

**Albus Potter and the Rise of the Dark Alliance**

**Written by Vekin87**

### **Full Summery :**

Fear. Chaos. Panic has consumed the Wizarding World, and every day whispers of an attack are heard. The riots and rallies of times passed are now common place, and the threat presented by Reginald Ares has never seemed more real as he lurks in the shadows with his newly named "Diciples of Change", seemingly waiting for the opportune moment to srike. But beyond this a civil war is brewing, one that may be more disastrous than the war that everyone fears. The public has taken it's stand against the Ministry. For the first time in years, the word " Renegade" is being used.

But amidst all of this anarchy Albus Potter enters his fourth year of Hogwarts, where the castle stands as the only comfort he has in a world where his father is now a pariah. But in between strange, sadistic dreams that he can never seem to remember, and a new professor who seems to have a vendetta against Slytherin House, Albus finds the safe haven of Hogwarts more hectic than ever. And though he has his friends to depend on, the year is made all the more terrifying when he learns that he's in more danger than he thought. Someone- for some reason- has a price on his head. And someone's looking to collect, too.

## Chapter 1: Vesnovitch

The waves crashed against the jagged rocks with tremendous force. The crackling of thunder was nearly drowned out by the sound of the rain pounding against the water, the ominous moonlight completing the picture of what was surely a foreboding place. In what was seemingly the middle of nowhere, in the very center of the ocean in which a storm was raging, a small island sat. There was a crack- not of thunder, but of something far more frightening. The sound of a wizard arriving.

A man now stood on the very edge of the island. The jagged rocks sat below him, the fierce winds blowing precariously, as if tempting him to go further. The man began walking through a trail of gargantuan trees, so wide in berth that they prevented the rain from drenching him anymore than he already was. He fought his way through the trees and bushes, pushing passed every single obstacle that nature presented him with. He finally reached a cavern that looked as though the entrance were sealed by solid rock. The man withdrew his wand, and at that very moment a flash of lightning illuminated the island.

For a single second Reginald Ares could be seen, his gray and wispy hair dangling in front of his face, some of it stuck to his cheeks from being sopping wet from the onslaught of rain. His cold and gray eyes blinked furiously at the sight of the cavern entrance, as if he were unsure if this were the correct one. After a moment he seemed to come to the conclusion that he was indeed at the right spot. With his now withdrawn wand- the Dragonfang Wand, the one that was so instrumental to his plans, he slashed the air. The cavern wall slid upwards at once revealing the entrance.

He entered the cavern and flicked his wand once more. The cavern wall slid closed again, blocking out the terrible sounds of the storm outside. A torch on the wall was lit simultaneously, and the light revealed a dirty and narrow hall. He slid through it and entered a much larger, but equally dirty room. His base of operations.

There were hooded figures scattered throughout the room, which was also illuminated by several torches hanging from the walls. There were perhaps fifty people in the room, all of them laughing or chatting as they were enjoying the dingy atmosphere. In the corner one of the men was so comfortable that he had taken his dark cloak off, and could be seen dressed in common, revealing clothes. With the sleeves of his shirt up an indiscernible scar could be seen on his forearm. It looked something like a faded skull. The hooded figure next to him was laughing merrily, a folded up newspaper in his hands.

Everyone turned to Ares as soon as he entered, though it was the man with the paper who spoke to him first.

"Red! Red!" he shouted, his voice impish and absolutely giddy. "Did you see the *Prophet*? They announced the new head Auror! Some nobody named Fischer! It's like they want to make it easier for us!"

A few people near him laughed. Ares paid the comment no mind. He aimed his golden wand at himself and in a single moment, his robes were crisp and his hair was no longer stuck to his face. He was completely dry. His mustache was quivering however, and now that his face could be seen, it was easy to tell that he was angry, or at least agitated. Something was not going his way.

"Did you Red?" the man repeated obsequiously. "And get this! That incompetent fool Weasley only got two percent of the vote! Hah!"

This time the entire room laughed, all but Ares, whose expression remained quite serious. The hooded figure with the newspaper meant to speak once more, but Ares cut him off.

"Not now Markson!" he barked, and his voice was so gruff and powerful that it put the thunder outside to shame.

Markson fell silent at once, as did all who were laughing. Ares began moving through the center of the room, and his henchmen- though they thought of themselves as followers- all backed up against the walls silently. They knew better than to engage him in conversation when he was furious.

Ares reached the end of the large room, and there was yet another concealed entrance here. With another casual flick of his wand, the stone barrier had raised itself up, and he was descending down poorly crafted stone cut stairs. The door behind him slid closed, concealing him entirely in darkness. There were no torches on the walls.

He continued to follow the seemingly endless set of stairs all the way to the bottom, where he reached a small chamber, completely circular and even grimier than what was directly above it. The small chamber was not quite as boring as the empty room above it however. In the very center there was a small stone pedestal, and on top of that, an enormous, thick, leather bound book.

Ares approached the Foulest Book and stared down at it, his face expressionless. He opened it up and began flipping through it randomly; the pages were so thick that they emitted dust when they were turned. Right when he had reached the page that he wanted, he placed his golden wand in the crease of the Book, where it sat nestled between the two sides of pages. He stepped back.

He then cleared his throat loudly and, in a tone that sounded odd coming from his gruff and deep voice, began muttering strange incantations in almost a singing voice. None of the words were of any recognizable language, though the last one seemed to be a name, as he bellowed it angrily.

"*VESNOVITCH!*"

Nothing happened. Ares remained motionless, the echo of his final word reverberating around the room. It was just about to die out when something happened. The Book began to glow a faint blue color, and suddenly, despite there being no wind in the room, the pages began blowing. Ares watched, his expression still unreadable, as a ghostly figure emerged from the book.

The figure was entirely white and wispy, almost intangible. Only its upper half was protruding from the glowing blue book, and once Ares adjusted his eyes to the intense light, he could make out a man. The man had a very thin face and high cheek bones. His hair was long and curly, and though it was as white as the rest of him, it showed hints of having been something like auburn when he was alive. The man wore small circular spectacles, of which his beady little eyes sat behind, eyeing Ares with contempt. Judging from the man's robes, which seemed to be made of fur, it was easy to see that he was from somewhere cold.

"You rang?" the ghostly figure said in a thick, distinctive Russian accent. His voice sounded irritated, as though he would not be where he was if given the choice.

"You lied to me Vesnovitch" Ares said menacingly.

Vesnovitch raised a ghostly eyebrow and continued to survey him. "Excuse me?" he asked.

Ares grabbed the Dragonfang Wand from off of the Book, and for a moment Vesnovitch flickered. He did not fade however- it seemed as though the Foulest Book was capable of supporting him alone now.

"You lied" Ares repeated through gritted teeth. He then raised the wand up high. "This wand does not obey me. I get no power from it, no control-"

"Then it does not belong to you" Vesnovitch said simply. "Earn it."

"It does belong to me!" Ares spat viciously. "I own it! It respects me! I can create them! It's just-"

"The Wand is deceitful by design" Vesnovitch said coolly. "And it is, for the sake of the conversation, an incomplete product."

"So it's faulty then?" Ares said, his face going white.

"Not faulty, no" Vesnovitch said. "Incomplete. I based its design off of the Deathstick. Not in power of course, such power cannot be replicated. But the wand chooses the wizard, such a statement is not a stable amongst wand makers for nothing."

"So it chooses its master differently than most wands" Ares said. "I know this. But the wand *does* respect me. It just doesn't work properly in some cases."

"Then it doesn't respect you" Vesnovitch said, his tone suggesting that he was relatively pleased with the situation. "Either that, or it only respects you partially."

"Partially?" Ares asked.

The ghostly image of Vesnovitch fell silent, apparently deep in thought. It raised its hand to its chin and seemed to rub thin air.

"It is not unheard of for wands to take two masters."

"But this is no ordinary wand!" Ares spat angrily. "Everything I've learned about it indicates just how unordinary it is! Surely, the regular rules do not apply-"

"You are still thinking of the wand's *initial* design" Vesnovitch said. "The design based off of the Wand of Destiny. But whereas that wand seeks power- and only the most powerful can utilize it-"

"But I *am* powerful" Ares said gruffly, his teeth gritted. "This wand has never been held by one like me, I can assure you. Every choice that I have made has been chosen for a singular reason, I've taken every opportunity to possess more power, whether it is as a wizard or as a human being! As a leader!"

Vesnovitch clicked his tongue impatiently, and then made a patronizing noise. For a second he seemed like he was going to laugh, though he maintained his composure.

"The living" he said, and he sounded disgusted. "Oh how foolish they are... Perhaps when they are dead, they will understand. Choosing power is insignificant when compared to the power of choice. There is more to a wizard than raw talent."

"Don't feed me that garbage!" Ares said angrily. "I did not summon you for a lecture on human values! I summoned you for answers!"

"Then don't cut me off and accuse me of not knowing what I'm talking about" Vesnovitch said icily, and Ares fell silent. "As I was saying, it is highly uncommon, though not impossible for a wand to take two masters. Typically there would already be some connection between them, but in this particular case, the Dragonfang Wand may be confused, and is thus splitting its powers."

"But no one else has had it!" Ares said. "I am the only one to use this wand!" he added, waving the brilliantly golden wand in front of Vesnovitch's transparent face.

"If I may speak" came a voice from behind Ares.

Ares turned around and squinted his eyes to see who was there. From the light radiating from the Foulest Book he could make out a hooded figure, it was one of his servants. On closer inspection he saw exactly who it was.

"What are you doing here Sebastian?" Ares asked his brother, his voice both curious and frustrated. His question seemed more of a demand for answers than anything however.

"Merely listening" Sebastian Darvy said, his electric blue eyes flickering maliciously in the light from the center of the room. He pulled his hood down and revealed his filthy mane of blonde hair. "I could not help but hear our dear deceased friend mentioning something of interest..."

"I sealed the door behind me" Ares said darkly.

Darvy ignored this. "The wand having two owners is an interesting theory indeed. You recall, I hope, the conversation that we had not too long ago? About a certain incident-"

"Not again!" Ares barked, rolling his eyes. Vesnovitch was now silent, picking at his intangible fingernails and listening to the two brothers bicker. "For the last time Sebastian, I refuse to allow you to blame your blunders on ancient magic! You were bested by a thirteen year old boy, deal with it!

"You don't understand-" Darvy tried to rebuttal, but Ares heaved a tremendous sigh that cut him off.

"You *don't understand*" he said irritably. "Children sometimes perform incredible feats of magic when in danger. What you described is nothing of interest. I would have hoped that you would have dealt with it better, but that is irrelevant."

"You weren't there!" Darvy said loudly, and he seemed to have taken his brother's words to heart. "You didn't see him! His eyes glowing gold, speaking in strange tongues-"

"I'm not doing this with you now" Ares said, turning around on the spot, his cloak sweeping across the ground and raising dust. Darvy stared at him angrily and looked for a moment as though he wanted to say something, to continue the argument, but eventually decided against it.

"As I was saying" Ares said to Vesnovitch, who still wore his bored expression and seemed more interested in the fingers that were not there than whatever it was Ares had to say. "I am the only one in decades who has used the Dragonfang Wand. It was kept concealed for years. I am the only one who could have possibly earned the wand's respect, and it shows. I can summon these creatures, these...these..."

He seemed to be unsure as what to call them.

"Inferi?" Darvy spoke up, still behind his brother.

"Not Inferi" Vesnovitch said calmly. "They are not reanimated corpses. They are creatures who are all but worthless, beings whose souls have left them but are still bound to this earth by their insatiable desire for the Wand. For all intents and purposes, they are the barbaric predecessor to

what you wizards call Dementors. Only unlike those foul beasts, they obey a single master and do not attack the soul, but rather the body."

"But they don't obey me!" Ares said. "I summon them, but I must destroy them immediately afterwards!"

Vesnovitch merely heaved a sigh. "Then the Wand is split in two. You can summon these beasts, though they obey another."

"That is impossible" Ares said forcefully, his teeth grinding against each other for maximum effect.

"Well I don't know why you called me if you don't plan on listening to me" Vesnovitch said dryly. "Honestly, disturbing me for no reason..."

"Fine!" Ares said. "Then away with you...for now."

Ares waved the Dragonfang Wand and the Book snapped itself shut. The blue light began to fade and the image of Vesnovitch began to flicker.

"Do svidaniya" Vesnovitch said sarcastically, and eventually he disappeared completely. The blue light faded entirely, leaving Ares alone in the dark chamber with his brother.

"What a waste" Darvy spoke up savagely the moment that Vesnovitch was completely gone. "All of that work to get the damn book, and it doesn't even give us answers!"

"It gave us answers" Ares said, turning to him. "Just not the answers that we need. Vesnovitch is under the delusion that I have been careless and allowed someone else to use the Wand; he does not know how meticulous I am. I will have to discover its faults by myself, it seems."

"How do you know he wasn't lying?" his brother asked him. "Ghosts are known to hide things, and he's not very fond of us, is he?"

"He is an echo, not a ghost" Ares corrected him. "And he has no reason to lie. I doubt that the dead concern themselves very much with the living; if they did he would understand why it is so important that I uncover his wand's secrets. And what's more, so long as we have the Book we are a constant nuisance. He understands the only way to be rid of me is to give me what I want..."

There were several moments of silence after this, where Darvy seemed to teeter on the thought of saying something. Only when Ares had turned back around did he speak.

"And you're sure?" Darvy asked hesitantly. "About-"

"I am positive" Ares cut him off. "And that is the last we will speak of the matter, understood?"



Darvy's face turned a faint shade of pink, and he stepped backwards so as to let the darkness of the room conceal it, despite his brother not looking at him anyway.

"Don't talk to me like I'm some servant" Darvy said darkly. "You may have the idiots above us fooled into thinking that you're some dark wizard, but I know your real intentions, I know what you really are!"

"You're right!" Ares said furiously, spinning around so fast that his cloak made a whirling sound. "You're not a servant! Servants actually do their jobs correctly!"

Darvy threw up his arms in anger. "This again!" he said. "You got the Book didn't you?"

"Indeed I did, due to my own prodigious skill" Ares said. "You were tasked with bringing me the Potter boy, and what did you do? Brought along some silly little girl with him! Then you were supposed to keep an eye on the younger one, and you failed to do that as well! Perhaps I'll start giving Fango your tasks! At least he is efficient!"

Darvy sneered. "Fango Wilde is a coward. He fled the battle at the Ministry when that scarred Auror showed up, he fears vengeance. I stayed, I fought! And you wouldn't even have Fango Wilde if not for me! Who turned him to our side? Me! Who concocted the Polyjuice Potion that got them off of his tail! Me! You need my potioneer expertise-"

Ares gave a derisive laugh that quickly turned itself into a scowl. "You think too highly of yourself. You were nothing when I found you Sebastian, *nothing*. Just a man with a knack for mixing liquids. You'd be a *bartender* if I hadn't found you. If I hadn't saved you from the pathetic and mundane redundancy that you called a life!"

Darvy looked as though he had been slapped in the face. He ran his hands through his blonde hair and made an angry noise, though he seemed unable, or possibly unwilling, to say what he wanted to say.

Ares' lips curled into a smile of satisfaction at his brother's silence. "Now leave me to my thoughts" he said, coldness etched into his gruff voice.

Darvy turned on the spot and began walking up the set of stone stairs, muttering incoherently the entire way. Only when Ares heard the stone door seal itself once more did he turn and let his mind wander. He stared down at the golden wand in his hand.

This wand was just another way that fate had robbed him. What with the muggle blood that flowed through veins, making him an incomplete wizard. With the adopted parents who had forbidden him to have an education, to let the extent of his powers flourish. And here this wand was, a wand that, according to legend, would make him a leader. Would not just let him reach his full potential, but would allow him to rule an army...would allow him to change the world that he knew desperately needed change. And it wasn't even working properly.

He thought savagely of Potter, for it was Potter, after all, who had told him about the Wand in the first place, though he of course had not known the potential repercussions. Potter, who had been more of a mentor to him than anyone else. Potter, who had taught him and respected him, Potter, who was blinded by the insufferable enigma that was morality, who refused to acknowledge that sometimes the right thing to do was the hardest thing as well. Potter, who would ultimately, and regretfully, have to die for his plans to come to fruition...

He continued to gaze at the Dragonfang Wand, and he felt the black fang that was a handle burn within his fist as if tempting him to try again, just one more time. Yes, it knew that he was its master. One more try, then.

He raised the Wand high above his head and began muttering strange incantations not unlike the ones that he used on the Foulest Book. The seemingly nonsensical words rang out through the chamber, and when he had finished, a blinding flash of light had forced him to close his eyes.

At first nothing happened, but then there was a sickening cracking noise. Ares stepped backwards and looked down at his feet, where he saw that the ground had split. The crack in the ground widened itself, all the while a terrible humming noise and fiery red light emitting from it. A hand shot out of the crack.

Within seconds the creature had pulled itself out from the crack. Standing nearly seven feet tall, the relatively short Ares had to stare up at it. It was like a giant skeleton, only with grayish paper thin flesh hanging off of its bones, maggots crawling from the eyes of its skull. It was standing almost lopsided, as if it were trying to stretch itself or become more comfortable. It carried a putrid smell unmatched by any other odor, and it was flexing its long skeletal fingers curiously, as if it had been too long since it used them. The crack in the ground sealed itself, and the red light ceased.

Ares raised the Wand up high so that the disgusting creature could see it.

"Bow to me" he said forcefully.

The skeletal figure merely stared at him, unable to comprehend him.

"Bow" he repeated.

The creature snapped its jaw at him, and then made a thundering roar that sounded almost lion like. It followed this was an icy screech; a battle cry. It raised its arms up high and lunged at Ares, its eyes focused on the wand in his hand-

There was an explosion. Ares had struck the wand through the air with little to no effort, and the blasting curse had been so powerful that the small chamber became full of dust. He cleared the dust with another wave of his wand, and saw that all that lay on the floor next to him was a pile of broken bones, a cracked, unmoving skull settled neatly at the top.

