccupied by picking up the scattered chairs by hand. Albus started at a brisk pace in the direction of his father, but it slowed as he neared him. He was only inches away when his father spun around.

Albus absorbed his appearance. He had caught only glimpses of his father over the last month or so, and now that he could view him freely, he took his time examining every inch of his face. His hair was shorter now, though still ruffled and sticking out oddly, as though windswept. His facial hair was gone, and his skin was fuller, with more color to it. Sunlight, coupled with a few square meals, had made a great difference in his visage. His emerald eyes were resting behind circular spectacles once more, and though they were no longer red and sagging, they remained intense and astute. They narrowed slightly when they caught sight of Albus, and indeed, he thought that he saw a flicker of a frown on his father's face as well.

"Have you been avoiding me?" Albus asked bluntly, his voice low. From behind him he could hear Scorpius and Morrison bickering over something, oblivious to what was going on at the other side of the yard.

"No" his father replied, and Albus noted that his voice was smoother than it had been in the prison. "Just postponing this."

"Postponing what?" Albus asked.

"This is where you say good-bye isn't it?"

Albus felt a surge of surprise jolt through his body, though he tried not to show it on his face. When he made to speak, his father continued, shaking his head and wearing a wry smile.

"You're too much like me for your own good" he said, closing his eyes slightly as he said it. "Even if you do it so differently..."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked, though he knew that playing dumb was a poor strategy. They would have to tackle the issue eventually, after all.

"You think I don't know what's been going through your head?" his father asked. "You think I don't know what you've been wanting-no, *craving*-since the moment you woke up safe and sound in your own bed?"

Albus stared at him blankly. "No" he said. "I don't think you do."

"You want Darvy, Albus" his father said matter-of-factly. "You want revenge-"

"No" Albus cut him off. "It's not- that's not- I'm not like that. This isn't about revenge."

"Then what's it about, Albus?" his father asked, his voice strained. "What are you *really* thinking right now?"

Albus felt his body start to shake; suddenly, quite suddenly, he was frightened. Frightened that his father would frown upon his thoughts, would, for the first time that he could remember, intentionally insult his ambitions.

"Everything going on in the world right now," Albus started slowly, "is because of Darvy. Just like he's always wanted, all of the attention is on him. Someone needs to stop him."

"*Someone*" his father mimicked him icily. "And why does that *someone* have to be you again?"

"Because I'm the only one who can" Albus said quickly, prepared for this. "Darvy doesn't have limits against anyone else; he gets those awful creatures to go after them. But for some reason- and I haven't figured out why yet, but I will-he can't do that against me. When it's me and Darvy, one on one, it just comes down to who the better wizard is-"

"And you think that you're the better wizard?" his father asked, sounding incredulous. "You are sixteen, you have yet to finish your education, I don't even think you can Apparate-"

"I can Apparate" Albus defended himself. "And I'm stronger than you think I am, Fairhart trained me-"

"Enough of this Fairhart nonsense!" his father growled, and for the first time in the conversation, he looked angry; his voice had been raised as well, and it now sounded closer to how it had back

in the prison. "I don't even want to *begin* to wonder why in the world you and Fairhart were in that prison-

"We were there to save you!"

"Were you?" his father asked acidly. "Because the last thing that I remember-before your precious Fairhart knocked me unconscious that is-is the two of you wanting to continue your little adventure! Something about the Foulest Book, off all things-

"You don't understand dad" Albus said, shaking his head. "The Book- the Book, the Wand, the Veil, we needed to separate them from Darvy. They're his- his- his necessities of tyranny-

"His *what*?" his father cut him off, contorting his face into a look of powerful bewilderment. "The necessities of- are you- what kind- what the hell- do you- *what*?"

"Fairhart explained it like this-" Albus started, but it was to no avail.

"Albus, do you even know what it is you're trying to get across here? I mean what- what kind of lunacy did that deranged vigilante force upon you-

"Don't!" Albus snapped, taken aback by his father's words. "Don't insult- dead-

"I know that Fairhart's dead, Albus" his father said, his voice returning to normal. "But that doesn't change the fact that he-

"Just because you hate him doesn't mean-

"I did not hate Sancticus Fairhart" his father said crisply. "But I have no more respect for him."

"Why?" Albus asked. "You used to like him-

"That was before he went *insane*, Albus-

"That's not true!" Albus said fiercely, anger rising up in his chest now. "Fairhart was a great wizard-

"I'm not denying his abilities" his father said sternly. "Fairhart was an uncannily skilled wizard. He was extremely intelligent, and he was brave, and he embodied many characteristics that define a great wizard. But he was crazy, Albus. I realized it as soon as I saw you there in that prison. He took *my son*," his started, his voice quivering somewhat, "took *my sixteen year-old boy*, and brought him to the most dangerous place in the world, and for what?"

"He needed my help" Albus whispered.

"Oh really?" his father blurted out sarcastically. "Oh yes, the odds of success must have went up greatly once he brought you aboard-

"It worked, didn't it?" Albus asked. "We got you out of there" he added, and he felt tears start to burn behind his eyes. He had not wanted this. He had not wanted this to turn into a verbal battle. "You could show a bit more thanks towards him, because without him-"

"Albus," his father cut him off in a clear tone, "do you honestly think, for a single second, that I thought of myself *once* behind those bars? The endless torture, the starvation, the cold...do you honestly think that the safety of my loved ones wasn't the only thing on my mind? And then...and then I see you. In the place where I'd want you to be least-"

"But I'm okay dad" Albus said, still shaking. "I'm okay. None of that matters, we got out okay-"

"It does matter!" his father shouted, and Albus saw flecks of liquid appear behind his glasses. "It matters Albus, because bringing you there has twisted you! Shaped you forever! Because now you've been somewhere that you never should have been, and now you've seen death, you've stared it down, and now you're just willing to go off and face it some more! You're not *ready* Albus-"

"Fairhart trained me" Albus repeated. "He made me a better wizard-"

"Did he really?" his father asked, the question clearly rhetorical. "Did he really make you a better wizard? Or a more *dangerous* one?"