He kicked at the pile of bones angrily, and then put his wand back within his robes. Giving the pile of rubble one final, disappointed glare, he turned and began walking up the stone stairs.

## Chapter 2 : The Two Captains

*Albus watched as Ares backed up against the tree in fear. The moonlight squeezed its way through the cracks of the large trees, illuminating both the look of terror on his face and the golden wand pointed at him.*

*"No- please don't" Ares stammered, and he actually slid down the tree, nearly curled up in fear.*

*Albus laughed cruelly. He lowered the wand slightly so that it was now perfectly aimed at the cowardly man before him, the man at his mercy.*

*"Please no!"*

*Albus laughed even louder, but he had now grown tired of the man's begging. It was time to end this. He gripped the Dragonfang Wand tightly.*

*"Avada kedavra!"*

*The jet of green light hit Ares square in the face. He toppled over like a ragdoll, his head banging against the roots of the massive tree that he had been leaning against. Albus approached him and looked down at his pitiful, weak face. He could see his reflection in his victim's lifeless eyes. He had resumed laughing, and his own eyes were glowing golden, though he knew that behind the light there was nothing there. He was hollow, he had no soul, and he was-*

A door opened. Albus shot up straight; he looked around frantically to make sure he was still in his bed, and then looked over at the door. It was Lily.

"Mom says get up" she said. "You need to eat breakfast now."

"Heard of knocking?" he answered her, ignoring what she had said completely. He wiped a bead of sweat from his face. Why was he panting so heavily?

Lily tossed her long red hair out of her face, then knocked once on the already opened door, despite the fact that she was already in the room.

"Better? Mom says get up."

And with that she turned around, leaving Albus to untangle himself from his blankets. He was now trying to remember what he had been dreaming about. Had someone been laughing? Everything was so blurry...

It took him more than fifteen minutes to get dressed, and though he collapsed back on his bed and tried to nap, he was downstairs within the hour. Yawning and pulling at his t-shirt to cool himself off, he entered the kitchen and saw that it wasn't empty. A small red headed figure had his back to him and he was pouring himself a large glass of orange juice on the counter.

Hugo spun around when he saw him enter.

"Oh hey Al" he said with a bit of a stutter. "Sorry, I don't think I left you enough-"

"It's fine, there's plenty" Albus told him, pouring himself a glass. He realized at once that he had miscalculated. There was barely half a cup.

"Sorry" Hugo repeated timidly.

"Don't worry about it" Albus said casually, taking a relatively small sip so as to savor it. He was too distracted to care anyway. He was still trying to remember his dream, though he was having a very hard time of it. He scratched at his chin, and then realized something. Hugo was in his kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" he asked him.

"My dad dropped me off" Hugo said, taking a large gulp of his own glass and sitting down at the kitchen table. "Then he left. He'll be back though. There's supposed to be a big meeting or something..."

Albus frowned slightly. There hadn't been a single day this summer when there wasn't visitors. Men and women of all sorts of colors and accents had been knocking on his door, asking to see his father and eventually having a large conversation in the kitchen. Even on his birthday there had been a relatively large meeting, and he hadn't been allowed downstairs for a great deal of the afternoon.

He then realized something else. If Hugo had been dropped off, then surely-

"Albus!"

Rose's shriek echoed through the entire downstairs. Albus groaned as his cousin marched into the room, her hair tied back into a ponytail and her face exasperated, as if she had been looking everywhere for him.

"Albus-" she repeated again when she saw him leaning against the counter.

"I heard you" he said dryly.

"Good, I need to borrow Marauder" she demanded.

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Why?"

But she was not listening; she had already spotted her younger brother and had pried the glass of orange juice from his fingers.

"Hey that's mine!" he argued.

"Hugo you have to learn to share!" she shot out pompously, and she took an enormous swig from his glass, and then wiped her mouth. "You were saying?" she added, turning back to him.

"I asked why you need Marauder" Albus said. "Don't you have an owl?"

"Errol's real old and we think he's sick too. My dad doesn't want him flying long distances..."

"Long distances?" Albus asked, and Hugo was now looking back and forth between them, seeing where things ended up. "How far? Who are you writing to?"

"None of your business" she said sharply.

"It is my business! It's my owl! And you're writing to one of those two prats!"

"No I'm not!" she said, but he knew she was lying. And with good reason too. Albus loathed both of the prats in question, a feeling of contempt that had only been exacerbated when one of them, Charles Eckley, had begun dating his crush the previous year. Albus had something of a small revenge however, as he had made Eckley feel like a fool on the Quidditch field in the final match, though that had done nothing to end the enmity. Rose still knew how unwilling he would be to have his owl deliver a letter to one of them.

"I'm not writing to either of them!" she said. "And it's not your owl either! It's your family's owl! And I'm family!"

"Well you can't use him anyway" Albus said smugly. "Because he's out delivering a letter to Morrison as we speak."

She threw up her hands furiously. "Albus! Why would you do that!"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I didn't know that you were going to need him" he said. "How can you fault me for that?"

Now Rose narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. "Fine!" she said. "Well tell me when he gets back!"

And with that, she turned around promptly and left, still carrying Hugo's glass of orange juice with her.

"She gets worse every year" Albus mumbled to himself, and he saw Hugo smile slightly. He then realized that his cousin no longer had a glass of orange juice. He handed his own over to him.

"Thanks" Hugo said gratefully.

"Don't worry about it" he said, and he left the kitchen to meander through his home. He didn't get very far however. No sooner had he entered the living room did he hear a loud thundering knock

on the door. Thinking that it was perhaps Hagrid, who had been visiting quite frequently this summer, he opened the door at once.

It wasn't Hagrid. Instead, a tall and burly man with a large curved nose and sallow skin was standing in the doorway. He had something of a sour look to him, what with his thick black eyebrows raised up high and his dark eyes leering downwards, though Albus was used to this appearance. He had, after all, met this man before.

"Hello Mr. Krum" he said, and he opened the door wider so that the man could enter.

"Hello" he replied in his thick Bulgarian accent, and he watched as Albus closed and locked the door behind him. "Do you know vere your father is?" he added before Albus could do much else.

"I just know he's out" Albus said. His father was always out for most of the day now. "You want to wait here until he comes back? I think my Uncle Ron will be back soon too."

Mr. Krum frowned slightly, though whether this was at the idea of his father not being there or Uncle Ron coming Albus wasn't sure. Every time that his uncle was in the same room as Mr. Krum Albus noticed that the tension was palpable, and mostly created by his uncle, who stared maliciously at him for a reason that Albus couldn't fathom.

"I vill wait I suppose" he said. "If it's not too much trouble."

Albus was right about to lead him into his kitchen when his mother came down the stairs holding a large basket of laundry.

"Viktor!" she gasped when she saw Mr. Krum, and she placed the basket down and hugged him. She quickly turned to Albus. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No..."

"Well you need to hurry up!" she said. "There's going to be people coming over and we're going to need the kitchen and the dining room! So hurry up! And wake James too!"

Albus groaned and began marching up the stairs. Once more, he would be forced to sit upstairs while a meeting played out underneath him. What's more, this was sure to be a big one, as Mr. Krum was there. Mr. Krum, as far as Albus knew, was a member of the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic, or more accurately, the head of their Department for Magical Games and Sports. Supposedly he had been something of a good Quidditch player in his youth. He was not entirely sure how his family knew him, though he knew why he was stopping by. Ares.

Ever since his first day back from his third year, the people that had been popping in and out of his home had talked of nothing but the man who had grievously injured his brother the previous year. Joseph Devlin, a member of the Irish Ministry of Magic, stopped by every Saturday. Ivona Mazur, the Polish Minister of Magic herself, had stayed for dinner not too long ago. The

conversation was always deep and quiet, though the little that Albus heard was always about Ares; where he was, what he was doing. To be fair, Albus didn't pay much attention to it. As far as he was concerned, he knew everything that he needed to know already and all that he really needed to know was how to stay out of trouble. He had yet to have a year at Hogwarts where he wasn't in some form or danger.

The appearance of Mr. Krum was especially noted in this case because as far as Albus knew, Mr. Krum was very busy in his own country, and anything that called him away from their must've been important. Thus, Albus fully expected for no less than fifty people to arrive for this particular meeting, including a few of his Hogwarts professors.

He reached James' bedroom door, and the sound of his mother and Mr. Krum quietly talking downstairs was drowned out. James was blasting the WWN (Wizards Wireless Network) so loud that Albus was quite sure that the door was about to be blasted off of its hinges from the vibrations. The sound of thundering drums and screeching guitars told him that he was banging his head to his favorite band, Sound of a Thousand Thestrals.

Albus opened the door and saw that James was indeed banging his head to the music. His shirt was off, revealing his muscular and toned Quidditch physique (including the long white scar directly down the right side of his chest) and he was moving his fingers exceptionally fast, as though mimicking the noises coming from his radio.

"James!" he yelled over the music, though now that the door was opened, he was sure that he had never heard anything louder, and knew that his brother had not heard him. "James!" he repeated. "Mom says-"

James flicked the radio off and the room turned quiet at once. "Heard of knocking?" he said.

Albus ignored him. "Mom says you need to eat your breakfast now" he said. "We've got people coming over."

"That short blonde bloke?" James asked. "Devlin?"

Albus shrugged. "Maybe, I dunno. But there's going to be a lot, Mr. Krum's here."

James looked for a moment as though he was going to say something, and then flicked his radio back on. The song was still playing, and Albus was forced to shut the door so as to avoid a headache.

Muttering to himself, he made his way back downstairs and heard that the amount of voices had more than doubled in the few seconds that he had conversed with James. He approached the dining room and peeked into the kitchen. A tall, pale man with tinted glass that Albus did not recognize was now there, sitting next to Mr. Krum. They were talking quietly. Across from Krum was a short balding man, slightly rounder than most, which was wheezing and wiping at



his forehead with a handkerchief. Albus had never seen this man before either. Nor did he know the woman who was arguing with him- who, Albus realized with a shock, was nearly as tall as Hagrid.

She had handsome olive skin and beetle black eyes that were oddly reminiscent of the Hogwarts gamekeeper as well, though her hair was sleek rather than ruffled, and appeared to be graying slightly. She spoke with an air of great importance to her, and her throaty voice was so clear and loud that it dampened the other conversation in the room and was much easier to hear.

"Au contraire, Meester Tommelson" she was saying, flapping her large hand through the air towards the wheezing man. "I do not believe it eez a matter of knowledge so much as it eez a matter of ignorance! Ze giants have never heard of zis ' Waddlesworth' character, zey have no reason to support him or Ares-"

Albus turned his attention away from the gigantic woman and paid attention to his mother, who had her back turned to him and was apparently busy making tea for the group of people in her kitchen. She was the only one in the room that he actually knew, and thus he left the kitchen and decided to head back upstairs, rather than intrude on what were surely several important conversations. He was just about to walk up the stairs when he noticed that the front door was unlocked.

His parents had been extremely stringent recently when it came to the protection of the house this summer, and he was constantly reminded to keep the door locked at all times. Apparently his father had put additional magical protection around the house, but his parents insisted that every security measure mattered. Thus, he approached the door and began fiddling with the lock. No sooner had he done so then did the door open.

Albus backed up away from the door in surprise, and then saw that he was face to face with his father. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Albus resumed his original plan and began walking up the stairs.

Things had been very tense between him and his father this summer. Ever since the disaster that had occurred at the end of the previous year, both of them seemed to have been unwilling to initiate conversation. Albus knew that his father felt truly horrible for what had happened- it was he after all who had released both Ares and Fango Wilde from Azkaban (albeit at different times and for different reasons, but still, he had done it!) and he now knew that Albus knew of his mistakes. Likewise, Albus could not find himself able to completely forgive him, and he knew that his father was truly hurting for it. Their relationship seemed more strained than ever, and the truly sad thing was that Albus would have it no other way. He had once idolized his father, though now that he saw his mistakes, found it hard to support him. Thus, conversations between the two were generally short and only brought about by necessity or by taking part in the conversations of others.

Thankfully, everyone was so busy that it mostly went unnoticed. His brother was far too obsessed with practicing Quidditch ( he had become especially motivated since losing in the final the previous year) and Lily was so looking forward to the upcoming year that her nose was almost constantly buried in books, something which Albus knew was a drawback of her having spent so much time with Rose. Only his mother seemed to notice the awkward silences that pertained to her husband and son, and she alone seemed to be determined to do something about it. She frequently attempted to throw him subtle hints as to spending more time with his father anyway, all of which Albus managed to successfully repel.

Not spending time with his father was getting harder however, especially since a certain day in the middle of July. His father had lost his position as Head Auror at the end of the previous school year, though it was in July that he officially left the Ministry altogether and became unemployed. It had caused uproar in the media, though according to his mother, his father had very good reasons for his departure. Though he was now spending more time at home, and at least usually making it to dinner, he seemed to always be preoccupied with top secret things, things that seemed to take place in the very countries where the people that now sat in his kitchen resided.

He collapsed onto his bed and allowed his thoughts to wander. He was still trying to remember bits and pieces of his dream, though, as dreams tended to do, this one was slowly slipping away, and any detail, regardless of how vague, seemed to be out of reach. Perhaps there had been tapping, he thought as he stared up at his ceiling. Yes, there must've been a loud tapping, for he was certainly hearing that now...

He shot up straight in his bed just as he had earlier in the morning, only now he instinctively turned to his bedroom window, where a beautiful tawny owl was tapping at it vehemently. He hurried over to the window and opened it, then watched as Marauder flew onto his bed and dropped an envelope. Albus picked it up and saw his name scribbled on the front in an extremely untidy scrawl. He ripped it open and read Morrison's letter at once.

*Al,*

*I got a broom. It's an old one though, or as my mom calls it a "classic". But either way I hear it's decent even by today's standards. Called a Nimbus Two Thousand. I think I might actually try out this year. Seriously, I'm not lying this time.*

*That's pretty lame that you have people popping in and out of your house all the time, though I suppose that you're at least picking up a lot of information from it. Have you heard about what's been going on? There are riots and rally's everywhere protesting the Ministry, its crazy. Everyone's got a different opinion on what to do about this Ares mess. Whatever, I'm just hoping it blows by; I don't want Hogsmeade trips cancelled this year, regardless of what happened to me last year.*

*Anyway, I wrote to Scorpius and he told me that he was waiting on his Hogwarts letter to go to Diagon Alley. Any chance we could all meet up? I've been so bored all summer; I've just been stuck in this damn house with my sister.*

*Later-*

*Morrison*

*P.S - No real beard or mustache. Lame.*

Albus chuckled at his friend's comment, but the fun didn't last very long. The second that he put the letter down he heard an unpleasant voice behind him.

"Good, I need to send this now."

He had left his door open and was now paying for it. Rose had pushed her way passed him and was now trying to get Marauder to sit still so as tie her envelope to him.

"Will you let him rest?" Albus asked, annoyed. "He just got back."

"He'll be fine Albus" Rose said dismissively. "Owls are very durable" she added, still struggling. Albus saw that the envelope in her hand was extremely thick, as though she had written several pages more than usual.

"Got a lot to tell ' Donny'?" he asked menacingly.

"I told you I'm not writing to either of them" she said as Marauder continued to flap around, refusing to hold still. Albus was quite pleased at the fight he was putting up. "You don't know the person I'm writing to."

"Oh yeah?" Albus teased. "Then how is he supposed to find him?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "Owls are *magical* Albus. They find people because the letters we write are intended for them specifically. Now will you let me do this!" she said, finally managing to tie the letter to Marauder's leg. He gave a disgruntled hoot.

"Oh yeah, sorry" Albus said. "I'll get out of your room right away" he added, rolling his own eyes. He then began petting Marauder's beak, and heard a much more comfortable and relaxed hoot because of it. "Now when you drop this off" he said quietly to his owl, "I want you to peck him. A lot. And hard."

"Albus that's a terrible thing to say!" Rose said. "And besides, I told you, it's not Charlie or Donny, so now you just look like a fool!"

She carried Marauder over to the window while Albus chanted "Liaaaaar" in a sing song voice.

Rose let Marauder out of the window, where he dropped two or three feet due to the size of the letter before flying off. She snapped the window shut and flipped her hair before addressing him. "Just so you know" she said, "You're very immature for your age."

And with that, she walked directly passed him and back out of the room, leaving Albus alone to collapse on his bed once more and resume thinking.

Albus spent the rest of the day in his room, utterly bored out of his mind. He listened to the occasional opening and closing of the front door, followed by the sliding of the locks, and that was about it. He had company however. Hugo and Lily stayed in his room, bothering him with questions as to why they weren't allowed downstairs and apparently displeased with the answers that they were getting.

"I *told* you" he said restlessly as they continued to pester him. "Mountain trolls got in the house; it's not safe down there. Let the grownups sort it out okay?"

Hugo frowned, though Lily took a much more offensive route.

"We're twelve, not stupid" she said. "We know that they're having a big meeting down there. Is it about that guy that everyone's still talking about? The guy that got away last year?"

Albus rolled over onto his side and heaved a sigh. "I don't know" he said, and this time he was only half lying. He really did have no idea what the details of the conversation going on below him were. "Just don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried" Lily said, though Hugo said nothing, seemingly cementing the fact that he was a tad bit scared. There was a slight pause before someone opened the door.

Albus rolled back over; ready to chew out whoever didn't knock this time, when he saw that it was his mother. She was looking flustered, as though she had just got done arguing, though her face turned more pleasant when she saw her daughter and nephew as well.

"You can come down for dinner now" she said to the three of them. "We're having chicken stew."

"Meeting over?" Albus asked her.

"Everyone's leaving now. And by the way, I forgot to tell you, here's your letters" she said, handing over three envelopes. "Yours is the heavier one, Albus. I have to give James and Rose theirs too, actually..."

And she turned and left, closing the door behind her. Hugo and Lily immediately began ripping at their envelopes to see what they needed for the upcoming school year, but Albus surveyed his envelope curiously. It did indeed seem slightly heavier.

"Advanced *Potion Making*?" Lily read aloud off of her note. "I haven't studied anything in Potions this summer! Who would assign that?"

Albus still wasn't listening. He opened his letter and saw the normal list of books, and indeed, near the top was a book of advanced potion making. There was also the *Standard Book of Spells: Grade Four*, and a highly recommended revised edition of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. Apart from that there was nothing new however, and Albus could not understand why his letter was heavier.

"Al, you dropped something" Hugo said, bending over and picking up a folded piece of paper. "It came from your envelope..."

He handed the folded piece of paper over and Albus unraveled it. His jaw nearly dropped, and he saw a silver badge drop out onto his bed. He read the letter first.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to be the Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch Team. Such an honor has been awarded to you due to your exceptional skill, leadership abilities, and apparent love for the magical sport of Quidditch.*

*Let it be known that not only is this an honor, but a privilege as well and certain requirements must be met to keep said privilege. Quidditch captains are expected to have strong academic achievement, show maturity, and to set positive examples for other students. Any sign of bad behavior or faltering grades can result in possible termination from the spot of Quidditch captain.*

*It is the job of the Quidditch Captain to plan practices and select members for their house team, as well as to deal with any situations pertaining to their players. Quidditch Captains are also expected to show integrity on the field, and to shake hands with their fellow captains.*

*Bidding you a good day and good luck in your new captainship,*

*Headmistress Minerva McGonagall*

Albus stared down at the loopy signature at the bottom, and then re-read the letter from start to finish, his breath quickening as he did so. Lily and Hugo were still talking privately, oblivious to what was going on. He picked up the silver badge and saw a giant "C" engraved on it. He grinned.

"Hey, where are you going-" Hugo started as Albus bolted from the room. He still had the folded piece of paper and the silver badge in his hand as he closed the door behind him. Who should he tell first? His mother? No...James. He wanted James to know first. James, who had failed to make captain thus far, despite being a sixth year, whereas Albus was only in his fourth.

He saw James running down the hall towards him. Albus raised his hand up to show him the badge-

"Boom!" James said, skidding to a halt and holding his own silver badge up. "Quidditch Captain. That's two years in a row I've got me a badge-"

Albus held up his own badge, and James fell silent for a moment. He squinted his eyes to make sure it wasn't a fake. "How is that possible?" he said when he had confirmed its authenticity. "You're only like eleven years old..."

Albus ignored his insult, he was too ecstatic at having shut his brother up. They both stared at each other for another moment, but it was finally James who spoke.

"Okay" he said. "So we're both in charge of our teams now huh? That's okay. I'm more than a better flier than you, I'm gonna' prove I'm a better leader too-"

Albus gave a short cold laugh. "We'll see" he said, staring right into his brothers eyes and trying to look as nonchalant as possible. They both slowly revolved on the spot, circling each other slightly, until finally James began walking downstairs and Albus continue down the hall, intent on telling his mother ( who had played Quidditch professionally) of his accolade. He reached his parent's room and saw the door was opened just a crack. And then he heard what sounded like sobbing.

He stopped dead in his tracks and put his ear up to the door.

"It's going to be okay Harry..." his mother was saying soothingly.

"My son hates me" he heard his father reply, and Albus realized now this his father was not sobbing, but sounded quite close.

"Albus does *not* hate you" his mother said sternly. "How could you think that! He's fourteen years old; he's going through a lot right now, that's all! Don't you remember when you were that age?"

"I was fighting dragons!" his father nearly shouted. "And merpeople..."

There was a brief silence after this, disturbed only by the sounds of the springs of their bed. His mother had obviously just sat down next to him. "You just need to spend more time with him, that's all."

"I used to be a hero to that kid" he heard his father say, and it sounded like his mouth was behind his hands. "Now he doesn't even talk to me. He hardly even looks at me. Even James isn't like this, and he's the one who got-"

"Harry, listen to me" Albus' mother cut him off. "You can't stay his hero forever. Everyone makes mistakes and Albus sees that. You just have to be his father now. You need to spend more time with him. The kids got their letters today; you should come to Diagon Alley with us-"

"I don't know if I'll be able to" he said. "I may have to go to Panama. San has a lead; he thinks Ares has a base on an island."

"Well you do what you have to do" his mother said. "But I think that it's going to take time to solve this problem with Albus. He-"

Albus walked away from the door, disgruntled, his silver captain's badge squeezed so tightly in the palm of his hand that it hurt. Quite suddenly, he didn't feel like telling either of his parents about it.

### Chapter 3: Wands and Redemption

Albus eventually did tell his parents about his shiny new badge, but it was more due to necessity than anything. James bragged about being Quidditch captain so much that Albus doubted very much if he had learned anything from his attitude the previous year, and Albus felt obligated to announce his own captainship so as to avoid another bout of "James the Great". Still, he for the most part remained quiet about it.

He had made no mention of what he had overheard to anyone, and instead, as he tended to do, mulled it over by himself in his room. The thought that his father was under such an impression- the impression that his son hated him- was a truly uncomfortable feeling, though he really saw no way to prove otherwise. He did not, of course, hate his father. But there was no denying that he now no longer had a hero. He had been hoping to at least spend some time with his father however, possibly rectify a few misconceptions on their trip to Diagon Alley, but alas, it was not going to happen.

"Dad's not coming with us?" Lily asked as everyone gathered around the fireplace.

His mother pursed her lips. "No, I'm afraid not" she said. "He couldn't make it. Urgent business."

"But dad doesn't work anymore" Lily said, sounding confused.

"Well don't worry about it" Uncle Ron said, patting her on the shoulder. "We're going to have a fun day anyway, aren't we guys?" he said, and there was a mutter of agreement in their large semicircle of people. Uncle Ron was standing behind Lily with his two children and his wife. Aunt Hermione, who did not have to go in to work today, would be accompanying them the entire time, as would Albus' mother.

"Line up, line up, plenty of floo powder" Albus' mother said.

James lined up first, looking very lazy indeed. He had just woken up, despite it being relatively late in the morning. He took a pinch of powder from the bowl that his mother held out, threw it into the fire, and mumbled "Diagon Alley".

The flames of the fireplace turned emerald green at once. He stepped through and vanished.

"Lily, you next" his mother said. Lily did the same. Hugo stepped up next.

"Now remember Hugo" Uncle Ron said as his son gazed into the fire. "Keep your elbows tucked in, chin down, eyes closed..."

"I'll be fine dad" Hugo responded, and he too entered the emerald green flames, vanishing instantly.

"Albus, you go next" his mother said, holding the bowl out to him.



Albus took a pinch of the powder, threw it into the fire, and said clearly and loudly "Diagon Alley!"

He took a step forward and instantaneously found himself revolving rapidly; his eyes closed tightly, his mouth kept closed and careful not to inhale the soot-

He stepped out of the grate a moment later, smiling at the sensation of travelling by floo. Stepping aside towards his siblings and Hugo, he took a look around at the familiar Leaky Cauldron. With something of a shock, he noticed that it didn't seem so familiar.

The pub was nearly deserted, and the few people in the dingy bar seemed to be content with just having a single drink and leaving. Though not quite silent, the customers all seemed to be mumbling rather than talking, and Albus had the curious suspicion that some of them were casting him strange looks. Hugo and Lily seemed to notice this too, as they both looked quite tense. James on the other hand didn't seem bothered by it at all, and was merely leaning up against the wall casually.

There was another flash of green and Uncle Ron was in the pub. "Everyone all right?" he asked.

Albus used the several seconds of people answering and Rose arriving to glance at Hannah, the landlady and Neville's wife. Her round face was looking very sullen as she cleaned a dirty glass with a rag, peering through her long blonde hair at her lack of customers. She didn't seem to notice their arrival.

Albus' mother and Aunt Hermione arrived next, and the second that they had done so Uncle Ron announced to them all " Okay, let's get going!" in a falsely cheery manner.

"Why are people looking at us?" his daughter muttered to him, but her mother shushed her.

"I'll explain in a bit" Uncle Ron said quietly as they walked out of the dingy pub.

They approached the large brick wall with which they usually had trouble with, though Albus saw that thankfully both Aunt Hermione and his mother seemed to know what they were doing. They both pulled out their wands anyway, but it was Aunt Hermione who tapped the brick that revealed the entrance to Diagon Alley.

The street that was now upon them seemed as cobbled and busy as ever; it was definitely more familiar than the Leaky Cauldron. People were popping in and out of shops complaining loudly about prices, and children were talking excitedly about new equipment at Quality Quidditch Supplies. And yet, there was an air of tension that Albus could not quite shake- the strange feeling that something was going on that he did not know about. People bustling passed him were all walking in mostly the same direction anyway, as if eager to be somewhere.

"So why were they looking at us daddy?" Rose piped up to her father, who was walking in the middle near the children. His wife was leading the way, and Albus was bringing up the rear, straining his ears to listen.

Uncle Ron gave a shrug. "The Ministry isn't very popular these days Rosie. A lot of people think we go the wrong way about...things. Poor Hannah's even losing customers because of it; everyone knows how friendly she is with us."

"So people are mad at you?" Hugo said, looking worried.

"Me, your mother, Uncle Harry..."

"Ron!" his wife reprimanded him from the front of the group. "Don't talk like that! No one's *mad* at anyone; they just have different opinions that's all..."

But even as she said it a rather young man with short black hair and a weedy expression on his face walked by them quickly- bumping James on the shoulder as he did so.

"Hey look where you're going!" James said, spinning around from the force. Albus knew that his brother was never one to back away from a fight, and knew that in a few seconds he would feel very sorry for this person indeed, for James was quite a good fighter, but the person continued walking without looking back.

"Watch it buddy!" Uncle Ron called after the person angrily, who still didn't turn back around.

"Don't start a fight-" Aunt Hermione said.

"I'm not starting a fight!" he answered her. "He bumped into my nephew..."

"I can't wait until I'm of age" James said irritably, still looking backwards and gripping the wand that he had pulled out. At sixteen, it would only be a year before James could use magic outside of school.

"I'm sure he didn't mean to bump into you" Albus heard his mother say, also from the front of the group. "He was just in a hurry, that's all" she added placatingly.

James snorted in disbelief, and Albus couldn't blame him. The young man who had bumped into him was not the only one giving them hateful looks. Indeed, the people in the Leaky Cauldron had been relatively tame compared to a few others, some of whom even made disgusting noises when they walked by.

Albus noticed that he and his brother were getting the most of it however, no doubt because they looked like their father, who was most likely the biggest pariah in the entire wizarding world now. He had not realized it for most of the summer, as he mostly stayed inside, but now that he was out and about and amidst other people, he realized that his father's drop in popularity was no

fabrication by the media. What he had written off last year as people merely being worried was now suddenly dawning on him. He was not the only one who no longer thought of his father as a hero.

With something of a sudden jolt, he realized how hard it must be for his father to walk around amongst these people- surely, it was much worse for him. Then he realized that his father probably deserved it. He had, after all, earned this blame. Then he felt guilty for thinking these things, and then, finally, he frowned at his own conflicting thoughts. He wished he could turn his brain off like that git Eckley...

"Alright, we all know where we're going?" Uncle Ron said when they had all stopped in the middle of the street. There was some muttering at this, but he seemed to get the gist. "Got it, we have no idea. Okay, let's split into groups to see who needs what."

There was a flurry of talking over this, and only Albus remained quiet.

"I can go off on my own" James spoke up loudly.

Uncle Ron chuckled. "That's clever" he said. "Okay, now onto groups-"

"I'm serious" James said. "I'm the only one in my year; I need to go different places. I'm taking N.E.W.T classes this year."

Albus knew that though James wanted to be off on his own, he wasn't lying at all. He had, surprisingly, gotten nine O.W.L's over the summer, including four "O's".

"Can he go off on his own Gin?" Uncle Ron said, turning to his sister. Albus watched as his mother frowned slightly.

"Yes" she said. "But if anyone bumps into you-"

"I know, I know" James said, rolling his eyes. "Curl up into a ball and cry for help right?"

His mother made to argue with him, but he shot off back the other way before she got the chance.

"That boy will be the death of me" his mother said. "What with his loud music and the owls constantly tapping on the windows..."

"Okay back to business" Uncle Ron said, clapping his hands together. "Gin, how about you take Lily and Hugo to get their things, and me and Mione will take these two" he said, nodding his head towards Albus and Rose. Albus groaned a bit- he did not want only Rose for company. Unable to voice this however, his mother agreed, and they went down separate streets.

"What do you guys need?" Aunt Hermione said as the four of them began walking down the cobbled streets.

"They need ice cream" Uncle Ron said, smiling and pointing towards an ice cream parlor a few shops down.

"Later" his wife told him. "Let's get the essentials first. The Apothecary's up this way..."

Shopping with Aunt Hermione was radically different than shopping with anyone else. She was quick and efficient, knowing where everything was and not getting distracted by anything. They were in and out of the Apothecary in ten minutes tops, and even then a great deal of time had been spent finding Uncle Ron, who had wandered off through the shop much like how a child would.

Albus was quite pleased with this method of shopping- the quicker the better. He did not want to spend any more time with Rose than was necessary, for she had complained loudly in the cauldron shop about wanting a new, solid gold cauldron, and had done everything in her power to get her parents to buy her a large spell book in Flourish & Blotts. Uncle Ron had been quite close to budging before Aunt Hermione had been stricter.

Another good reason to speed things up was that Albus quickly felt like he was going to be attacked. The mean stares that they received increased when inside the shops, and even some of the shopkeepers seemed to not be particularly fond of them. Aunt Hermione seemed quite indifferent to it ("It doesn't matter what they think of you," she told he and Rose, "It matters what you know about yourself!") and seemed keen on keeping her husband out of trouble instead. Uncle Ron, it seemed, was not as quick to ignore disingenuous passerby. When a young girl accidentally bumped into Rose (and it truly did look accidental) Uncle Ron yelled at her so loudly that she ran off almost in tears.

"Do you think my mom is going through the same thing?" Albus asked his uncle as they browsed through the shelves of the Stationary Shop looking for a particular kind of parchment. "All of these bad looks?"

"Doubtful" his uncle said. "To be honest with you, most of the stares you're getting are because of me. Auror's are the least popular people in the Ministry right now. And I'm not going to lie, it's ridiculous! We catch hundreds of dark wizards, then one slips passed us and suddenly we're remedial..."

After the stop at the Stationary Shop they had one more place to visit. Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions was further down in Diagon Alley, indeed, not too far off from Knockturn Alley, and was the principle place of business for robes. Rose had complained that her robes were getting too short, and thus Albus- who was perfectly content with the size of his robes despite having grown an inch or two, was forced to wait as she was fitted.

"It still feels a tad bit too tight" Rose said pleasantly as the elderly and stern looking Madam Malkin took out pins from the plain black robes that she was trying on.

"Let me get a bigger set" Madam Malkin said, and she walked off into a back room.

"Mummy, look at those dress robes!" Rose said, pointing out a nice looking set of light blue dress robes hanging up in a row of rather boring looking ones.

"We're not here to browse Rose" her mother said. "We'll come back a different day. Now let's just get you fitted into your Hogwarts robes."

Rose made a huffing noise, and Albus rolled his eyes and turned the chair that he was sitting in to get a view of the window. He knew that Rose would not be so difficult or picky- and certainly would not be addressing her mother as "Mummy" if her friends, particularly those two prats or Mirra- were here.

Mirra. This thought alone seemed to bring something of a nice feeling to him, despite the day having been rather boring and mundane thus far. Last year she had kissed him on the cheek. He wondered if she would do it again when they met at the platform in just a few days...

"What are you grinning at?" he heard his uncle say, and he was snapped out of his thoughts.

"Huh? Nothing" Albus said, trying to make his expression stony.

"Don't give me that waffle" Uncle Ron said, pulling up his own chair as Madam Malkin returned and began talking to Rose and Aunt Hermione. "I saw that stupid smile. Who were you thinking of?" he teased.

"No one- nothing" Albus said, feeling his cheeks blush slightly. He continued looking out the window and saw people walking by rather quickly. They all seemed to be in just as much a hurry as the man who had walked into James.

"What's going on out there?" Albus asked his uncle, glad to have something to change the topic to.

Uncle Ron stood up and peered out the window. "No idea" he said truthfully. "There must be a sale on Anti-Auror stickers or something..."

People continued to walk by quickly, and all of them seemed to be rather attentive towards something as well. Albus noticed that the direction that they were going seemed to be close to Knockturn Alley.

"What's going on?" Rose said, turning towards the window from several feet away. Madam Malkin made a slight "tsking" sound to indicate her displeasure at Rose's lack of attention however, and she was forced to turn back around.

"Tell me what's happening" she demanded of her father and cousin.

"Rose watch your tone" Aunt Hermione said, though she too was now inching herself closer to the window, where more and more people were walking by.

They didn't get to find out what the commotion was for several more minutes, for Rose insisted on trying on yet another set of robes. They finally managed to leave however, with Madam Malkin shaking her head as she closed the door.

"Alright let's see what's going on here" Uncle Ron said. He led the four of them further down the street towards Knockturn Alley, where what looked like little more than a hundred people had gathered.

They entered the crowd and Albus managed to inch his way towards the middle, where he could see what was going on clearly. At the front of the crowd of people, right at the border of, though not quite in Knockturn Alley, what looked like a small wooden stage had been erected. The stage wasn't that high up- maybe only four or five feet off of the ground, but it was certainly wide; what looked like ten men could stand side to side on it. There was only one man standing on it however, and he was one of the most peculiar looking men that Albus had ever seen.

He was very thin and appeared to be middle aged, and he had chalk white skin and very pointed features, including a chiseled chin and a long upturned nose. The most striking feature of his appearance however was his dark, tomato soup red hair that made him look a bit like Uncle Bill. His hair was quite long however, draped down over his back even, and was so straight and clean that it seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. To complete the unique picture he was wearing a magnificent baby blue suit complete with a yellow tie that clashed perfectly together; he looked immaculate in every sense of the word.