Albus said nothing, and his father took his silence as an indication that he could continue further.

"How many ways can you hurt people now, Albus? How many new curses do you know? How many hexes? How many ways can you deflect a spell back; how many ways can you inflict damage? You're better at fighting sure, but let me ask you this Albus, all that training, how many healing spells do you know?"

Albus looked down at the ground. "Healing- healing wasn't his strong suit-"

"I wouldn't think so" his father said, his teeth gritted. "Fairhart was a murderer, Albus. It was in his nature, don't pretend like you didn't already know that. You are *not* a Renegade, Albus. You are not Fairhart, no matter how much you want to be."

"I'm not trying to be like Fairhart" Albus said, and he looked up. "But you're wrong. I *am* a Renegade now-"

His father laughed callously, and when Albus spoke up, the tears were falling fresh from his eyes.

"Don't mock me!" he said. "You don't- you don't know-"

"I'm not trying to mock you, Albus" his father said, the laughter vanishing.

"You're trying to make me want to stay-"

"No, I'm trying to make you realize that you *need to stay*. What is out there for you Albus? What are your plans? What is your course of action? Where do you go first, do you even know? *Is there* somewhere to go first?"

Albus said nothing, not even bothering to argue on the matter. The truth was, though he didn't have a direct course of action yet, he did have a place to go first. In the past few weeks he'd scoured his memories for all that Fairhart had told him, and something that had cropped into his thoughts more than once had been Fairhart's last fleeting words to him. Something about the silver box back at the cabin. What was in that box that was so important that Fairhart had chosen to use his last few breaths to speak about it? Albus intended to find out as soon as possible.

"Albus" his father said, apparently taking his silence as a sign of acquiescence, "you don't know what you're doing here. You have the desire, I know that you do, but this notion that you can just go off and save the world by yourself...it's just not realistic. You *want* to be the only one that can stop Darvy, but the truth is-

"You can't" Albus said quickly, and his father raised his eyebrows.

"All modesty aside Albus, I've faced wizards in my time that make Darvy look like a muggle infant by comparison. He has no army to speak of now, bar an assortment of wizards that I've *already imprisoned before*. You are underestimating the group that I've assembled-

"You're underestimating Darvy" Albus said, shaking his head. He knew this for a fact. Fairhart had been light years from Darvy in skill as well, but that didn't mean that Darvy hadn't gotten the upper hand. His army was not gone for good. Give him enough time to rebuild, and he'd be just as formidable as before. "Darvy's smart dad, maybe not with books and words, but he knows how to terrorize. He's just going to hide out and rebuild his army, until he's right back to where he was, and when that happens...when that happens it's going to have to be me. Like I said before, for some reason I can control those things, and that means that Darvy's greatest advantage is thrown out the window against me."

"But you're still just a boy!" his father said. "And even if what you say is true, why go off on your own when you can aid me? When you can stand by my side, when I can protect you! Why can't you understand that your part is done? That you've done so much, and now it's time for it to end? Don't let the whispers and murmurs frighten you, Albus, this war is over now-

"This war is just beginning!" Albus argued, wiping at his face. "People fighting each other, taking sides, all while Darvy rallies support-

"These are aftershocks Albus" his father said. "They come whenever the destruction ends; small patches of instability as the world is sorted out. I am not leading my friends against a ferocious leader and his army of lethal creatures, I am leading them against a ruined man who has been forced to go into hiding again-

"And how many of them are you just going to watch die?" Albus asked. "When the fighting happens, when push comes to shove, when you see that army there, how many people are you going to send in?"

"I wouldn't do that Albus-"

"That's why you can't beat Darvy" Albus told him, and his father gawked.

"Albus, don't tell me that you *support* Waddlesworth, support what he did-"

"The United Ministry saved my life dad-" he started.

"Only because you found every conceivable way to endanger it!"

"Let me finish!" Albus roared, deciding that, for the first time in the conversation, he would be in control. He could no longer hear Scorpius and Morrison at the other end of the yard, though he was sure that they hadn't went inside. "The United Ministry saved my life. And even though they shouldn't have been sent in like that, there's no denying that if Waddlesworth actually *knew* how to stop Darvy, he'd have the brute force to do it, and he'd use it to. But you wouldn't! You're not willing to take those risks, even if it means saving lives in the end! I saw it back in the prison, when you thought that saving those prisoners wasn't-"

"That's entirely different, Albus!" his father said scathingly. "You are talking about supporting a war here! Combat! The deaths of many-"

"You *don't* support war!" Albus said. "That's why you won't be able to stop Darvy! You'll spend all your time planning some attack, and then when his army is back-"

"I do support war, Albus" his father said. "But I only support it when it's actually *necessary*. I've seen enough death in my life to know that lives often end for next to no reason at all. Though I know that war is sometimes necessary, Albus, I also know that when it *isn't*, people still find excuses to have it. That's what this was. You think that Waddlesworth sent those men to Azkaban because he wanted them to stop Darvy? To finish this threat? Let me tell you something, Albus, Waddlesworth may have been thinking about victory when he sent those wizards and witches in, but at his core, he was most concerned with showing the world the power at his fingertips. Those men and women died for *nothing*, don't pretend like you don't know that-"

"I'm not going to pretend anything" Albus said softly. "But that's why I'm not planning on some huge fight. I understand why it's necessary, but I also know if Darvy has enough time, no amount of skilled wizards is going to get through what he creates. That's why I aim to stop him in a different way-"

"Again with these tyranny items" his father scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Albus, do you know how I know Darvy doesn't need these things as much as you say he does? Because the last time I saw the Foulest Book, Fango Wilde was trying to flee the island with it!"