The man that could have passed for a Weasley, perhaps with a lighter shade of red for his hair, was facing the crowd and moving his hands demonstratively and enthusiastically. It looked like he was preaching. His small, beady blue eyes seemed to focus on the entire crowd as he spoke.

"And you see, my fellow wizards, my magical brethren, that even in dark times, it is our unity that keeps our heads up. It is the shoulder of the wizards and witches next to us that keeps us from falling into our deep sleep, where we are haunted by the nightmares of our past and where we dream in vain of our ideal future. But it does not do well to dream my friends. No, not when what may oppose our world is very real.

"Do you hear their lies, my fellow citizens? Do you read their papers? The Ministry is blinded, unwilling to fight and unwilling to submit; indecisive. They say that we should not be prepared for a war. I say...we should *always* be prepared for war!"

There was a smatter of applause at this, and a great deal of muttering followed after it. Albus could see at once why people were so attentive. This man, whoever he was, had an extremely rare gift in his voice. When he spoke it was loud and clear, and with a feeling of such powerful

confidence that it actually gave Albus shivers. What's more, his tone seemed to be extremely oily and persuasive, and Albus thought at once that this man had never lost an argument in his life. He seemed like the type of person who, with enough time, could convince someone that they didn't exist.

"Think back!" the red headed man said, and he was now pacing slowly back and forth on his stage, a single finger held up high. "Think back twenty years ago. Do you remember the state of the world? For those of you who were too young, I will give you a good idea of what life was like. Fear. Chaos. Voldemort had fallen, though he left destruction in his wake. And his followers are abroad, what happened? Who stopped them from avenging their master? Who served them justice? The Ministry?"

There was more muttering, though no one seemed to want to answer what was apparently a rhetorical question.

"No! Your Ministry of Magic gave *them* deals and let them cooperate! They spared pity and had mercy, they allowed the men and women- the men and women that murdered and tortured our loved ones- to walk free! And from what? From technicality! From 'lack of evidence'?"

This was followed by a chorus of loud booing, and Albus took this time to look behind him. Uncle Ron was a few people back, not saying anything but looking worried. Aunt Hermione and Rose, it seemed, had stayed out of the crowd.

"Our Ministry has proven time and time again that they are inefficient when regarding our safety, that they are incapable of protecting us when we need protection! So who will stand up? Who will face tyranny? Certainly not the Ministry, who in the last twenty years have only successfully arrested half of the Death Eaters, half of Voldemort's supporters. Who then? I'll tell you who. Me. And you."

He continued moving back and forth, only he was now holding his head up seemingly with great dignity. His next words were spoken more vehemently than his last, and seemed to be directed more at the sky than at the people below him, all of whom seemed engrossed by him.

"Let the public no longer hide and hope, let us act. As a war brews the soldiers are gathered together. Who will stand in front of our children? The Ministry, which has stepped aside numerous times before, and once let the same wizard, destroy what we held dear twice? No, *we* must stand in the way. It is our loved ones in danger, let *us* be the ones who protect them!"

The crowd now cheered in approval. The man rose up his arms as if to embrace them, and suddenly, his voice became much darker. He sounded angrier.

"For the last twenty years they've called us 'Renegades', labeled us as criminals and accused us of having no conscience. Oh no, my friends, there is a conscience, and there is more than just that. There is will. To fight for our peace and our safety is not a choice but a duty, not a matter of

morality but of logic. The people have stood behind an insufficient government for far too long. But we must be bound together. The wizarding world is comprised of its people- let its people fight for it. Let its people destroy this new threat!"

There was a sudden intake of breath at this last word, and suddenly people were whispering, still staring up at the man expectantly.

"Oh yes" the man said. "You know the threat of which I speak. Ares. Every day his army grows, every day a battle is prepared. The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this, they call me a liar. Say I am misinformed. They'd have you believe that Ares is hiding! Hiding from what!" he asked loudly, and he followed this with a cold laugh. "Hiding from the government that used to give him gold? From the wizards who taught him everything he knows? Hiding from the people who have been unable to find him for more than a year now, and were unable to capture him when he walked up to their faces in their own building, and left of his own accord just three months ago?"

He said this last part very quickly, as if trying to get his listeners to understand the sarcasm in it. The whispering stopped, and the silence was now nearly unbearable. People seemed to be waiting with baited breath for this man's next words.

"Ares is not hiding, my friends," he said, and his voice had returned to normal. "We saw him but twenty years ago, saw how vicious he was, saw that he did things that made us 'Renegades' look tame. And now with dark wizards at his disposal, and soon with dark creatures as well, it will not be long. What he wants I do not know, why he wants it I cannot fathom, but I know this- the Ministry will not fight it, and even if they do, they will lose. Why? Because they lack the will.

"We are on our own, but we have never been stronger. We need no government, no group of highly trained Aurors! What do Aurors care!" he asked, and his voice, just as quickly as it had been lowered, was suddenly loud and angry once more. "Will they die for your young! Will they protect you every waking hour of every night and day! Don't be foolish my friends, the only people that can defend the public is the public. The commoner. Those not bound by the burden of contractual obligations, those who see past the facade of the law, who understand the difference between dying for a reason and living for nothing! Let our children sleep at night knowing, not that their safety depends on a stranger, but on their parents! On those who love them!"

The man, already walking back and forth slowly, now began pacing at a much faster rate, as if sizing up the crowd; sizing up his soldiers. When he spoke he held his clenched fist up and eyed them all with determination. His voice had lost its momentary burst of anger however- he was back to being oily and persuasive, and now, to a certain degree, desperate. There was a note of pleading in his miraculously infectious words.



"And now I give you an option my fellow wizards and witches, and I beg of you to see the importance of such an offer. Join Wands and Redemption. Join me and my loyal adversaries, join me in the fight that our Ministry cannot fight. Some will not agree with you, some will hate you; they will spit at you and call you a villain! Say that you're no better than that which you fight! But you will know- you will know what purpose you serve. It is the job of the people to protect the people. And that is what Wands and Redemption is for. We understand that the right thing may sometimes be the hard thing. That sometimes we must torture and do even worse...that sometimes to defeat the enemy; we must fight like the enemy!"

"And some of you will still ask! You will ask me of what purpose you have! And you will ask ' But Warren, I cannot fight, then what can I do?' And I answer you here when I say that you need not fight. Wands and Redemption is not unreasonable. Not all wizards are born skilled with a wand. I will not arm you with a dagger to face one with a sword, nor will I give you a wooden shield to stop a stream of fire. It is your support that is imperative. Donations are always welcome, but not necessary, no, it's not money. Every wizard can contribute in any way, and that is what makes us so different from the Ministry that cannot help us. Because we all unite, we all have different skills. No job is too small, no task is unimportant. As a member of Wands and Redemption you are wanted, you are needed, and you are appreciated!"

He shook his fist violently as he said his last sentence, and the crowd cheered so loud that Albus thought, for an instant, that he was in the middle of a Quidditch game. The red headed man stared down at them for a second; eyeing them all and nodding his head at their reception, and then stepped down from the stage. He made to speak, and at once everyone turned silent once more.

"Those of you who wish to donate," he said, now on ground level, his voice just a bit quieter and less persuasive, " Or wish to join, please see Zydrunas."

He indicated a man to the right of the stage, one that Albus had not even noticed before; for he had been too enthralled by the speech he had heard. Now snapped out of his trance, he took a good look at Zydrunas and thought that he had never seen anyone more frightening. He was pale and tall- not Hagrid's height, but still far from the average height of a normal person. Though quite far away, Albus thought that if he had to hazard a guess he would say that the man stood at about seven feet. He was completely bald, though it looked shaved rather than natural, and the only hair on him appeared to be his bushy blonde eyebrows. He was quite muscular however, noticeable even through his plain black robes, and he had a murderous look on his face as well- like he was ready for a fight. Albus found something about him quite comical however. Perhaps it was the pink plastic bag he was holding to receive donations, or the clipboard in his hand to take names.

The crowd immediately rushed towards Zydrunas, who eyed them all suspiciously as they threw gold into the bag, some of them even taking the clipboard and signing up in front of their peers.

"Come on" he heard someone say, and he saw Uncle Ron right behind him, looking very grim. "Let's get out of here."

He led him back through the crowd of people. Even with most of them lining up, it was still something of a hard fight. Albus saw that his uncle was leading him back to Aunt Hermione and Rose, who had been, it seemed, in the crowd after all. His mother and Lily and Hugo were also there, though Albus did not see his brother.

They began walking up as a group, Albus still in the back with Uncle Ron and his family, now joined by Hugo. His mother and Lily walked a little further ahead, though everyone was silent. Finally, Hugo asked, "Dad, who was that guy?"

Uncle Ron was still looking slightly grim, though he begrudgingly gave an answer. "That was Warren Waddlesworth" he said.

Albus, who immediately thought of a penguin with long red hair, suddenly remembered something. Hadn't the tall woman in his kitchen mentioned him?

"But who is he?" Hugo asked. "Why was he saying those things about the Ministry...?"

Uncle Ron heaved a sigh as Rose also looked at him. Aunt Hermione appeared to be listening, but was not speaking.

"He doesn't really like the Ministry. Because he thinks we don't do our jobs right. And...He has this group of people- Wands and Redemption- who do our jobs his way."

Aunt Hermione slowed down slightly and began speaking. "They're going to find out anyway Ron" she said, and he hung his head slightly. She turned to her children. "Wands and Redemption is an organization created by Warren Waddlesworth to eliminate dark activity, though it's separate from the Ministry. They're much more extreme and show much more disregard for rules and regulations. Its members are known as Renegades, though only a few of them actually act- most are just supporters."

"But what do the Renegades do?" Hugo asked. "Auror stuff?"

"Kind of" Uncle Ron said. "And I think I've explained this before. They did catch dark wizards, but they kind of go the wrong way about it. They don't really care if who they catch is actually dark, and because they're comprised of people who aren't really suited for that kind of work, they tend to lack a bit of reason and do things a bit messier. And more vicious."

"So they're criminals?" Hugo asked.

"Basically" Uncle Ron admitted.

"But then why can't you arrest them?"

"Because very few of them actually do things- a lot of them are just supporters like your mother said. And you can't really arrest someone for *agreeing*. The ones who actually do something tend to be very good at not getting caught, and reasonably so. The Ministry isn't going to pay attention to a dark wizard's murder as much as they would a regular person's. That's just how it is..."

"But what about Waddlesworth?" Albus asked. "He's their leader isn't he? You know he's done stuff. You could've just gone up there and arrested him..."

Even as he said it however, Albus felt a strange twinge in his gut not unlike the one he had felt when he had been thinking of his father. Really, he didn't want that man to get arrested. He had made a lot of sense, after all...

"But there's no *proof* of anything" his uncle told him. "That's the big problem. Warren is very smart, there's no getting around it. He knows how to tip toe around. Even back after Voldemort fell, when he first formed WAR, he was good at covering his tracks. And he's far from rusty. They've just reformed, but he's as good as ever. And when we do get him on something, he gets it pinned on one of his lower guys. I don't know if he's a strong wizard, but he can get other people to do his dirty work, and if he gets caught, he's got a smart enough mouth to pin it on them. And they gladly do it. He's got a lot of credibility, Warren Waddlesworth."

"Really, it's one of the things that proves his point" Aunt Hermione spoke up. "The Ministry needs a significant amount of evidence to arrest someone, even someone as blatantly guilty as Waddlesworth. But WAR doesn't care. If you're suspected as doing something wrong, you as good as did it. You can see how that appeals to the public in these times."

"And asked for your question" Uncle Ron added, "No, I couldn't just go up there and arrest him. And believe me, he wants me to."

"What?" Albus, Rose and Hugo said, all shocked. "Why?" Rose asked.

"For publicity" he answered. "You heard him up there, didn't you? Half of the things he says are all about how the Ministry focuses on the small problems and stands aside, about how they don't do what's necessary and all that junk. If I arrested him, his supporters would double. 'There's those damn Aurors' they'd say. 'Arresting people for having opinions when they should be going after Ares. Just like he was sayin'"

Uncle Ron laughed at his own joke, though Albus still had a few questions, one of which was asked by Rose.

"How did he get so much support in the first place?" she asked. "How do people know about his group?"

It was her mother who answered her. "Warren was very popular back then just as a philanthropist."

"That means he gave a lot of money to people" Rose said quickly to Hugo, and, Albus noticed, to himself as well.

"I know what it means" he told his cousin icily, though this was of course not true.

His aunt continued. "Warren's heart is in the right place, it really is. His father was a big investor in Quality Quidditch Supplies, and his parents live in a different country now, but he's very well off with that money."

"Never worked a day in his life" Uncle Ron said bitterly. His wife ignored him and kept speaking however.

"He got a lot of the money after the war, and the first thing he did was donate. So many towns and cities were destroyed by Voldemort...it was hard to rebuild. But Warren was very polite. He gave his money to everyone, even had it transferred to muggle money to assist them. They were told it was financed by their own government, but Warren paid for just about everything. I can still remember when he announced he would pay for the Brockdale Bridge to be rebuilt, it cost him a fortune. Not that he cared at all, money was nothing to him."

"But as the Renegade movement picked up steam" Uncle Ron continued for his wife, "He began realizing that it wasn't all about the money. He wanted justice served. He formed WAR about two years after Voldemort fell, and some of the things his men did to people were just despicable. Had them torture Stan Shunpike into insanity, remember ' Mione? Because he wouldn't give up names? As if that poor kid was really a Death Eater..."

"If it's not about money, then why was he taking donations?" Rose asked.

"Just to get the public involved" her mother answered her. "If they put in money, then they're officially supporters, and he can ask them to do certain things. He really doesn't need it at all."

"Why was he paying to have all those cities rebuilt anyway though?" Albus asked both his aunt and uncle. "Shouldn't the Ministry have done it?"

They tensed up a bit at this. Uncle Ron seemed incapable of answering, though Aunt Hermione, predictably, recovered quickly and gave an answer.

"Yes, they should have" she said. "But at this point the Ministry was putting all of its funding towards other endeavors. Auror's for instance, were hired in bulk following Voldemort's downfall, partially to replace the many that died and partially to quickly clean up the Death Eaters that got away. A lot of gold went towards giving them wands if they'd lost them during the war, training them, giving them supplies, and obviously paying a lot."

"They even considered giving us all Invisibility Cloaks" Uncle Ron said. "But demiguise hair is hard to come by, and they're endangered and all..."

"Is that how my dad got his?" Albus asked.

Uncle Ron scratched at his chin. "No, his is a bit older than that. And I'm not proud of all the money!" he added hastily. "None of us really are. Your dad especially always argued with Kingsley that too much money was going towards preparing, not rebuilding."

"But can't goblins just make more gold?" Hugo asked.

His father chuckled at this. "It doesn't work like that son. I know it seems like it should- but it just doesn't. There will never be enough money in the world, and too much of it went to a couple different branches of the Ministry. That's one of the things that Warren's got right, probably the only thing in my opinion..."

"Warren's got a lot right" his wife said darkly, and her husband shrugged rather than attempted to fight what was surely a losing battle. "I'm not an Auror, I can say it. Though I do think that they're too extreme- way too extreme. And it should also be known that this whole money situation occurred during a different time. Protection was more likely to raise public morale, hiring Aurors was a necessity. Everything is socioeconomic."

"Yeah" Uncle Ron added uneasily to Hugo. "Like you mother said, it was a different time. Everything is sosuconomic."

Aunt Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron we talked about this! You can't use words that you *can't pronounce or don't know the meaning of.*"

"I never use words I don't mean!" he bickered back.

"Oh yes you do! The first time you met my parents you mixed up 'chivalrous' with 'chauvinist' remember?"

"I was nineteen!"

He walked a bit closer to her and began playfully arguing, effectively ending all of the questioning and leaving Albus alone in the back to his thoughts.

Warren Waddlesworth was certainly an interesting person, even if he wasn't a giant penguin. But more than just unique looking, his speech had gotten Albus thinking. A lot of what he said had made sense. The Ministry *did* step aside...they were not efficient. He had learned this last year. He was careful not to voice this out loud, for he knew that it was surely disappoint his uncle, but still, he could not help but envy those people, the ones who had been willing to fight the battle that the Ministry would not. And Waddlesworth had reminded him of someone too...

It had been Professor Fairhart who had first touched on these things, and Fairhart who had seemed to side with Waddlesworth when it came down to it. And, now that he thought about it, didn't Fairhart know Waddlesworth? Wasn't that what his father had said? He knew that Fairhart had not been, and was not, a member of WAR. He was far too benevolent. True, he may have killed at the end of last year, but it was necessary wasn't it? They were being attacked weren't they? James had been dying...

Thinking of these things made him uneasy, but he couldn't help it. Either way, he knew that Fairhart was not a bad person. He had a great deal of respect for his former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and considered him something of a friend as well. Albus actually had not seen him all summer however, though he wanted to talk to him badly. He knew that this was unlikely though, if his father was correct, Fairhart was off in Panama somewhere. And now that he *really* thought about it, Fairhart could not possibly have been in WAR. Waddlesworth had mentioned torturing, and he knew that Fairhart would have never done something like that. Yes, WAR was much too radical, much too violent. Now that he thought about it, he didn't envy those people. Or maybe he still did, just a little bit...

"Okay let's stop here" he heard his mother say from the very front of their group, where she was still walking alongside her daughter.

Albus saw that they had been walking a considerable distance as they were talking; he had not even noticed his feet moving. They were several streets from Knockturn Alley, and Albus could no longer see a stage or a group of people. They were back on the normally crowded streets, and his mother was looking around anxiously.

"Where is he?" she said to herself, and Albus knew she was talking about James. She had stopped them just a couple of shops away from Uncle George's shop, and she had been clearly hoping to see him waiting there.

"I'm sure he's fine mom" Lily said. "James can take care of himself."

"I just don't want him fighting anyone" she said.

"He'll be fine Gin" Uncle Ron said, leaning up against a shop where several slabs of green meat were hanging.

"Get your dragon liver!" the shopkeeper, a squat old man was announcing to the street. "Twenty sickles an ounce!"

Albus too leaned up against the shop. He was not worried about James, though he was still curious about a few other things.

"Who was that other guy?" Albus asked his uncle, and it was now just the two of them talking, though Rose seemed to be listening. "The bald one?"

His uncle looked at him inquisitively, and then it seemed to dawn on him. "Oh...*that guy*" he said, sounding disgusted. "That was The Hammer."

"The Hammer?" Albus asked, intrigued.

"Yeah. His real name is Zydrunas Kalvaitis; he's Warren's right hand man basically. Remember I said he got other blokes to do his dirty work? That ugly old troll is his main one and personal bodyguard too, so that Warren never gets in trouble. He's brutal. Earned his nickname for a reason. He's actually been in Azkaban before, a couple of times. Everyone's scared of him."

"Are you scared of him dad?" Rose asked incredulously.

Uncle Ron gave a small chuckle. "Rosie please, there's only two people I'm afraid of. One of them gave birth to me, and the other one gave birth to you. Personally I'd like a one on one with The Hammer..."

"How'd he get out?" Albus asked. "Of Azkaban, I mean."

Uncle Ron gave an enormous frown. "He gave us a lot of good names" he said, clearly ashamed. "But you know...different time and all."

There was an awkward silence following this, while Albus watched his mother move around the street anxiously looking for James. They finally saw him walking towards them holding a bag of joke shop items. He had indeed been in Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

"What took you so long?" his mother asked him sternly.

"I was shopping around, that's all..."

"Well from now on-"

But exactly what would happen from now on Albus didn't get to find out. His mother had been cut off by an ear splitting noise, so loud that everyone on the street gasped and looked around. There were more loud noises, as though miniature explosions were happening, and finally - screaming. Loud, violent screams that seemed to fill the air. Albus turned around on the spot and noticed that it was coming from the opposite direction- the direction where Waddlesworth and the crowd had been.

## Chapter 4: Anarchy in the Alley

The loud noises and small explosions continued for several more moments before suddenly ceasing, leaving an extremely confusing silence in its wake. Then, without warning, what sounded like a stampede was heard, and Albus could see people running towards them in the distance, all of them looking panicked.

"Stay here" Uncle Ron said, and he ran towards and then through the people, his wand drawn and his expression fearless.

"Be careful-" his wife started, though she was cut off by the people rushing passed her.

Rose shouted. Hugo looked like he was about to start crying. More and more people were running passed them, not careful in the slightest to knock any of them over.

Albus stood quite still, seemingly frozen in time, his eardrums going through an auditory overload as his brain tried to comprehend what was happening. What was going on? Why were these people running through the streets of Diagon Alley, terror on their faces? And then he heard it.

"Did they kill him?" someone asked their friend, both of them running as well.

"No the curse missed. I mean I think it did, I was signing up-"

Someone was firing killing curses. Why Albus did not know, but he knew that his uncle had ran directly into the fold. This was, apparently, all that his brother needed to hear.

"James you are *not* going in there! Stay put!" he heard his mother yell, and she actually made to grab at her son. James brushed her aside and ran through the crowd as well.

"James!" Lily yelled, and she ran after her brother.

"Lily no!"

Rose and Hugo were clinging to their mother, who was looking quite worried. Albus knew that she was only staying put for her children's sake, and knew that the only reason her children hadn't ran into the fold is because they were not cursed with the Potter stupidity, the poor decision making that frequently led to dangerous situations.

*Wait a minute he thought. I'm a Potter too! I make stupid decisions too!*

No sooner had he thought these words did he feel his feet start moving. He was running now, fighting against the crowd of fleeing people and going in after his brother and sister.

"Oh no you don't!" he heard his mother shout. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"



Albus didn't let the shock of his mother firing a spell at him faze him. He instinctively ducked his head and felt the spell fly passed him. It hit a random pedestrian instead, who toppled over at once, rigid as a board. People began tripping over him, giving Albus the distraction that he needed to enter the fray.

He tore through the crowd, bumping into scurrying people and nearly being knocked over several times. He now had three family members in the chaos, though, he knew, only his uncle was trained for such a situation. His first and immediate thought was his sister. He had to get her out of there.

He continued bumping into people, nearly tripping over a young boy who had fallen on the floor. Albus stopped and helped raise the boy to his feet, but the child was midway through saying "Thank you" when he continued running, keeping his eyes open for the flash of red hair that denoted his sister. He caught fragments of conversation as he ran.

"An assassination attempt? But from who-"

"I knew it! I knew it was a bad idea, I knew-"

"Old Waddlesworth knows better than to preach near Knockturn Alley now! That's for sure-"

Albus continued his trek, and he subconsciously pulled out his wand as well, though he didn't see or hear any spells being fired. Until-

*"Stupefy!"*

A jet of right light just missed him, and the designated target, whoever he was, fell to the ground. Suddenly, jets of red light were being fired everywhere. It was as though the first had been proof that wand work was allowed.

Albus forced himself down, though he was still quite intent on finding his sister. He continued moving on his hands and knees. He worked his way all the way down another street like this, and, with a jolt, realized that he wasn't too far off from where the stage had been. He looked and saw that the stage was but large splinters of wood now. Someone had blown it up.

He glanced around near the broken stage and saw Warren Waddlesworth leaning up against a shop, of which the shopkeeper was now absent. His brilliant blue suit was splattered with red. His face was bleeding quite badly. Next to him was the bald man that his uncle had called "The Hammer". He appeared to be standing guard over his injured leader. And sure enough, when someone approached them, he took no time to find out if he was offering help or was a hindrance. The Hammer seized him with both hands and threw him into the crowd of stampeding people like a ragdoll, then bent low and made to hoist Waddlesworth up.

Albus continued to look around, realizing that he had grown distracted. The stunning spells were not being fired as much now; Albus thought that he could raise himself up and risk it. He did so

and saw that a few more people were running towards Waddlesworth, concerned looks on their faces.

"Move it, kid!" came a threatening, female voice.

Albus was pushed roughly aside. He caught a small glimpse of a tall woman with straight blonde hair hurrying towards Waddlesworth, along with two or three other people behind her. The Hammer did not chuck these people into the crowd.

So this was a riot. He had recalled reading about riots the previous year, including one that occurred just outside of the Ministry of Magic, and now he saw why they received so much attention. They were quite dangerous. Unconscious bodies were loitered all around him, and people seemed to be stepping over them with little to no care as they ran away. He glanced back at Waddlesworth's bleeding face and knew at once what had happened. Someone had stormed the stage and tried to attack him, and what was happening now was the direct result.

A stunner flew right by him, and Albus ducked down quickly and resumed crawling, cursing himself for having risked getting hit. He poked his head back to look for Lily and couldn't see her anywhere. The stage of confusion was passed now, and was replaced with anxiety. Where was his little sister?

He glanced down and saw a middle aged man with long brown hair lying on the ground, his hands bound behind his back with thick ropes. They were struggling to get up, though it was quite hard, considering someone was stepping on their face. Albus looked up and saw that the foot belonged to his uncle.

"Now you stay right here" he said, his wand drawn. Someone ran passed him and Uncle Ron, apparently recognizing the person as a threat, took aim with his wand and fired. Thick ropes now bound this person as well; they fell to the floor with a crash and began struggling to get up.

"I'll be with you in a minute!" he shouted at the person, his foot still pressing down on his first victim's face. Albus wondered how many of the people laying down on the ground was a result, not of stunners, but of his uncle.

"Albus?" his uncle said angrily when he had spotted his nephew on the ground. " What the fu- "

"James and Lily!" Albus announced quickly, standing up. " They both ran this way to help you!"

Uncle Ron heaved a tremendous sigh, though even as he did so he raised his wand over his shoulder and, with accuracy and skill that Albus had never associated with his uncle before, fired a stunning spell right at someone trying to untie the man on the ground a few feet away. He fell to the ground in an unconscious slump.

"Where's Rosie and Hugo?" he asked.

"They stayed behind- your family's fine" Albus shouted over the noise. " And I think my mom ran in too" he added. Now he thought about it, she had no reason to not be involved; all three of her children were in danger.

"Okay James'll be fine" Uncle Ron said. " Let's split up and find Lily. Send up red sparks if you do."

Albus nodded, though he wasn't entirely sure that he could send up red sparks. He turned away from his uncle and began pushing his way through the crowd, though it was still as difficult as ever. He was not very big and it was quite a struggle to move passed people trying to force themselves in his direction.

He kept his head low as he had been, though he still kept an eager eye out for his sister's red hair. Had James perhaps found her and taken her to safety? Was he looking for no one? And where *was* James? He recalled the riot on the Quidditch field in his first year. His brother had been the center of attention then...

Someone bumped into him with a great deal of force. Albus staggered slightly, and then another bump told him that the first was not an accident. He fell to the ground, his head smacking against the ground and his hands scraping against the concrete. He bit his lip from the pain, but then saw, sideways, his sister.

She was leaning up against an abandoned shop several feet away, and she was looking nothing short of terrified. Her collar was raised up to her chin and she was trembling; she clearly knew the mistake that she had made. She kept trying to push herself off of the wall and into the crowd of people, but they were running back and forth passed her so fast that she dared not risk it.

He wanted to call to her, to tell her to stay put until he could come and get her, but then an elbow collided with his mouth. He turned his head up so that he could see skyward, wondering who on Earth had singled him out to attack in a riot full of adults twice his size, and then saw who it was. It was the same weedy looking young man who had bumped into James earlier.

"Geroff me" he managed to groan with his jaw in agonizing pain, though the man did not budge, he was still pressed on top of him, ready to strike him again-

And he did. Albus felt his fist hit him square in the eye, and the fact that some nameless, random hoodlum was the one doing it didn't even occur to him. All that he could think about, was that his sister was about to get ran over by a stampeding crowd, and here he was, getting punched in the face repeatedly...

He closed his eyes and more painful blows came, his teeth bared and his fist clenched as he tried to fight back, though proved unable to. Another blow, and then another, and his sister had surely seen him by now, was surely going to enter the fold to help him and get herself killed...

He felt a sickening pain that had nothing to do with the young man's fists. A curious buzzing filled his ears, and a peculiar- and yet somehow familiar- sensation was crawling up though his body. Through his closed eyelids he saw flashes of light, and he knew that his eyes were turning a delicate shade of gold. He knew, somehow, that he would not be in this position for long-

And then it all stopped. He felt an enormous amount of relief as someone picked the man up off of him. Breathing heavily, he noticed that the buzzing had stopped and that his eyes were now no longer turning golden. Whatever was about to happen had been stopped halfway due to the person getting off of him. He sat upright to see who had helped him and saw that it was his brother.

"Don't-" he punched the man across the face, then pulled him back by his collar, "ever-" another punch, "touch-" he punched him again, "him-" yet another punch, and Albus saw a tooth fly out of the man's mouth, "agai-"

Albus leapt up and pulled his brother off of the man, who collapsed onto the ground looking far worse than anyone that Uncle Ron had stunned.

"No time for that" he told his brother. "Lily-"

James saw her as soon as Albus indicated her. Albus watched as his brother stepped over the near lifeless person on the ground and approached his younger sister. They had a quick, quiet conversation and she took his hand. He led her through the crowd of violent people, tripping someone who had come close to bumping into them as he did so. He managed to bring her over to Albus, and now it was the three of them together in the very center of the rioting crowd, sticking close so as avoid being separated and trying frantically to find a way out.

"Lily keep hold of my hand" James said strictly, and he began walking slowly, his sister clinging to him tightly. "Al, stay a little ahead of- Al?"

But Albus was not listening. He had a pounding headache and his mind was racing. Now that Lily was at least back with them his thoughts were free to wander towards other things, the most prominent of which had just transpired. That intense pain on the ground, that odd buzzing; it had happened before. The strange golden tint that he saw through his eyelids...

"AL!"

Albus snapped out of his daze and looked at his brother.

"What is with you?" James asked him. "Stay focused, we're going to be fine!"

"I know" he replied quickly. "It's just- my eye hurts, that's all"

This was far from a lie. His left eye was indeed hurting very badly, and he knew without looking that it was black and blue.

James continued to lead them through the crowds of people, which, thankfully, was beginning to thin slightly. Many people had fled, and many were on the ground, either tied up or unconscious. Albus knew that his uncle could not be responsible for all of them- Aurors must have show up. He glanced near the broken stage and saw that Waddlesworth had vanished, as had the people who were tending to him.

"Over here!" they heard someone yell, and all three of them looked passed a group of people to see Uncle Ron, his red hair poking up over the heads of those smaller than him.

James led both of his siblings over to him.

"What the *hell* did you think you were doing?" Their uncle scolded them, though Albus noticed that it was mostly directed at James. Before his brother could respond Uncle Ron held out a crumpled piece of paper that may have been ripped from *The Daily Prophet*. All three of them stared at it with confused expressions on their faces as people continued to storm by them.

"Grab this and keep holding on to it, it's a portkey."

"A what-" Lily began to ask.

"Grab it!" her uncle demanded, and they all immediately seized the crumpled up piece of paper.

Uncle Ron let go of the paper, which immediately started to glow blue, and the next second Albus felt the same feeling that he felt just a few months ago, when he had taken a portkey out of Hogsmeade...

There was a huge jerking motion and he felt as he though has now hurtling through space, with someone pulling on the back of his collar leading the way. His eyes were closed, though he could hear Lily screaming next to him...

He hit solid ground and felt his two siblings land next to him. Before he could get up, before he could even open his eyes and see where they were, he heard a terrible shriek.

*"HOW DARE YOU!"*

Albus thought that his eardrums might explode. He opened his eyes and saw that they were all in his living room, and that the cause of the shriek had been their mother. Looking both flustered and furious, she was pointing a shaky finger at them.

"Are you *insane!* Running off into the middle of that! Your uncle sent word ahead that he was making a portkey and I had half of a mind to tell him NOT TO! It would have served you right, jumping into a riot with killing curses flying around and-"

"Mom I wanted to help Uncle Ron-" James started, and Albus buried his face in his hands. Of the three of them, James was the only one foolish enough to ever actually attempt to argue back with their mother. Albus and his sister at least knew when to keep quiet and take it.

"YOU THINK HE NEEDED YOUR HELP! NEEDED HIS NEPHEW DYING!"

James' attempts to battle back after this were less than satisfactory, as eventually his voice became inaudible from his mothers thundering shouts. For thirty minutes she yelled without pause, her tone changing only when she seemed close to tears at the idea of losing all three of her children at once, and then once more to an exasperated tone in which she said, more to herself than to them " When I tell Harry..."

"All three of you upstairs, now" she said when her voice had completely turned back to normal. Albus breathed a sigh of relief.

"But mom-" James started.

"To your rooms" she cut him off. "*Now*. I'll call you down for dinner."

Pleasantly surprised at the thought of still getting dinner, Albus marched his way up to his room with a very quiet Lily behind him and a very agitated James in front of him. Only when he heard James' door slam did he collapse on his own bed, touching at his left eye and feeling the sharp stinging that told him that the bruises were not going to go away quickly.

He lay on his back for some time, letting the events that had transpired over the course of the last few hours replay in his mind. There was Waddlesworth on the stage, and he was giving a rousing speech. And then the Hammer had been taking names. Then there was screaming and a huge riot...and Lily had run in. And then he had been ducking spells and getting ran over, being beaten to a pulp by the same person who had bumped into James.

Why were the people so rowdy? Now that he thought back to it, what had happened didn't really fit into the idea of a riot at all. There wasn't exactly vandalism. And what had the people been fighting? He remembered seeing people attack each other randomly...it had been pure chaos. Were people so uncontrollable? Are they so naturally violent?

He tried rolling over onto his stomach but found that the pressure of his pillow was too much for his eye to handle. He ended up lying on his side, staring off into space and wondering what it would be like when he returned to Hogwarts in just a few days. Would people dislike him there as well? Was anyone else waiting to punch him in his face just because he looked like his father?

He felt his eye sting again from the mere thought, and then suddenly remembered something else. His eyes. Through their lids he had seen rays of light, beautiful golden light that had given him a strange sense of power. It had stopped suddenly- but the feeling still lingered within him. And it was not the first time either. Just a few months ago something strikingly similar had

happened. He could not mention what had almost happened in Diagon Alley to anyone though. The only people who knew about it he had sworn to secrecy. If Professor Fairhart could not explain it, he didn't want anyone knowing about it...

He was finally called down to dinner after what felt like a few hours, and when he sat at the dining room table in between his two siblings there was a definite air of uneasiness. His father was home now, and his robes were looking singed and battered; he had been at the riot. Uncle Ron was sitting next to him, looking very exhausted and eager to eat. Albus watched as his mother set down plates for all of them, a very stiff expression on her face.

"Where's Aunt Herm-" James started, but his mother cut him off once more.

"You keep your mouth shut while you're eating!" she snapped, and she began spooning mashed potatoes on his plate.

He mouthed wordlessly but made no noise. Only when their mother had returned to the kitchen did the silence break.

"She's back at our house with Rosie and Hugo" Uncle Ron said. "I'm only here because I had to talk to your dad-"

"THAT INCLUDES YOU RONALD!" Albus heard his mother yell from inside the kitchen, and Uncle Ron stopped talking and began spooning mashed potatoes onto his plate at once.

Dinner progressed like this for about twenty more minutes. They all sat in silence while their mother served them, and Albus noticed that of everyone at the table, she seemed most angry at his father. Once the plates were all cleared, she announced that she was going to bed and stormed up the stairs much like her daughter would.

"She's not angry at you three" Albus' father said after she had slammed the door. "She was just scared that's all."

"She's angry at someone" James said, licking his plate clean.

"That would be me" his father said with a wry smile. It was now the five of them sitting at the dinner table with clear plates, and Albus, free of the distraction of his mother, realized how withered his father looked. His robes were not the only thing that was destroyed. His smile looked broken too.

"Why is she angry at you Daddy?" Lily asked.