Albus felt his body go cold. Fango Wilde had the Foulest Book...

"Now something tells me that Darvy isn't all bent up out of shape over it-"

"Did he get away with it?" Albus asked, distracted. "Wilde? With the Book?"

His father extended his arms as if to indicate that it was unimportant. "I don't know! Probably! I didn't see him when I left the island-"

Albus felt his heart start to pound aggressively. Fango Wilde had the Foulest Book. The item that Fairhart had considered to be the most important, Wilde was now in possession of...but why? It seemed like Albus had somewhere else to go now as well, before going after Darvy. Fairhart had wanted to destroy the Book, after all...

"Albus are you even listening to me?" his father asked, and Albus snapped himself out of his thoughts. His father sighed. "Listen to me," he continued, "what I tell you now I'm not telling you to anger you, or to make you feel like you're a poor wizard...I'm telling you because I've been where you are. Because I know what you're up against, because I know that there's no way to be prepared for it-"

"But you still did it, didn't you?" Albus asked, suddenly aware of how he could turn this argument in his favor. "How old were you when you beat Voldemort, huh? And how'd you do that? Hiding behind other people? Or did you go after him?"

He father inhaled sharply. "I went after him-"

"Then what makes this any different-"

"Because you're not supposed to be doing any of this! Because this is nothing more than you squeezing your way into a situation that you don't belong in! You just have to trust me Albus, I'm your father-"

"You didn't have a father!" Albus barked out, the tears falling again. He knew from the look on his father's face that he'd taken things too far, but that didn't stop him from continuing. "You didn't have someone tell you what you could and couldn't do! You didn't have someone to tell you that it wasn't your fault, to stay out of it all-"

"You're right, I didn't" his father said, and Albus saw that tone was now low, his face darkened. "I had your aunt and your uncle instead, and I'm thankful *every day* for that. Because I couldn't do it all by myself, Albus. If I hadn't met your Uncle Ron on the train that first day of school, do you have any idea how different things would've been? If we didn't have your Aunt Hermione

practically holding our hands the whole way through, do you think you'd even *be here* right now? Do you think that we'd have gotten a damn thing done without her? We'd have been dead in two days! I *had people* Albus. I wasn't alone, I had people to fight by my side, people who I'd die for, just as they would for me. Now you have to ask yourself, do you?"

Albus noticed that his father casted a furtive glance right over him as he spoke, in the direction of Morrison and Scorpius, who were speaking once again, as though tactfully attempting to drown out the noise nearby. Albus looked back at them, and had his answer in a second.

"Yeah," he said, "I do."

"But you're not going to take them with you, are you?"

Albus hesitated. "No- I'm not-"

"Why?" his father shot out fiercely.

"Because this isn't there fight. Because this isn't about-"

"That's why you're not ready!" his father lashed out angrily, and Albus saw that his body was shaking now too. "Because you don't understand that sometimes you need other people's help! Because you're foolish enough to think that it's *best* for your friends and family if they don't stand by your side, failing to realize just how important those bonds are! You think that it's just down to you and Darvy now, you're making it personal-"

"Darvy made it personal!" Albus shouted, his fists clenching up at the thought. "You don't get it, you weren't there! Wherever Darvy is, he isn't thinking about how he's going to take on you, or Waddlesworth, or anyone else who comes his way, he's thinking about *me*! And that's not some absurd pride, or me putting myself up high, I don't want my dead body to be the first thing he thinks about when he wakes up, but the truth is that it *is* down to me and him. Neither of us planned it that way, but he's killed *my* friends now! He's done everything to ruin *me*!"

His father said nothing for a moment, silent tears streaking down his face. When he finally spoke, it was in a hollow voice.

"I love you, Albus. I love you enough to tell you that you're not ready to do this. Your heart is in the wrong place right now, you're going to destroy yourself before you can come even close to Darvy-"

"I'm powerful dad" Albus said, and he felt his own face darken. "Darvy knows it now. He's seen it. And I know- I know that you've seen it too."

He extended his left hand, showing the mass of regrown skin in the center. His father said nothing.

"Darvy fears me, and with good reason. I don't know what he wants more, to have what I have, or to have me get rid of it, but either way, he knows that I stand in his way. I'm *dangerous* dad. And I'm sick of hiding from that power. I'm going to learn to control it. I'm going to use it. I don't know why I sometimes do what I can do...but I know that when it comes down to me against him, he's going to have no chance against me. I'm going to make sure that he has no army left, that he has no way of ruining lives, and then I'm going to stop him for good."

"This- this power" his father said at once. "Why do you think that it needs to be used like that? Why do you think that it needs to be used at all? Why does this have to end with taking Darvy's life, with you-"

"There's something *wrong with me*" Albus choked out, admitting it for the first time. "I don't remember what happened in that graveyard, but my body does. I know that I was excited. That I was pleased. And I know that I caused destruction. Whatever is wrong with me is also-"

"There's nothing wrong with you!" his father yelled, and he actually reached forward and clasped him around the shoulders. "Why do you think that? You're just- you're just ill! Sick! If you stay here we can help you, we can-"

But Albus pulled himself away. He knew the truth. He knew that he and Darvy were connected, and he knew that he was the one who had to stop him. He thought of Fairhart's requirements, from weeks ago. What had he said, about what it would take for someone to stop Darvy?

You'd need to know about what he has at his disposal.

Check. Albus knew that Darvy's power was rooted in his items. He still had the Wand and the Veil, and so long as he had that, no one else would be able to stop him. As for the Book, Albus would need to make sure that Darvy couldn't get that back either, lest he find a way to improve his odds...

You'd need to have the training necessary to perform the task.

Check. Albus was skilled enough to face off against Darvy, he was sure, but even beyond that, he'd need to track him down, and Fango Wilde too. He'd need to know how to acquire information, even if by force. Fairhart had passed these skills along to him.

And you'd have to be willing to die in the process.

...

Check.

Albus made to spin around quickly, realizing that this dispute with his father was getting him nowhere. It pained him to turn away, to remove himself from his father's grip just as he was trying to comfort him, but he could not delay this any further; he could not change the truth, no

matter how badly he wanted to. He went to leave, to end it all abruptly, but his father's voice stopped him.

"I can't let you go Albus" he said.

Albus turned and looked over his shoulder. "You're not going to be able to stop me forever dad" he said, and he actually allowed a grin of satisfaction to stretch across his face. "You keep me here today, I'm gone tomorrow. Keep me here tomorrow, I'm gone the next day. This is something that I have to do. Tell everyone I said I'm sorry" he added, a shooting pain going through his gut. He would never be able to explain this to his mother, or to his siblings or cousins...

He went to walk away towards the house, but his father called after him.

"If you go, I'm just going to come and get you!"

Albus turned on his heel as he walked. He then raised his arms, only to let them drop at his sides. "You know what?" he said shortly. "Go for it."

And he turned away again, knowing that if Fairhart hadn't trained him well enough to elude his father, then he really wasn't ready after all.

He didn't look back as he entered his house, realizing, with an odd feeling in his stomach, that his impulsiveness had detracted from his chances to appreciate just what it was he would be leaving behind. Once he left his home, how long would it be until he returned? *Would* he return?

He hurried up the stairs two at a time, thankful that there was no one else in sight. He entered his room and looked around wildly, finding the two things that he was looking for at once; his trunk, and his school bag.

He immediately ransacked his room, pillaging it for everything that he could think of. All the gold that he'd accumulated over the years he dumped into his backpack, filling it with clothes as well. He at first felt childish doing it, loading his things into the backpack as if he was preparing for class, but then he remembered Fairhart and the sacks of bread, and he realized that it didn't really matter how he carried his things. He checked his pockets to make sure that his wand was safe, then dove through his trunk. The first thing that he saw was his Christmas present from Mirra; a picture of he and his father smiling, with a frame decorated by her personally...

He placed it into his bag carefully, deciding that it was as necessary as clothes or gold. Then he dug through old, unused Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes products, shoving them into the pockets on the backpack tightly, and then-

He reached what was arguably his most treasured possession. His Invisibility Cloak. Flowing over his hands effortlessly, it all but glittered in the light, sleek and silky, warm around his

hands. This would certainly make his endeavors easier, just as it undoubtedly had for his father, and for his father before him...

But then he froze on the spot. He had no intentions of dying, but if he did, how would the heirloom be passed down? He made up his mind in an instant. He folded the Cloak up neatly and left the room, returning seconds later empty handed; Lily would most likely be in for a surprise when she next entered her room and saw what was on her bed.

He zipped up his bag in a single, quick motion, then exited his room with it slung over his back, making a mental note to cast a Featherweight Charm on it once he was gone. And then, again without looking back, he left his home.

When he entered the yard once more he saw that his father was gone; in the few minutes that he'd been packing, he had went to go do something, probably something that involved making his son's departure difficult. Albus would give him no such chance though. He strode through the yard briskly-

"Going somewhere, mate?"

Albus turned sharply; he'd almost walked right passed Morrison and Scorpius.

It had been Scorpius who had spoken, standing up firmly with his head cocked to the side. Morrison was sitting next to him in one of the metal chairs that he'd failed to organize properly, looking grim.

Albus said nothing; not that Scorpius had even given him the chance.

"We're not stupid mate" he said. "We've pretty much figured out that you're not taking that bag to Hogwarts."

"Not with it closed and all" Morrison commented sourly.

Albus heaved a sigh. "Look-"

"We're coming with you" Morrison shot out at once. "I don't know why you would think otherwise-"

"I'm not doubting that guys *want* to come, but you wouldn't be able to-"

"Oh, cut this 'tough guy' nonsense out!" Scorpius snapped. "Who do you think you are, huh?"

"You're not Fairhart" Morrison said spitefully. "You can stop pretending like it."

Albus scowled. What was it with people thinking that he thought that?

"Listen-"

"Go!" Scorpius blurted out, and Morrison looked up at him. Albus' eyes widened as well.

"What-"

"Just go!" Scorpius said. "But before you do, you better make sure you go into those trees over there," he said, pointing towards them, "and explain to Mirra just why she isn't worth sticking around for! Because right now she's searching through a frickin' forest looking for some pretend doll for a girl that she wouldn't even *know* if she wasn't dating the biggest prat in the world, and she's doing it so that when she comes back she can hold your disgusting, messed up hand and kiss your mediocre face and somehow think that she's the luckiest girl in the world!"

Albus cringed slightly; Scorpius had a knack for telling the truth in the most hurtful of ways. Before he could say anything, however, Scorpius had spoken up again.

"Go" he said. "And know that regardless of how sly you *think you are*, I'm going to be right behind you. Even with Morrison slowing me down."

"Yeah!" Morrison said, suddenly back in the picture. "Even *with* me slowing him down!"

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but Scorpius held his hand up.