"Because sometimes your mother and I don't agree on things" he said. "I, for instance, said that James was old enough to decide if he wanted to help out-"

"Because I am!" James said pompously.

"-And she blew up in my face" his father finished.

There were a couple more moments of silence before his father began speaking again. "You three *do* understand what you did wrong right? We're not angry, we were- we were just frightened."

"You weren't there" Albus said quickly, unaware as to how rude he sounded. "When we were, I mean."

"I came as soon as I'd heard word that you three ran in. That was very risky of all of you...regardless of how old" he added sternly to James. "Thankfully by the time that I got there you were all safe."

"Is everything over?" Lily asked.

"You mean the riot?" Uncle Ron said. "Yeah that's over. Couple people got locked up, that's all. This isn't the first time something like this has happened. In Diagon Alley though...a lot of places got destroyed. There'll be some rebuilding done, that's for sure."

"But why was there a riot in the first place?" Lily asked, and Albus was glad for this. He did not want to have to speak, but he still wanted these questions answered.

Uncle Ron gave a large stretch before speaking. "Some idiot stormed the stage and attacked Waddlesworth."

"Who?" James asked, and Albus remembered that his brother had not witnessed the speech.

"Waddlesworth. Real clean looking guy" Uncle Ron said, clearly forgetting that James had not been there. "Kind of pointy nose..."

"So wait someone stormed the stage?" Lily asked. "And then what?"

It was her father who answered.

"Rumor has it that they fired a killing curse, but I'd take it with a grain of salt. Most likely Warren dodged a regular curse, than pushed himself in front of a smaller one for dramatic effect. Either way, the people in the crowd started going after the guy who fired it, then *his* group got involved. And of course once the Aurors started showing up, it was pandemonium."

"But why would someone attack him?" Albus asked, and his father almost looked surprised at being addressed. This gave Albus an uneasy feeling.

"Because people hate him" he replied.

"Huh?"



Uncle Ron interjected at this point. "Al, those people signing up for WAR don't make up the entire population. For every person who thinks Waddlesworth is the best thing since Butterbeer, there's two or three who are about as anti- Renegade as you can get. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that they side with the Ministry either, it's just that they think that WAR goes the wrong way about things."

"It takes a very strange set of morals to really think that Renegades are the right thing" Albus' father said, and he turned his attention back to him. "You either one hundred percent support Waddlesworth, or you're against him. Few people can claim to see both sides of the picture. So on one hand you have his devout followers- either members or WAR or just supporters- who think he's doing the right thing in preparing for battle and for willingly torturing or killing-"

"And on the other hand you have the rest of the public" Uncle Ron said. "Who don't know what to do about Ares, but know that they're no better than Death Eaters if they use WAR's methods. And then there's the Ministry, caught in between, trying to stop the people from tearing each other apart and getting blamed for everything..."

"Uncle Ron's right" Albus' father said when they looked at him with shocked expressions on their faces. "Waddlesworth has a strong group of supporters behind him- one that's always growing. And everyone else will always just be everyone else. No one sides with the Ministry but the Ministry. Our popularity hit an all time low considering how bad we were during the war with Voldemort, and rightfully so. No one finds us so trustworthy anymore..."

"And notice," Uncle Ron continued. "That Warren didn't fight at all. Ended up a big mess didn't he? Because he knows he can't get locked up. Instead, word's going to spread that someone tried to 'assassinate him' and he refused to fight back. He'll be called a pacifist next, you just wait. His face'll be on t-shirts and lunchboxes."

"But...but what does this all accomplish?" Albus asked them both, and he knew from the curious looks on their faces that they had not understood him. "I mean, we're all against Ares aren't we? What's the point of fighting each other?"

His father smiled at him, a strange, toothy smile that indicated how pleased he was. "There is none Al, you've hit the nail on the head. That's why Ares is winning."

*"Winning?"*

"Oh yeah" his father continued. "Think of it from his point of view. People are frightened. They're fighting in the streets over how to deal with him, and he hasn't even moved since his break in at the Department of Mysteries. The Wizarding World is on the brink of a civil war, one that the Ministry can't stop because they're a third party in it, and he's just sitting back watching it unfold. By the time he is ready to make his move, we'll have spent so much time, energy, and

manpower into fighting each other that we'll be finished before a battle even begins. Rather clever, don't you think?"

"So then- he does want to start a war?" Albus asked. "Like Waddlesworth was saying?"

"He wants to do something" Uncle Ron said. "He's not waiting to find the right words to apologize. He's off hiding for a reason. And with Waddlesworth hyping him up like he's Voldemort- which he's not- he can stay hidden as long as he wants."

"Voldemort wasn't so long ago" his father said. "Only about twenty years, and it's still fresh in people's memories. They fail to realize that as powerful as Ares is, he's not Voldemort. And he doesn't have an army of dark creatures either, just a handful of people who avoided Azkaban. But they're psyching themselves out you see? All this attention is making him out to be a bigger threat than he really is, and that way when something does happen, we'll be entirely unprepared."

"But what do you think he's trying to do?" Albus asked, and he realized that he was the only one of his siblings still in the conversation. James had gone into the living room and Lily was almost asleep at the table.

His father leaned across the table, a small frown on his face. "We really don't know. But we think that he needs something for it. More support. That's why we're trying to isolate him."

"Isolate him?"

"All these people that you see walking in and out of this house Al? It's no coincidence that they're all from different countries. I've got the whole world keeping a lookout. I'm only really hated here. I've got plenty of support overseas, and it's paying off now. We think that Ares left Britain, but I've got look outs everywhere. Contacts...I know a few people. Ares is stuck, hiding on some small island somewhere, or in some forest, I can guarantee it. He's not going anywhere with people like Mr. Krum making sure that their Ministries keep their eyes open. Eventually he'll have to send out his little followers, and we'll nab them and get a trail. He definitely wants to fight someone...possibly even the Ministry."

"This Ministry?" Albus asked incredulously. "Like all the Aurors?"

"Anybody in our government" Uncle Ron said. "Ares hates us with a passion. It sounds ridiculous I know, because no one man can be foolish enough to try and take on an entire system of people, but he's bold enough. That's the main reason we're keeping him isolated and in hiding. We don't want him rallying giants and Dementors and all kinds of dark creatures like Voldemort did. We can't let him create an army, because then it will all be a very real possibility- he could take on anyone then."

"But he's not looking for regular followers either" Albus' father said, scratching at his chin. " It's a very peculiar situation, he hasn't been out in the open for a while. It's almost like he has what

he wants, he just can't do anything with it. This is very strange, because just about every dark creature we know is accounted for. We've got tabs on all of them. Even the goblins, who aren't big on the Ministry of Magic either, say that they want nothing to do with him."

"And if we can be honest with you" Uncle Ron said, "Ares is only half of our problem. The other half belongs to his brother."

"What?" Albus asked, taken aback at this piece of information. "Darvy? How?"

"He's a pretty mediocre wizard" his father answered him. "But he's unpredictable. Ares has a set of ideals- on some level we can see his point of view, find out what he wants."

"But not his brother" Uncle Ron chimed in. "I've seen sadists and psychos, but that Sebastian Darvy is in a league of his own. He put on a very good act when he was a professor- but he's downright sociopathic."

Albus nodded his head in agreement at this. Just the previous year he had encountered his former potions professor again, and he had proved to be nothing less than malevolent. Still, that didn't explain why he was "half the problem".

"But what's the big deal about him?" Albus asked. "He's crazy, but so what? It's like you guys said, he's mediocre."

"But it's not all about power Al" Uncle Ron answered him. "Look at Waddlesworth. It's about control."

"Rumor has it" his father said, "That Darvy is going around talking about other endeavors than his brother. Now I've said it before- Ares' men are just pawns, tools for what he really wants. He can't stand the Dark Arts really, and he scarcely uses them. But Darvy seems to be going about a different way than that. He's practically promoted himself to second in command- he loves the attention."

"But how do you know this?" Albus asked. "If Ares is in hiding?"

His father's voice dropped very low as he answered, almost as if he didn't want to wake Lily, who was now sleeping at the table, breathing slowly with her head buried in her arms.

"Because people talk Al. Ares doesn't really consider himself a tyrant or anything like that. He calls his men the 'Disciples of Change'. But Darvy's been going on about more than change. He calls them the 'Dark Alliance' behind Ares' back.

"The Dark Alliance?" Albus asked, surprised at the cheesiness of it.

Uncle Ron nodded, frowning. "Yeah, crappy name right? He even stole our old acronym, didn't he Harry? The D.A I tell you..."

"But what do you mean behind Ares' back?"

"Well that's why he's half the problem" his father answered him. "He loves attention, so much so that's he's already given these people a name, one meant to inspire fear. While Ares wants to lay low and wait it out before bringing his ' Disciples of Change' in, Darvy wants to cause a ruckus. He even sent a threat to the Ministry not too long ago, one that Ares most definitely didn't tell him to send. He's itching to see some action, to be the big man on campus. We can't trust that Ares has a grip on his brother, and that means that at any time Darvy can cause destruction. This is why we're acting quick- trying to find them all fast."

"But how do you know all this? All this Dark Alliance crap and- do you like have a spy or something?" he asked.

They exchanged a look, an extremely familiar look. It was the same look that Morrison and Scorpius, his two best friends, would exchange when they didn't want to say something.

"No, not a spy" his father said shortly.

"Definitely not" Uncle Ron added.

"Definitely" his father continued.

"Don't be a prat Al" his uncle finished with.

They both looked at each other again, both of their faces looking quite stony. Albus could tell that they regretted the conversation as a whole, and for a moment wondered how it had gotten so far. Normally his questions would be turned away.

But then, as he looked into his father's face, he realized it. His dad just wanted to talk to him. His son was asking him questions- something that he wanted to happen all summer. He didn't care how many secrets he let up, he just wanted to be a father again. This made Albus feel terribly guilty, but he couldn't help but be a bit satisfied by it.

"So...not a spy" Albus said.

"No" his father said. "Just intelligence, that's all. And recent intelligence also suggests that Ares may be hiding somewhere near Panama. Plenty of islands around there. That's where San- your old teacher that is- is investigating now. Our leads are all pretty shot at the moment though, there's nothing to suggest that Ares doesn't have more than one place to hide. And if I know Red, he'll have enchantments and barriers all-"

"Why do you do that?" Albus asked his father, cutting him off completely.

"Do what?"

"That" he said, feeling a bit of anger bubble up in him. Wasn't he just feeling guilty? "Sometimes you call him Ares, but then sometimes you call him Red. It's like you're not sure if he's your enemy or your old Auror buddy."

His father merely stared at him, his exhausted face trying to muster more than a shameful frown, but failing. He didn't have an answer, and Albus knew that whatever small happiness that his father had found in discussing something with him had evaporated.

"Maybe you should go to bed" he said finally, a little disappointed. "You go back to Hogwarts in a couple of days, you should catch up on sleep now. Before all that studying..."

Albus frowned then looked at his Uncle Ron, who had put his feet up at the table and was nodding his head in agreement. Albus silently left the room.

"And put some ice on that eye!" he heard his uncle yell as he went up the stairs.

Albus ignored him and marched through the upstairs hallway, closing the door quietly before laying down on his bed. Even after sitting down and eating dinner he still had some adrenaline in him from the riot. He tried mulling over it all in his head- what had occurred in Diagon Alley and what his father had told him. It all connected. Ares was the source of all this, why, Albus could even say that it was Ares who had messed up his eye.

And then he heard his father's voice in his head. *You either one hundred percent support Waddlesworth, or you're against him. Few people can claim to see both sides of the picture.*

But Albus didn't see any side to it. He didn't really agree with anybody. And with that lonely thought, he rolled over onto his side and pulled his covers over himself, thinking that the first of September couldn't come soon enough.

## Chapter 5: The Hand of Glory

The last few days of summer whizzed by in a series of awkward silences and an eye truly aching in pain. Albus checked the bathroom mirror every morning, hoping to see progress in both swelling and color, only to be disappointed. Ice had not reduced the size of the bumps around the left side of his face, and it remained as purple as ever; he was dreading explaining it to his friends, and was constantly trying to think of good cover stories for it.

Meanwhile, his parents were acting very peculiar indeed. His father appeared to be regretting telling him so much the day of the riot, as he no longer tried to create simple conversation, but this seemed to pain him as well. It was as though apart from it, he had nothing to talk to his son about. Albus' mother, on the other hand, brought it up as much as she possibly could, as though constantly reminding her three children of it could somehow reverse what had happened.

"I ironed all of your clothes" she said as he entered the kitchen and made to pour himself a glass of milk.

"Okay" he said simply.

"Now do you have all of your books?"

"Yes."

"And your wand is already packed away?"

"Yes. Mom, you know I pack right every year" he added irritably.

"Oh I'm *dreadfully* sorry" she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Her back was to him, she was making herself tea. "It's just that sometimes you kids don't always plan ahead. Sometimes you do things like, oh, I don't know, *run into a mob of angry pe-*"

"Mom, don't start" he said, heaving a sigh. He was almost out of the kitchen when his mother continued talking.

"Is James packed?"

"I think so..."

"Well go know so!" she said.

Albus left the kitchen, muttering under his breath as he did so. In addition to his mother's constant quips about how reckless her children were, she seemed keen on reminding them that she could, at times, be quite nasty. Her temper was always on the rise now- yet another reason that Albus could not wait to return to Hogwarts.

He walked up the stairs and knocked on James' door, all the while hearing, of course, loud music. He gave another extremely loud knock, and to his very great surprise, his brother answered.

"What?" he said irritably.

"Mom says-"

"Yeah, yeah" James started to cut him off dismissively.

"- That you need to pack all of your-"

"Pack my trunk, I know!" his brother hollered over the music. "I'm on it!" he added, though Albus saw a letter unfolded on his bed. He was right in the middle of reading what one of his many female companions had written to him.

James slammed the door in his face after he caught a glimpse of the letter. Albus, thoroughly disgruntled, lay down in his bed and tried to let sleep come to him.

But he was having a very rough time sleeping lately. Every couple mornings or so he found that he woke up with his shirt stuck to his body from intense sweating, his eyes blinking furiously to a light that wasn't there in his completely dark room.

Somehow, he knew that these mornings were preceded by a particular dream, though he wasn't sure what that dream was. He could never remember it. He laid there in his bed for some time that night, not even focusing on the next morning, when he would be boarding the Hogwarts Express. No, instead he was wondering what this certain dream was. He thought maybe someone cackled in it, he could remember an eerie laugh. Yes...definitely a cackle...

He was now standing in an entirely white room, completely square and containing nothing but a single silver chair, which lay forgotten on the floor. Across from him a man stood- no-covered in fear. His long blonde hair was tossed in front of his sweaty face, and his electric blue eyes were wincing as though he was afraid of what it was he was seeing.

"I'm terribly sorry" the man said in a voice that didn't fit his appearance at all. It was barely more than a squeak. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone..."

Albus ignored him. He raised his wand high up and saw that it was not the wand that he normally brandished. This one was entirely gold, bar only the black handle that he gripped. He laughed maliciously at the sight of Sebastian Darvy apologizing, and somehow, despite his insane laugh, managed to mutter two words. Green light flooded the white room...

**"SIXTEEN YEARS OLD JAMES! YOU HAVE YET TO PACK YOUR THINGS IN ADVANCE FOR SIX STRAIGHT YEARS NOW!"**

Albus nearly leapt out of his bed. He looked around, bewildered at the noise, and felt sweat dripping off the back of his neck. Damn, he had dreamed again. About what?

But he could not focus at all, for his mother was still screaming.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you James! I know you were told to pack. I *told* Albus to remind you."

"He never reminded me!" Albus heard James lie. "He was knocked out all night."

"Oh are you kidding me" Albus muttered to himself, untangling himself from his covers and frantically searching his room for his own trunk. Hopefully he had not dreamed packing it...

He hadn't. Everything was neatly put away; ready to be stashed into the back of a magically expanded car. Breathing a sigh of relief, he quickly opened the door and stuck his head out. There's no way that it was the morning already...

But alas, it was. The bathroom light was on and the water running, indicating that Lily had already been in there for twenty minutes. Albus jumped his way down the stairs and tried to catch the rest of the argument, which had went from loud to quiet in a matter of moments.

"I just- I just don't get it James" his mother was saying slowly, flapping her hands as she threw books into his trunk with him. Albus had a sudden feeling of *déjà vu*. Had the same thing not occurred the previous year? "Every year. *Every year*. And you know we don't have ministry cars this year either..."

"Wait what?" Albus asked, and she turned to him.

"Oh good, you're up" she said. "Didn't I tell you to remind James to pack last night?"

"I did!"

"Did not!" James said, throwing a large leather-bound book into the trunk so carelessly that Albus thought that he heard a few pages rip.

"Did too!" Albus said. "I knocked and you said you were packing-"

"That *never happened*-"

"Oh come on-"

"Stop!" their mother said. "Just stop. James, keep packing, Albus- go- go eat breakfast. And hurry!"

"Wait how are we getting there?" he asked.



"Your father's driving. The ministry won't give us a car anymore, we have to use ours. And yes, that means no *speeding up* button, so hurry up now!"

Albus entered the kitchen and saw his father sitting at the table, the *Daily Prophet* propped up against a cup of coffee. He looked up when Albus entered.

"Good morning" he said.

"Morning" Albus replied casually, spotting the plate of eggs and sausages that his mother had cooked. He began piling his plate high. Then he ate in silence.

His silent breakfast ended only when his mother called for the two of them. James was just finishing up packing, muttering under his breath indiscernibly as he did so, with Albus occasionally catching phrases like "grown man" and "Quidditch Captain". After a couple more minutes of bustling around, in which Albus dressed himself up rather lackadaisically in muggle clothes (he would be changing on the train), the five of them exited the Potter Mansion.

The closer that they pushed their trunks to the old, rusty, red car that their father drove the easier it became for Albus to remember the last time he was in it. The first day of his first year. He remembered how uncomfortable the trip had been, with all three of them sitting in the back bickering. He remembered James taunting him as well, telling him that he would end up in Slytherin- something that Albus had vehemently denied.