"No" he said.

"Yeah, no good-byes" Morrison said, standing up and nodding. "We'll be seeing you soon anyway..."

And with that, they both turned and left, not even caring to look back at the mixture of emotions on Albus' face.

He watched them go all the way until they'd went inside, and at the next moment he'd turned to head into the dense trees that bridged into the backyard. He'd Apparate once he was far enough in, and though he had a few destinations in mind, he wasn't entirely sure where he'd be going first. He just knew that he couldn't stay here any longer; couldn't let himself get attached any further than he already was.

He walked into the cluster of thick tree trunks and watched the light of the sun thin out at once. It was nothing like being back on the island, but at the same time he felt used to it all; comforted in the solace of nature. As he walked he thought of Scorpius' harsh words about speaking to Mirra, and after pondering them for a few minutes, he realized that he wouldn't be able to say good-bye to her-

"Albus?"

He turned so quickly that he nearly hit his head on a protruding branch. Mirra was standing just a few feet away from him, twigs in her hair as though she'd been walking around for more than an hour, a curious expression on her face.

"Hey!" he said brightly. "Did you- did you find that doll-"

"Where are you going?" she asked him, her expression hardening on the spot. "And why- why do you have a school bag on you..."

Albus couldn't take his eyes away from her. He could only stand there, soaking in her ivory face and long, dark hair, watching as it flowed over her neck, where he saw a silver chain dangling down into her shirt. The locket that he'd given her...

"Albus where are you going?" she repeated, sounding nothing short of flustered by the fact that he hadn't answered her yet.

"I- I have some things to do-"

"No!" she said, and Albus watched as she shook her head quickly. "No! You're not leaving! Not again-"

"I have to!" he said, feeling his insides crawl. "I know that you-"

"I'll tell your dad!" she threatened at once.

"He already knows" Albus said, giving her a light smile. "Everyone probably does by now-"

Mirra threw her hands up. "Am I *only one* who cares about you-"

"Mirra, listen to me" he said, and he moved closer to her. She went to back up, as though unwilling to touch him, but he grabbed hold of her shoulders anyway. "I know that this is the worst thing that I can do right now-"

"What's this all been for?" she asked. "All of this, me and you, what does it matter if you don't come back? If you don't come back from this- this- this stupid- this stupid- whatever it is!"

Albus kissed her forehead softly, and he felt his body collapse slightly when she pulled away.

"Albus you can't do this-"

"I know that this is wrong, what I'm doing to you" Albus said. "I know that-"

"Maybe it's not that *this* is wrong, Albus!" she snapped, glaring at him. "Maybe it's just that *you're* wrong! Wrong for me!"

Albus said nothing, frozen on the spot. Those words had pierced him like a dagger, but he was determined not to let it show. When he failed to respond, Mirra continued wistfully.

"All that I want is for you to not go and try and get yourself *killed*. Is that *really* too much to ask? I mean-"

Albus leaned in and kissed her. Just as he had when he was over her house, moments before Waddlesworth had been elected Minister, he silenced her with a kiss, this time knowing that it might his last ever with her. And so he held it there, the hand with his new scar on it finding the back of her head, the other under her chin, his backpack now slung across one shoulder, suddenly feeling weightless even without magic being involved. And this time, Albus noticed, Mirra didn't recoil back. It was as though she knew that it could be the last time too-

They broke apart, and Albus stepped backwards at once, leaving Mirra to look at him with tearful eyes. Before she could say anything however, Albus had already started speaking.

"You know I almost got you that in gold" he said, indicating the locket around her neck. She gawked at him.

"What-"

"I'm so glad I didn't though" he said. "I mean you're always beautiful but just- it just really suits you. Silver is definitely your color."

He caught sight of her standing there, mouth still hanging wide open, and with that last look at her, he turned sharply on the spot.

"Albus wait-" she called out.

But it was too late. He'd already felt his body compress itself, already seen everything turn black as he disappeared into empty space, and at the next moment, he was gone.

The sound of a cloak sliding across the floor roused Sebastian Darvy from his stupor. When he turned around, peering through the darkness, he saw which subordinate it was. Still, he didn't relax his grip on the Dragonfang Wand.

"What is it, Markson?"

Markson strode forward cautiously, his hood pulled up to conceal his fox-like, concerned face. He glanced at the foreboding Veil next to his master, watching as it billowed back and forth, despite there being no wind in the run down shack that they were inside of.

"M- M 'lord" he said, inclining his head slightly.

"What is it? Spit it out!"

"Some of the- some of the newer members of our ranks are growing curious as to- as to what it is they should be doing. We've been hiding for weeks now-"

"They're growing restless" Darvy said savagely, his blue eyes twitching. "They seek a mutiny, don't they-"

"No!" Markson said, holding out his thin hands. "No- not at all! They are merely- merely anxious to know when you will start to rebuild your army..."

"I will not be rebuilding my army for some time" Darvy said, glancing over at the Veil.

"You wish us to set our sights on the Book then-"

"The Book is unimportant" Darvy said. "I know who took it, and he'll get no use from it."

Markson practically danced on the spot before asking his next question.

"M' lord," he started, "if you- if you don't mind me asking- why- why *not* start rebuilding your forces now?"

Darvy glanced at him sourly. "I will not create an army that someone else can command" he said shortly, his admittance of this paining him as he said it. "No...before anything else, I must ensure that I am the only one who can wield such power."

Markson gazed at him without speaking, waiting for him to continue.

"Our priority now," Darvy said, "is to get the Potter boy out of the way. The death of Albus Potter must come first, before anything else. I have allowed this Wand to have two masters for far too long..." he added, tightening his grip on the black, fang-like handle of it.