Smiling slightly, he watched as his father popped open the back of the car, which Albus knew was magically expanded. One after another all three of their trunks were placed into the back, and then the three children marched into the back seats of the car in order of their age, with James going in first and Lily bringing up the rear. Albus sat in the middle, fully aware that he was probably the most uncomfortable.

"Okay, we should make good time" his father said as he started up the car, fixing the rear view mirror and giving his wife a small smile. Albus knew at once that he was slightly nervous. His father probably hadn't driven this car since the last time Albus was in it.

"One last time" their mother said. "*Is everything packed?*"

"Yes mum!" all three of them chorused, and they were off.

It was a predictable Potter car ride. Within seconds three of the five of them had begun arguing over any number of trivial things, including the space of the car.

"Get off my side-" James said.

"I'm in the middle-" Albus battled back.

"Mum, Albus' foot is on top of mine-" Lily said.

"That's James'!"

"James, get your foot off of your sister's-" their father said.

"I can't pull it back; Albus is in the way-"

"Oh that's a bunch of bull-"

"Mouth" his mother said icily, and there was silence for several seconds before the fighting broke out again.

"Mum, James is making faces at me" Lily said.

"I yawned-"

"For a whole minute!"

This time their mother actually spun around.

"Quiet!" she said. "Or I swear we'll turn this car around, and you'll all be homeschooled!"

They all shut up again.

"Your father's trying to drive" she continued. "Let him concentrate..."

As it turned out however, Albus' father was a much better driver than Uncle Ron- and much quieter too. He didn't roll down any windows and yell at anyone, no one honked at him, and he seemed absolutely comfortable with driving on the whole. Albus noticed that kept checking the rearview mirror however- and twice their green eyes met.

They arrived at the station with a considerable amount of time to spare, and by the time that they had all casually slipped through the barrier Albus thought that he had would have plenty of time to find his friends.

"Are we waiting for Uncle Ron?" Lily asked.

Their father checked his watch. "They should all be here soon. I know Uncle George is running late. Why don't you kids go look around for your friends and meet back here in a bit?"

James didn't need telling twice, he pushed his trunk away and at once vanished into the crowd of people. Albus went to follow after him but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

"Could I talk to you for a second?" his father asked him.

Albus nodded, and then followed his father away from his mother and Lily, who were still near the barrier waiting for the rest of the family.

His father turned to him when they were a considerable distance away. Looking tense, he began to speak.

"Albus- listen. I just-"

Albus stared up at him, watching as his father seemed to struggle with words. He began playing with his fingers a bit, and he had wrinkles in his forehead, even more noticeable due to the lightning bolt scar that it carried.

"Yeah?" Albus asked, eager to leave and find his friends.

His father shook his head. "Never mind" he said. "Go- go find your friends."

Albus gave his father a bemused look before turning and walking through the platform. What an awkward moment. He was used to their silences now- but that had been most strange. His father had actually wanted to tell him something, and was unable to.

He meandered through Platform Nine and Three Quarters, keeping his eyes peeled for the sign of a tall, goofy looking student that he knew he would recognize as Morrison. Albus was quite keen to find him. He had been so distracted by the riot that he had never written back, and was eager to tell Morrison that he had made Quidditch Captain. Morrison was not the first friendly face that he found however. Skimming through the crowd, he saw someone standing by herself, pushing a trunk around as well. Mirra.

Blushing slightly, Albus made his way towards her, trying to see how much had changed since the previous year. She didn't look an inch taller, though her dark hair was a bit longer and slightly curlier. She was looking as pretty as ever, and Albus strolled towards her with his head held high, hoping that he would radiate confidence and coolness as he did so.

She turned and saw him when he was feet away. Smiling as well, she abandoned her trunk.

"Albus!" she said, and her voice had not changed at all either.

"Hey" he said, his voice much more mature than it had been in the car. He too let go of his trunk and reached out for a hug, which she gave him. A familiar feeling of warmth spread through him, and he was quite close to smelling her hair as he had once used to, though he managed to control himself. There was still a chance he would get a kiss on the cheek...

When they had finished their embrace she backed up slightly to get a good look at him, and he noticed that he had a few inches on her now. He smiled widely as she stared at him, waiting for it-

"Oh my gosh" she said, holding her hand up to her mouth. "What happened to your eye?"

"Huh? Oh, right..." he said, frowning. He had forgotten his black eye, and was just now realizing that he had no cover story. Hadn't he been trying to think of one? "Quidditch" he said quickly, thinking that if he were lucky he could segue into being captain.

"Quidditch?" she asked, perplexed. "When?"

"Oh, just a pickup game with my family" he lied. "A few days ago. I was going for the snitch and I crashed. Caught it though!" he added, wondering how much farther he could take his story while still keeping it plausible. "Basically blew the other team out-", then, realizing that a come from behind victory was a better story, he changed his mind. "I mean, we were *getting* blown out, it was my catch that narrowly helped us win. But yeah, I crashed during my dive and I-

But he was cut off by an ear splitting yell. Turning, he saw that Rose had arrived and had pushed her trunk over to them. Mirra quickly turned away from him and the two best friends began hugging each other and talking so fast and loud that Albus doubted very much if either of them could understand each other- or even noticed that he was still there.

He tapped his cousin on the shoulder. "I was- I was talki-"

But Rose ignored him and continued talking about her summer with Mirra. She whipped her red hair out of her face, nearly smacking Albus with it as she did so. Albus took this as a sign to go.

"Okay, I'll catch up with you later" he said loudly, thoroughly disheartened but trying his hardest not to let it show on his face.

If Mirra heard him she made no attempt to acknowledge it ; she still continued to converse with Rose, who's knack for being as un-apropos as possible appeared to have carried itself over to her fourth year as well. Instead he continued to wander through the platform, keeping an eye out for any familiar faces. He saw Bartleby Bing, a friendly Slytherin in his year, talking to his mother and a very haughty looking older sister. Not far away was Milton Parish from Ravenclaw- Albus knew his name from Defence Against the Dark Arts the previous year. He was quite close to turning around to get back to his family when someone called out to him.

"Oi! Al!"

He spun around and saw that it was Morrison. He looked...about the same. As opposed to the previous year, when his height had changed considerably and his facial hair started to grow in (or so it would have seemed), he looked quite normal. There was no mustache or beard to speak of and he didn't appear to be any taller. Albus had expected this though. He couldn't imagine his friend going through a miraculous growth spurt once more. If he continued at his former pace he would be Hagrids height by the time they left school.

"What happened to your eye?" Morrison asked as he approached, apparently appalled by it. Still, they slapped each other's hands in greeting.

"Long story" Albus said. "But if Mirra asks tell her it was a Quidditch accident."

"Ahh got 'ya" Morrison said with a cheeky grin. He leaned up against his own trunk casually, scratching at his mousy brown hair. "So that's still going on. How is she though? You already saw her?"

"Yeah, she's with Rose" Albus said, casting a mean glare in the direction that they were, though they were too far away to be seen. "And I barely got to talk to her too. Rose just cut me off..."

"Yeah, she tends to do that" Morrison said. "So what's been up? Anything going on all summer?"

"A bit" Albus said, realizing just now that he was quite eager to tell his friends about the riot. "But I'll tell you later." He wanted Scorpius to be there. "How's the new broom?"

Morrison shrugged. "It's alright. I was flying around all summer, I'm getting pretty good. I really think I'm going to try out this year. Atticus is gone right? So I just gotta' impress the new captain and I'll be in..."

Albus smiled widely. "I have a feeling he'll take a liking to you" he said, hoping that he wasn't letting too much of the surprise on. He wanted Scorpius too to be there for the announcement of his accolade.

"Why do you know him?" Morrison asked.

"We've met" he said shortly. "Have you seen Scorpius at all, by the way?"

"No, but he normally gets here a bit late doesn't he? Come on, let's walk around a bit. I heard Melonie Grue really shaped up over the summer..."

The two of them began pushing their trunks through the crowd of people, Morrison using his considerable size to clear the way and make things easier. They chatted aimlessly as they walked, both of them keeping an eye out for their other friend while waving to familiar faces. Albus mostly listened- Morrison was complaining about his summer.

"So my sister's got a *new* boyfriend now, I swear she gets one every few months. And I said to her new boyfriend- Michael his name is - I said 'you know Lisa was engaged before right?' And then she went off on this tirade saying I shouldn't be talking about stuff I didn't understand and that I should keep my mouth shut when company's around. I mean, really, it's my house too; I have a right to talk to the guy who's probably going to take my room and make me sleep on the damn couch. Oh, and did I tell you? Trelawney assigned us a new book. Stupidest thing I've ever read, I almost returned it. I might try and drop that abomination of a class and take Muggle Studies like you-"

He was talking very fast, and Albus knew that he had probably been bursting to say this stuff for some time. Still, he was barely listening. His eyes kept opening widely when he saw blonde hair, but there was no pointy face or pale cheeks that indicated it was Scorpius.

Eventually they gave up their search, deciding that they would see him on the train, and Albus began to head back to his family. They only had fifteen minutes before the train left now, and Albus knew that he had to say goodbye.

"Don't you want to say goodbye to your folks?" he asked Morrison.

His friend gave a loud laugh. "Mate, my family drove off while I was still getting my things out of the back. I was wandering this place for an hour before you showed up. That fat bloke who stands guard outside the barrier was real shirty with me too, seemed to think I was too early."

And so, Albus led Morrison over to his family, who, with the exception of Rose, was all waiting by the train in anticipation. Albus noticed that his father looked extremely antsy, and knew at once why. Now that the platform was more crowded, he was getting very rude stares. Uncle Ron, who was waiting with Hugo, was getting them as well, but seemed unconcerned by it.

"Alright Al?" he asked when Albus approached them. Then he saw Morrison and held out his hand. "Vincent right? Or something like that?"

Morrison nodded and shook his hand, and then, somehow, they immediately began having a conversation and were soon laughing at something immature. Albus turned to his mother, who was talking to Lily as if it were her first year.

"And remember that you can write at *any time*."

"Mum, I know-"

"And if you get in any problems with any other students you tell..." she left the sentence hanging so that Lily could answer it.

"James?"

"Absolutely not!" his mother said rather loudly. "A professor! Neville will be more than willing to help I'm sure-"

Uncle George was talking to Fred and his younger sister Roxanne, who was not yet old enough to go. She didn't seem all that bothered by it however. If anything she seemed glad that she would have the house to herself, without her big brother there to bother her. A few feet away from them were the twins Molly and Lucy, who were placating their father.

"And how much homework will you do?" Uncle Percy asked them.

"All of it" Molly said dryly.

"And extra credit" Lucy added.

"Why?" he asked.

They both sighed, then chorused, as though rehearsed, "So that we can be the first ever pair of Head Girls in Hogwarts history."

"That's right..."

The whistle blew, and Albus realized that Rose must have gotten on the train with Mirra. He watched as all of his younger cousins hugged their parents (even James gave his mother a half hug), and then, quite quickly, he found arms wrapped around him.

It was his father.

"Look after yourself, Al" he said briskly, and he gave him a brief, extra squeeze before letting go and walking over to Lily before his son could even reply. Slightly startled, Albus watched as Morrison hoisted both of their trunks up onto the scarlet train, then proceeded to do the same with the Weasley children's as well.

"Thank you dear" Aunt Hermione said as he lifted Hugo's up. She then kissed her son on the cheek. Everyone was still hugging their children and now saying goodbye. Albus got onto the train with Morrison and watched as his mother waved to him. The rest of the children followed after him, making something of a jam for the other people trying to board. Soon enough the entire family was waving at the train, with Albus waving back, joined by Morrison, who looked most comical waving to people that he barely knew. Soon the train began picking up speed and his family had vanished...

"Shall we find our other friend" Morrison said in a mock sophisticated voice. Albus chuckled and began pushing his trunk after him, watching as his younger cousins and sister began scampering to find a compartment where they could all sit together. Then, quite suddenly, he felt a tug at his shirt.

It was Hugo.

"Can I sit with-" he started, but he was cut off by Fred.

"Hugo!" he shouted from the very last compartment on the train. "Over here, plenty of room!"

Albus watched as Hugo gave him something of a blank stare. He then walked over to the compartment with all of his cousins in it without saying a word.

Slightly bewildered, Albus continued following Morrison down the train, occasionally poking his head into compartments to find Scorpius. They finally saw him in the last compartment, near the front of the train, his legs stretched over to the other side and looking thoroughly bored. He

looked precisely the same as he had the previous year, with his blonde hair combed back and his pale face cold and unmoving. He grinned when they entered however.

"Seats taken" he joked as Morrison pushed his legs aside and collapsed onto the seat, where he took up an entire side. Albus sat across from him, next to Scorpius. He slapped both of their hands, but it was Albus who greeted him first.

"How was your summer?" he asked.

Scorpius shrugged, just as Morrison had. "Can't complain" he said. "How about yours? What happened to your eye? Looks like you lost a fight with a doorknob."

Albus gave him a cold stare, but cracked a smile all the same. He figured that now was a good time to tell his story.

"Okay" he started. "So at the end of the summer I was in Diagon Alley-"

"No way!" Morrison cut him off, sitting up straight. "You were in the riot?"

"Huh?" Albus said. "How did-"

"You were actually there?" Scorpius said, appearing slightly impressed.

"How do you guys know about the riot?" Albus asked them, feeling slightly disappointed that his story was going to be significantly shorter.

"You're joking right?" Morrison said, apparently baffled at his stupidity. "Mate, have you been reading the *Prophet*?"

"No" Albus said truthfully. He had never really read the newspaper that much- the closest that he had gotten was skimming through articles the previous year. And nothing this summer had changed that either, especially now that his father was probably the most hated man in all of the Wizarding World. He then remembered his thoughts about how he would be treated by his fellow students this year. Well, he hadn't received a single hateful glare thus far, which was a good sign...

"It's been the biggest thing in the news for a few days now" Scorpius said, and Albus was snapped away from his thoughts. "Everyone's talking about it."

"So you were actually there?" Morrison asked excitedly. "You got to see someone storm the stage and attack that Waddles bloke that everyone's on about?"

"No" Albus said. "But I got to see him afterwards, and saw his bodyguard chuck someone a couple of feet."



Scorpius and Morrison exchanged a look of glee. Albus then cleared his throat and began telling them, from start to finish what had occurred during the riot. He recounted everything from James running in to the portkey home- though he altered a few things slightly. For starters, he made it quite clear that he had put up a very good fight against the young man who had attacked him, and also claimed that his black eye was the result of a single sucker punch and nothing more. He also left out the moment in which he had almost lost control, the moment in which his eyes had glowed gold and a strange feeling of power had entered him- though this was more to keep the focus on the chaos surrounding him.

"Whoa" Morrison said when Albus was finished telling his slightly altered story. "That sounds crazy. I wish I was there..."

"You really don't" Albus told him. "It was pretty scary having people knock you over and having stunners fly over your head."

He knew at once that he had said the wrong thing. Morrison stuck out his lower lip at him and made a pouting face. "Aww was Awbus scawed?" he taunted. "Does he need a bwankie...?"

Scorpius laughed and Albus, realizing that his story had lost its impact and would soon be a tool for teasing him, changed the topic to more familiar ground.

"So Scorpius" he said, addressing his laughing friend. "You trying out for the team this year?"

Scorpius smiled widely, and Albus knew that he couldn't believe that he hadn't gotten around to discussing it yet. "My mom says I can play out as long as I keep an 'O' average."

"An 'O' average!" Morrison shouted. "Ridiculous."

"Well that's the price of fun and games" Scorpius said, his eyes narrowed.

"Not for me" Morrison said. "I'll be playing with my straight 'P's', thank you very much."

"Whoa, whoa, back up" Albus said, allowing his biggest smile of the day to happen. "Don't be so sure. I haven't even let you guys on the team yet..."

They stared at him, mouths wide open.

"Wait...what?" Morrison asked.

Albus held up his hand to his mouth in mock surprise. "Oops" he said. "Did I...not mention I was captain?"

They both continued to stare at him in disbelief, and it wasn't until he reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny badge that they made loud whooping noises.

"We'll make the team for sure now!" Morrison laughed.

Albus went a bit red at this. Morrison and Scorpius were his best friends...but he didn't want them actually thinking that guaranteed them spots on the team. There were only so many open positions after all, and Albus had to think of what was best for the team. Still- it felt good to be the biggest person in the room for once.

Morrison continued his rave. "And this has got to be a record or something; you're not even old enough to be Prefect! You're only fourteen!"

Scorpius shook his head and wiped away a pretend tear. "So many things happened over the summer" he said. "Albus made captain, Morrison learned to count passed ten...my boy's are growing up so fast!"

All three of them laughed, and Albus was right about to ask them what positions they would try for when the compartment door slid open. Two people were now standing there, the first Albus recognized to be his cousin Rose. Expecting her to be accompanied by Mirra, or possibly one of those prats, Albus did a double take when he saw the person next to her.

It was a boy, and he was very tall and very handsome. He had long, flowing blonde hair that seemed to dangle in front of his perfectly shaped face. When he tossed his hair away and smiled Albus could see rows of perfectly even teeth, all of them blinding white. His eyes were a mesmerizing ocean blue that almost put Albus into a trance, and it was only when Rose began speaking that Albus turned his head away.

"Hey guys" she said to the three of them, and Albus noticed that she was already dressed in her Hogwarts robes.

"Hey" they chorused back, though it was Morrison who continued.

"Who's this kid?" he asked, nodding his towards the pulchritudinous person behind her.

She stepped aside and allowed him to enter. "Name's Lance" he said in a cool voice. "Lance Disona."

He held out his hand to shake all of theirs, and Albus noticed that the fingers on both of his hands were heavily bandaged; the only blemish on what was otherwise probably a perfect sight.

"Morrison" said Morrison, shaking his hand. Scorpius did the same, though Albus thought that he had a rather sour look on his face as he did so. He eyed both of their visitors warily, anyway. When it came time for Albus to shake hands with Lance he announced his name and had Lance grin at him.