"But- but how do we- how do we-"

"If Potter tries to murder me, he will kill himself instead" Darvy said knowingly. "The Wand cannot respect a murderer."

"He killed many on the island-"

"No" Darvy said, shaking his head. "Whatever took control of him did that. I must face him as he is. Without his additional power he is weak; I can defeat him. And even if not, he is unaware of what his actions-"

"But *how do we get to him-*"

"He will come to me" Darvy shot out, agitated at having been cut off. He eyed the wand briefly, then snapped his attention back up to a terrified Markson a moment later. "We will kill his friends. Kill his family. Kill everyone that he loves, everyone that he can't stand to lose. And

then, whether it is I who delivers the finishing blow, or whether he does it to himself, he *will die.*"

Markson nodded. "Then you- then you cannot possibly lose."

Darvy thought back to the words of the ghostly wandmaker, realizing that now more than ever were they true. He now knew what he had to do. The outside world mattered little now; he'd let it destroy itself. It was now down to him and Potter. He would either kill the boy, or the boy would kill himself.

"That's right" Darvy said, smiling for the first time in weeks. "I cannot lose. And as for Albus Potter...he will lose *everything...* "

Author's Note/ Book 7 Preview

Hello readers! Vekin87 here, stopping by for what will be the last post in this book. As promised, I have some information about book 7 to hand out, as well as a few questions to answer and criticisms to address. I also have some very important information pertaining to my activities in between books, but all of that stuff can wait. First, I think that some gratitude is due.

You are no doubt sick of hearing this, but once more, I can only say thank you. Thank you, thank, and thank you. This series has evolved into something that I could have never imagined when I first started writing it, and this would have been impossible if not for all of the tremendous support that it's received from its fan base. I first sat down to write Book 1 with the hopes that someone would enjoy it. 6 books, hundreds of reviews, and thousands of readers later, and I can sleep soundly at night knowing that I succeeded. This series was designed to be my way to give back to the Harry Potter community, and seeing them flourish sends shivers down my spine. To everyone who's read these stories-to anyone reading this right now-thank you much for your continued support, and please know (and I'm sure I've said this before, but I will hammer into your heads if I must) that this is YOUR series; that it couldn't be what it is today if not for you.

And now, a few other announcements to make. Before we get into the Q/A sessions and Book 7 tidbits, I have a few things of importance that I'd *really* like it if you guys would read, as it's all being done for you. The official Vekin87 facebook page (which can be located on my profile) has now exceeded 100 likes, and continues to grow. For those of you have a facebook and have yet to join it, now may be a good time, as I expect some discussion to go on now that I'm entering a hiatus period. The TVtropes page on my profile is also still active and open to be edited by anyone, and as such, if any of you are willing to add to it, feel free to do so. Also, I have a question for you all that I would be greatly appreciative of if you'd answer it, whether it be in a review, in a private message, or even in the poll that will be put up shortly.

If I created a forum here on fanfiction exclusively for my series, would you guys participate in it? One thing that I noticed when going over reviews is that often times discussions actually occur in the reviews, but with other people reviewing in between, sometimes it all gets overlooked. My brother had the idea to create a forum so that you guys could, up until book 7 and even during it, communicate with one another. I always see theories about who is going to die, who will start dating, etc. and I think that if I had a forum, it would be easier for you guys to speak about things. It would also be a great way for me to stop by and clear something up if it's too confusing; obviously, quickly posting in a forum is much less time consuming than posting an author's note about a single dispute.

On the other side, however, I don't know how prominent forums really are here on this site, and I don't want to create one unless I'm sure that people will be participating in it; i'd hate for only a few people to talk in it, the end result being that often times questions wouldn't get answered. So leave a review or answer the poll etc. because if enough people think that they'd be at least somewhat active in it, I'd be happy to create it.

Also, in the meanwhile before Book 7, one-shots will be returning. They will be, along with all future author's notes about the next book, uploaded in the current "Vekin87" one-shots page, and so I highly recommend that you put said story on Author alert, as things like the official release date of book 7, as well as an inside-the-flap-jacket summary, will be placed there. In terms of what the one-shots will be about, I can guarantee at least three for now: another one for Blackwood taking place wayyy before the start of the series, one for Ares, in which he meets his biological mother for the first time (also takes place before the series) and one for Charles Eckley, which takes place during the events Book 6, shortly after the attack on the train.

And finally, I have another huge announcement to make. During this hiatus I hope to stay very, very busy, and I hope to do so by continuing to improve this series. And so, I am very excited to announce "Project Grammar". My brother/beta, who has never read my first few books, has finally decided to do so, and we decided that this would be great a great opportunity to go over my first four books and edit them so that they're up to scratch with book 6. I should make it very clear that NO PLOT ELEMENTS will be changed; if you choose not to go back and read them, you'll find that you're missing nothing, not even dialogue. For those of you would like to go back and read them, however, I hope that you will be pleased to see the changes, which include, but are not limited to:

-Proper usage of apostrophies

-Spelling that's actually been checked

-Better usage of captilization

-The fixing of broken sentences

-Slight modifications to continuity that is not story related, i.e getting rid of the usage of "Thanksgiving" in book 1. I may also change Dominique's gender to that of a girl, in the same book.

Author's notes that litter the stories will also largely be removed, bar a few that have significance (as in those that actually answer questions.) Line breaks, which have been included since the last few chapters of book 5, will also be used throughout the books. I actually HAVE been using them since book 1, but it wasn't until book 5 that I realized that the lines disappear unless you put them in immediately before uploading, with a special

button on the chapter editor. Line breaks are very important to altering the pace of a story, and also serve well when switching between different points of view, which I do relatively frequently (believe me, I RAGED when I found out that they weren't showing up.) Also, I will now be doing pre-post edits so that things like wordsstucktogether and words that are completely cut out due to the nature of the document will no longer be prevelant. I will not, however, be adding the commas to dialogue (which yes, I am aware is correct), only because even up to book 6 they're not there, and I don't want the books to be inconsistent. Obviously, I don't have the power at my disposal to make these books PERFECT, but I hope to make them good enough so that new readers will not be deterred from reading them, and also so that old readers who go back through them will have the chance to get excited for the final book of the series. These books will be uploaded in their entirety one at a time, and again, people will be alerted of this through special notifications in my one-shots page. The new and improved Book 1 should be out within the next 2 weeks, so look out for that!

And now that those announcements are done, I think that its time to get to the juice of the update. First and foremost, I think I'll address just a few slight issues that some people had:

1. Lack of other characters in the second half. Following the attack on the train, FotD becomes largely an Albus-Fairhart centered book. I knew that this would be met with mixed reception, as characters like Morrison and Scorpius are so popular, but believe me, there was *no other way* to do this book, and indeed, advance this series. While it may have seemed tedious on the initial read through, I can assure you that by the time that the series is done, these moments will be seen as among the most important in the series. Everything from Albus' training to his deep conversations with the Renegade are instrumental to the overall themes of my series, and I should note that my books are, more so than JK's, very protagonist heavy. Albus is a loner; Morrison and Scorpius may make up his trio, but the dynamic is not exactly as it was with Ron and Hermione. This will be discussed more when answering questions later however.

2. The Nundu. Only a few people commented on this, but I thought it best to clear it up. The Nundu is described (all over the internet, and believe me, I googled hard on this one) as a beast that has never been defeated by less than a hundred wizards, and as a creature with breath that causes disease. It was pointed out by one or two people that Albus and Fairhart defeating such a creature is thus unlikely. I want to make it very clear that they did NOT defeat the Nundu. Albus outsmarted the Nundu, and it defeated itself. Albus is consistently described as a wizard that is most effective when thinking strategically. Albus knew that it would take extremely powerful magic to take out the Nundu; he thus knew that he needed to use the Ministry enchantments on the island against it. Without those enchantments, you can expect a very different outcome. Also, I believe that one person mentioned that Fairhart should have died when the creature breathed on him. Nothing

that I read, however, suggests that the Nundu's breath causes sudden death. It causes disease and decay, neither of which occur immediately. I would imagine that prolonged exposure is the true cause of death in such a case, and though Fairhart was weakened, inhaling a single breath was unlikely to kill him.

And beyond all this, I realllly just wanted to give you guys a cool scene that shows the dangers of the island, which I put ALOT of thought into even prior to the book being written. Realistically, I don't think that twelve year old Harry should have been able to kill a Basilisk (also often described as among the most dangerous creatures in the world) with nothing more than "a songbird and an old hat" either, but admittedly, it made for an awesome sequence, didn't it? XD

3. The Tier List. I created a tier list a few chapters back, and while most people seem to be at least along the same lines of it, others don't think that Ares and Fairhart should be where they are, that is, above Harry. Let me just say that I do not think that Ares and Fairhart are "greater" wizards than Harry; but I know for sure, as they are my characters, that they are stronger. Ares is specifically designed to be more powerful; he was not intended to be the nemesis of Albus, but of Harry. Darvy is Albus' nemesis. Ares was a character who Albus needed to see his father struggle against; he needed to see that his dad couldn't do everything. Ares was a prodigy; in a very real sense, he was the next Voldemort/Dumbledore. In fact, there's a line in Book 4 where Ares comments that he can't remember his original last name, though he believes that it may have began with either a "D" or "R". These stand for Dumbledore and Riddle, respectively. Obviously, Ares is related to neither of them; this is a slight, almost inside-joke that I threw in to make readers understand that Ares was well on his way to greatness. Like Voldemort, he was gifted from a very young age, performing complex magic long before he ever would have reached a school. His adoptive parents home-schooled him however, and though this helped him greatly with his abilities and his knowledge, this sheltered life also tremendously damaged his true potential. Add in the fact that he later received Auror training from Harry Potter, and you can say that Ares was on a fast pace to truly reaching legendary status. But due to his upbringing, Ares didn't know enough about the world to decide what he wanted to be. He is sometimes seen performing Voldemort-like acts of tyranny, other times providing mercy reminiscent of Dumbledore. He may very well could have been the next extremely powerful good/dark wizard, but his indecisiveness proves to be his folly, and he dies as little more than a shadow on a world that's already long since forgotten him. The dangers of indecisiveness are a huge theme in my book books, and Ares is perhaps the first character to exemplify them.

Fairhart, on the other hand, I also don't imagine as being greater than Harry, but I certainly make him more skilled, or at least more varied. While Fairhart never received a proper magical education, he was extremely fortunate enough to live portions of his life in a muggle environment, and thus knows a great deal about history, science, psychology, and

many other things that have been show to benefit a wizards capabilities. Some of the best wizards and witches in the HP series grew up at least somewhat around muggles (Harry, Riddle, Hermione, Snape) and the most powerful pure-blood character in the books (Dumbledore) is explicitly mentioned as being active in the muggle world, what with his love for their magazines and lemon drops and what not. From this background, Fairhart joined WAR, where he spent years and years learning to harness this knowledge into ways to kill; to inflict pain. And then, from there he became an Auror, so he's very skilled on all fronts, even if he struggles with things that require patience and willpower, like Potions or Occlumency.

So while I'd much rather have Harry fighting alongside me than either Ares or Fairhart, they are designed to be as powerful as they are, and certainly rank among the highest in my books. Perhaps one day I'll make a full tier list, but obviously, it really is up to YOUR imagination who comes out better in a duel, I'm just telling you what I make of my characters, and why they're designed that way.

Okay! On to some questions:

Q: Does book 7 have a release date?

A: Alas, no. There will be a bit of a long hiatus before 7, and this is part of the reason why I'm trying to stay so active in the offseason. Obviously there needs to be planning and the like, and there's a chance that I'll be returning to college in the spring (as of right now its tentative, as even financial aid can't all the way help people like me haha). I'd image that you'll see the first chapters in the spring however, and I definitely want this entire series done before I turn 21 in August. Expect more information to trickle out in author's notes as time goes by however.

Q: Will Book 7 be longer than Book 6?

A: Sorry, but most certainly not. I'd expect Book 7 to be closer in length to 4 and 5, but to be honest, this has a lot to do with the fast paced nature of it. Like in HPatDH, there's no Quidditch matches, I can promise that much, and I hope to tighten the book and make it flow seamlessly, even if that does make it a bit shorter; in the end, it will be for the best.

Q: Do Scorpius and Morrison end up with Albus?

A; Hmmm, can't say, but I can promise that their presence will be more noticeable in this next one. In Book 6 they were basically missing for about 45% straight of it. Their appearances will be interwoven into the story, but I can't go much further than that without spoiling anything.

Q: Are you only writing 7 books, and will there be an epilogue?

A: Yes, only seven books, but there will be info on any surviving characters; I'm still toying around with ideas on this.

Q: Will you be killing off any major characters in the next book?

A: Yes.

Q: Will Hermione play a bigger role in Book 7?

A: You know, every book I plan on incorporating her more, but her ridiculous intelligence makes it hard to do. While I can't promise anything that's specifically Hermione related, I can promise that the original trio will play a large part on this next book, and that yes, you will see them all duel.

Q: Will we see more of Mirra, and what will her role be?

A: Mirra is a very tormented character for me, because as Albus gets more thick, she gets softer. I can not specify on her role in Book 7, but as Albus' primary love interest for- what, 7 books now?- I can tell you that she'll have more of a part to play than Ginny did in DH.

Q: Will Hogwarts be open next year?

A: I am not at liberty to discuss the status of Hogwarts at this time.

Q: Various questions about Albus' family and friends, and their status'.

A: Albus' main family members will have roles to play, but apart from the original trio, there won't be that much there for them. All will be cleared up in Book 7 however.

Q: Do you read fanfiction?

A: Sorry, no : / I used to, when I was younger, but in the last 5 years or so, the only stories that I've read are mine, and even then, I rarely re-read my own work; I'm one of those people who faceplams when going over their stories, typically utterly disappointed with them (believe me, Project Grammar is painful). I do, however, read published books in my spare time when I can, so if anyone's interested in what I'd recommend there, feel free to leave a review asking or to drop me a PM.

Q: Who do you consider to be Harry's parallel in the original series?"

A: This is an interesting question, because Harry in my series is really just supposed to be an adult version of what he was in JK's; a great wizard who has matured, and who deeply cares for his loved ones. In terms of exposition and the like though, he's probably closest to Dumbledore. Though not nearly as powerful or wise, I often try to make him the voice of reason, and he's typically the one who clears things up at the end of the book, isn't he? Good question, but very difficult one.

And that seems to be it for now, so on to a few book 7 tidbits!

1. Book 7 does not start off immediately after Albus Apparates away. Time will have elapsed, though not much, and it will all be cleared up early on.

2. Book 7 will be very, very fast paced. I hate saying this, as I'm such a huge Harry Potter fan, but I for one was a tad bit disappointed in how Deathly Hallows was handled. I thought that the Hallows plot was introduced too late in the series, and mostly served as a way to make Harry avoid the battles of the wizarding world, as he searched for different mysteries and ways to defeat Voldemort. Whereas Harry basically stayed on the outskirts of the war until the end, Albus will largely be in the thick of it. With Renegade factions popping up everywhere, fighting for control, and with the Dark Alliance still wreaking havoc, Albus will find himself in battles often, and will frequently be forced to create and shatter alliances at a moment's notice.

3. Book 7 should resolve everything in the series, high up among them the nature of Albus and the Dragonfang Wand.

4. Book 7 will be very sullen and gritty; darker even than Deathly Hallows, I'd say. I don't want to spoil anything, but more than one major character will die, and believe me when I say that no one is fully safe, regardless of their role in the books.

5. Tracking will play an important part in Book 7.

6. Charles Eckley will have a semi-prominent role, and you will get to meet a least one of his older brothers as well.

7. Albus has went through several levels of popularity in these books, sometimes very well liked, other times loathed. This was done purposefully, to make his character flexible and unique. Let me just say that, whether you like the things that he does or not, Albus will be at his most "badass" in book 7.

8. With Book 7 I will hope to properly elucidate on several key themes in my entire series, including the dangers of indecisiveness (as mentioned above), the nature of redemption, and, perhaps most importantly, the importance of internal struggle and moral ambiguity, including-as mentioned in a previous book-what gives someone "the right to kill" someone else. Albus' inner struggles are a huge part of this series, and they will be very prominent in this final installment.

8. And finally, Book 7 is tentatively titled as (though it is very unlikely that this will change), "Albus Potter and the War Within."

So that's that! Reviews are not necessary, but are always greatly appreciated, and again, please let me know if you'd be interested in a forum. This is the last post for this book, all

future posts will be in my one-shots page until Book 7. So for now, my best wishes to all of my readers and their friends and families! Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed the book and are as excited for book 7 as I am,

-Kevin