"The famous Albus Potter, of course."

Albus stared at him for a moment, sure of the insult that was to come regarding his father.

"Led Slytherin to their first Quidditch cup victory in quite some time. Bravo- you played a fantastic final."

"Thanks" Albus said, grinning and letting go of his hand. He was right about to ask if Lance played for Gryffindor when he noticed that he too was already dressed in his Hogwarts robes, and they were lined with yellow. He was from Hufflepuff.

"What happened to your eye, by the way?" Lance asked him, and his tone suggested that it was truly an innocuous inquiry.

"Got attacked by a Hippogriff" Albus said with a slight grin, not feeling like telling the same story twice in the same hour. "What happened to your fingers?" he asked with an equal amount of pleasure in his voice.

"Got attacked by a Manticore" he said with a smile that showed his perfect teeth once more. "We've really got to start having less exciting summers, don't we?"

Albus laughed, but it was interrupted by Rose.

"Well now that we're all acquainted" she said a bit testily, "I can actually tell why I'm here. Mirra said she wants us to get carriages next to each other, so when we get off the train wait around a bit, don't just hop into one."

"Okey dokey" Morrison said, and then he and Albus both said goodbye. Scorpius however, Albus noticed, remained silent as the two of them left. The second that the compartment door was closed he spoke however.

"Ever seen that kid before?" he asked the two of them.

They both shook their heads no. "He must be a year ahead of us" Albus said. "I would've recognized him if he was in our year."

Scorpius narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"What are you joking?" Morrison asked. "That kid's gorgeous!"

They both looked at him.

"Hey mate, I'm a guy and I have no problem saying it. That's a good lookin' cat right there."

Albus wondered if Morrison too had seen the yellow on his robes, for the Hufflepuff symbol was a badger, but he didn't get a chance to ask. Scorpius had sneered.

"Not really" he said. "Looked pretty average looking to me." Then, as though eager to drop the entire thing, he changed the conversation back to something simple. "Anything else happen over the summer? Anything interesting at all?"

Morrison launched into complaining about his sister again, while Albus pondered whether or not he should voice what had occurred during the riot. Both of his friends knew about what had happened with Darvy the previous year (though only Morrison had actually seen it) and thus, they were his best confidants on the matter. He wished that he could speak to Fairhart too, but he was not willing to risk writing a letter that might not reach him. He also didn't want to talk to his father about it- there was too much awkwardness there.

"And the worst part is" Morrison was still saying, "She's not even a witch. She's like a muggle with magic parents. And she can't tell her boyfriends about Hogwarts obviously, so she tells them all that I go to this school for criminal children. Criminal! I mean sure, I've keyed a car before, but who hasn't?"

Scorpius was clearly tuning him out, but it didn't look intentional. He just seemed generally preoccupied with something. Hoping to capitalize on his lack of attention, Albus decided to mention it now.

"Hey, can I talk to you guys about something real quick?" he asked.

Morrison stopped talking at once.

"Sure" Scorpius said, apparently a little intrigued at his interruption.

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but Morrison cut him off first. "One sec, Al" he said, and he turned to Scorpius. "Think I could take a peek at your Advanced Potion book now real quick and check if it's the right one? I had to get mine second hand. Sorry, I just remembered it now."

Scorpius nodded his head. "In my trunk" he said, nodding towards it.

Morrison began rifling through it, but Scorpius kept his eyes on Albus. "You were saying Al?"

"Well remember last year-"

But he was cut off by Morrison once again, though this time he wasn't asking a question. No, instead his friend had screamed loudly in a high pitched voice, withdrawing his hand from Scorpius' trunk as he did so. For a moment Albus wondered why, but then he saw it. There was no book of advanced potions in his grasp, but instead a scabby, rotting gray hand that appeared to have attached itself to his wrist. Albus didn't scream, but he gave a slight jump and watched as Morrison swung his arm around, frantically trying to get the hand off of him.

Scorpius chuckled, then seized the hand mid-swing and gave it a slight squeeze. It stopped clinging to Morrison at once. Scorpius then picked it up and dangled it, where it didn't move of its own accord at all. Morrison stopped screaming and merely stared at it, grabbing his arm and panting heavily.

"What the- what is that thing? WHY IS THERE A SEVERED HAND IN YOUR TRUNK?"

"Will you keep it down?" Scorpius said, though he continued to chuckle. "It's called a Hand of Glory you idiot. They're really rare, but they can't hurt you."

"I'm not worried about getting hurt!" Morrison said sharply. "I'm worried about you getting carted off to Azkaban for chopping some poor bloke up!"

"This hand is hundreds of years old" Scorpius said, his laughs finally dying down. "I didn't chop up anyone. And it's really useful too. When it holds a candle it only gives you light. It's not alive or anything, it grabbed you because a candle goes there, you prat."

But Albus, who had settled himself down now, was more curious as to why Scorpius had it- not what it did.

"Where did you get one of those?" he asked him.

"Got it for my birthday second year" he said. "It was my dad's."

"How come you never told us about it?" Morrison asked with indignation in his voice.

"You never asked..."

"We never asked if you were a vampire either!" Morrison said. "But you still tell someone. We share everything. Al told us about the Cloak."

Albus grinned slightly. He still had not told them that his brother had given him the Marauder's Map- another highly useful (and illegal) tool. He was not going to tell them yet however.

"But why do you have it?" Albus asked Scorpius. "If you got it two years ago, why have it now?"

Scorpius went the slightest shade of pink. "I just- I dunno. I figured I'd rather have it with me at Hogwarts then leave it home" he finished somewhat blandly. "Safer" he added.

"What's so unsafe about your house?" Albus asked.

"Come on mate, we just said no secrets" Morrison added.

Scorpius cleared his throat. "It's just my granddad, that's all. He's been leaving the Manor a lot more lately...and he's asked me about the Hand a couple of times. And I just...I just didn't want him using it" he said with a frown on his face.

Albus nodded his head- he understood perfectly. Scorpius' grandfather, Lucius Malfoy, was a former dark wizard and supporter of Voldemort. Albus knew this information from both his Uncle Ron, who often insulted the Malfoy family (though he seemed to like Scorpius), and from Lucius Malfoy himself. Just two years prior he had overheard Lucius discussing dark activities with a dark wizard named Rookwood. If he was leaving the house frequently that was indeed suspicious, especially since Ares was supposed to be gathering supporters, wasn't he? And

certainly, a hand that gave light only to the holder would come in handy if travelling by night to some remote island...

"I'm sure it's just coincidence" Albus said. "But yeah- I get it."

Scorpius nodded his head, and then turned to Morrison, as if he wanted his opinion as well.

Morrison shrugged. "I dunno" he said. "Maybe he's just leaving a lot because his grandson's an annoying prat."

Scorpius smirked at him and held the Hand of Glory up, then pushed down four fingers- leaving only the middle up. All three of them laughed, and indeed they laughed for quite some time. After this they joked for most of the train ride, playfully ridiculing each other and making puns about the Hand of Glory. They were having such a good time that Albus decided not to tell them about his near transformation during the riot- there was no point in bothering with it, not when they had not seen each other in months and were just now getting used to one another again.

They procrastinated changing into their robes until the train started to slow down, and when Albus looked outside he saw that it was pitch black. They left their trunks on the train- including the Hand of Glory- and departed into the chilly night.

"Firs' years, firs' years!" came a familiar growl that brought a smile to Albus' face. He peered through the darkness and saw, in the moonlight, the silhouette of the hulking figure that was Hagrid.

"Alrigh' Al'?" he said when Albus approached him.

"Doin' alright" he answered as a group of timid first years made their way over to him. At first Albus wondered why Hagrid didn't ask about his black eye, and then realized that it probably couldn't be seen in the pitch blackness.

"Four ter a boat" he said to them casually, before turning back to one of his favorite students.

"Got some great lessons fer yer this year Al, yeh jus' wait 'n see."

"Chimaeras?" Morrison asked with a grin.

Hagrid chuckled. "Not till yer fifth year Morrison. But still, some good stuff."

The carriages pulled by invisible beasts pulled themselves up to them after he said this, and Albus waved as Hagrid led the terrified new comers towards the black lake. Albus stood still and waited, glancing around occasionally for Mirra and Rose, hoping that they wouldn't be paired with those insufferable idiots Hornsbrook and Eckley.

"Come on; let's go" Scorpius said a little forcefully into his ear.

"Huh?" Albus said as Scorpius climbed into one of the carriages. "We're supposed to wait-"

"They're taking forever" he answered, despite the fact that when Albus looked they seemed to not be too far away.

Eckley and Hornsbrook were indeed with them, though they seemed to be skulking behind Rose rather than walking with her. She was instead walking side by side with Lance, and the two of them seemed to be laughing merrily. Mirra was also walking along side her.

"Can't we wait just another min-"

"Oh come on Al" Morrison said. "It's freezing." And he too climbed into the carriage.

Albus groaned and climbed in as well, turning and looking over his shoulder as he did so. Mirra saw him and, seeing that he had not waited, made a small frown. Albus heaved a sigh and turned back to his friends. They were then joined by their fourth member, a Slytherin girl in their year named Melonie. She had round rosy cheeks and dirty blonde hair, and Albus realized that he had barely talked to her in their three years of living in the same common room.

She smiled at them all and Morrison immediately struck up a conversation with her, but Albus instead eyed Scorpius. He too was casting looks over his shoulder, and Albus saw that he was looking at carriage a few behind them. The one with Rose and Mirra.

The journey wasn't very long, but for some reason it was agonizingly cold. Despite having just left August the chilly wind seemed to be acting more along the lines of late September, and once the carriages stopped Albus hopped off shivering. He and his fellow students rushed to the giant, splendid doors of the magnificent castle that beheld them, and Albus gladly embraced the warmth that he felt as they entered it.

"Feels good to be out of the cold" he said to his two friends. Scorpius grunted to acknowledge him.

"Yeah, I feel bad for those poor runts crossing the lake" Morrison said as they strolled through towards the Great Hall. They were not the first to reach the doors however, and it was a seventh year Ravenclaw who held them open for the students.

The Great Hall looked as fantastic as ever, with its highly polished floors reflecting the starry sky of the enchanted ceiling. The high table was already occupied by the teachers, including Headmistress McGonagall, who had taken the position the previous year. She beamed down at the students as they entered, but Albus was ushered to the Slytherin table by his fellow classmates before he could get a glimpse at anyone else.

Albus took a seat at the table and watched as his friends joined him on either side, something that he was quite accustomed to. With a jolt he realized that the other familiar part of the opening feast would not be there however. Atticus, the old Quidditch captain and a good friend, had

graduated. He then remembered his last conversation with him- Atticus had said that he had recommended a "good choice" for the position of Quidditch Captain.

He smiled widely at this thought, and was only snapped from his concentration a few minutes later when the doors to the Great Hall burst open. The frightened first years were led in by Professor Longbottom- Neville as Albus knew him- and stood in line between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables looking anxious. Was it just him, or did they get smaller every year?

Albus watched as his Herbology professor left the students alone, returning with a ragged stool and an older, more ragged hat. The cacophony of chattering students died down at once as Neville set the hat up. There was a moment of silence before the brim opened up into a mouth, and suddenly the Sorting Hat was singing.

*Oh, now you're here at Hogwarts,*

*Where adventure is assured!*

*Filled with books and rooms and spells,*

*No student will ever go ignored!*

*And I know you're thinking, what's this, this hat can speak?*

*But speech is far from my only feat!*

*For atop your head I see inside,*

*And deem a place where you'll reside!*

*Are you a Ravenclaw perhaps?*

*With a mind as sharp as knives?*

*Or a Slytherin instead?*

*Cunning and careful,*

*Eye's always on the prize!*

*Gryffindor may be your place*

*If one is brave and full of strength*

*But Hufflepuff's a place to be,*

*For loyalty or for those who don't fit the rest!*

*But though I sort you I bring a message*



*A dire warning before your festives  
I sort through four, but four is one  
And once you're sorted you are from done  
For amidst great change you are all the better  
So long as you stand, all together  
And now I must keep up with my own pace,  
So step on up and learn your place!*

The Hat closed its mouth abruptly, and the applause began. Albus was a little taken aback at the brevity of its song- it was usually much longer, but he joined in on the clapping all the same. Several students whistled as the Sorting Hat bowed its head to all four of the house tables, and then sat motionless, ready to perform its job.

"When I call your name," Neville announced to the first years. "Step up and place the Hat on your head to be sorted."

Albus noticed that several of the first years heaved sighs of relief at this, and he wondered what it was they had been expecting. He turned back to Neville.

"Arkin, Sonya!"

A small, polite looking girl stepped up and nervously placed the Hat on her head. Only a couple of seconds later did it shout "GRYFFINDOR!"

Albus rolled his eyes and turned his head away. This again. For yet another year it seemed, more than half of the students would join the rest of his family in Gryffindor, which was, apparently, the only house worth joining.

And he proved spectacularly correct. Every other name, sometimes two in a row, was met with raucous applause from the Gryffindor table. Occasionally Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff got a new member as well, but for Slytherin it was a rarity. The sorting wasn't as painful this year however- not for Albus anyway. Last year he had been forced to endure the torment of watching four of his cousins and his sister get separated from him- now he was just almost falling asleep.

In the end Slytherin gained six new people total- three boys, two of which were twins- and three girls. Albus tried greeting them enthusiastically so as to make them feel welcome, but they seemed to already know that they had joined the house that was generally disliked. Once all of the tables were done greeting their new members, Headmistress McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

" Good evening students!" she said, her leathery face staring down at all of them, her thin mouth strait and sturdy, emitting a sense of confidence that Albus had become accustomed to the previous year. "And welcome to another year at Hogwarts! For our new students, we all welcome you to the first night of an experience like no other!"

"For those of you who do not know my name, or those of you who have forgotten over the summer, I am Headmistress McGonagall, and Hogwarts has always been more than a home to me. For all of you I hope that it is the same."

The students looked around expectantly at this, and Albus thought that he had a good idea why. If his friends were correct in saying that the riot was public knowledge, then so was everything else going on. They were no doubt expecting their headmistress to comment on the turmoil that had engulfed the Wizarding World. They were disappointed.

"Our magnificent feast awaits us, though before we have it I have a few small announcements to make!" she continued. "First, Professor Handit has returned as the full time professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts! This position was given to someone else the previous year, though Professor Handit is more than willing to return to it!"

There was a very polite applause at this, and Albus too clapped lightly. He knew that many of the students had preferred Professor Fairhart, whose approach to teaching was much more obscure and captivating, though Professor Handit was far from a bad teacher. He seemed rather enthusiastic at getting his job back as well- he was waving at the students happily, a wide grin on his face.

Albus turned his attention back to Professor McGonagall. She would no doubt be announcing the new Potions Master next. Albus was quite curious as to who it was. After all, he knew that they had assigned second year students a book of advanced potion making.

"The position of Potions professor," she announced, " Will be filled by Professor Blackwood! This is her first year at this school, and I hope that you welcome her and treat her with the utmost respect!"

Professor Blackwood stood up, and Albus noticed that she received an embrace much heavier than the one given to Professor Handit. This was no doubt attributed to her appearance. She had straight, long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders, and a heart shaped face that seemed rather strict. She was neither old nor young, probably a couple years younger than his father, but there was no denying that there was a youthful beauty to her. She did not wave as she stood; she merely looked at all of them, her expression unfathomable.

Her applause lasted longer than Professor Handits as well, and Albus thought that he even heard someone (who may have been his brother) give a loud whistle. Morrison turned to him, clapping enthusiastically.

"And I thought Professor Bellinger was hot" he said cheekily. "Looks like I just found me a girlfriend."

Scorpius rolled his eyes as Albus laughed. He then looked up at Professor Blackwood, who was now eyeing each table individually. Her eyes seemed to linger a moment longer on the Slytherin table, and Albus could have sworn he saw her throw them a contemptuous look. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light however- her expression seemed quite normal when Professor McGonagall resumed speaking.

"Professor Blackwood will also be filling the role of Head of Slytherin house" Professor McGonagall said as the clapping died down. "A few other announcements must still be made- the usual reminders. The Forbidden Forest is of course forbidden. No student for any reason is to enter it, nor be close to it. Flying lessons are not mandatory, but are suggested. Please speak to Mister Wood if you are interested in learning to fly. Also, a reminder to Quidditch Captains- you are to speak with your heads of houses by the end of the first week of term to designate a time for both tryouts and practices."

Albus nodded his head at this, not even realizing that she was not addressing him by himself. Somehow however, he knew that his brother had nodded his head as well. He also realized that this meant he would be talking to Professor Blackwood soon.

Morrison too realized this. "Lucky bloke" he said, elbowing Albus in the ribs. "Put in a good word for me won't you? I have a feeling she likes to play hard to get, know what I mean?"

Albus laughed, and as he did so Professor McGonagall announced that the feast was to begin. Instantaneously he found plates of delicious, mouth watering food on his table. He took a swig of pumpkin juice from the goblet that had been empty a moment before and began piling his plate high. Predictably, the conversation immediately turned to their new professor.

"She's got nothing on Bellinger" Bartleby Bing said at once.

Morrison stared at him. "You're insane. Don't get me wrong, Bellinger's no slouch, but this Blackwood gal has got her beat."

"Boys" said Melonie Grue, the girl from the carriage, her voice cold.

Morrison turned to her and ripped a large chunk of chicken off of the bone. "What? There's nothing wrong with respecting women based primarily off of how attractive they are. That's why they wear makeup isn't it? Besides, you've never thought about any teachers at the school? Never took a good look at Professor Longbottom?"

Melonie stared at him for a moment, then shook her head in disgust and resumed eating.

"What about you Scorpius?" asked Dante Haug. "Which one would you take?"

"Neither" he said dryly, and Albus noticed that he hadn't touched his plate. Then, when he saw people looking at him, he pulled a plate of steak and kidney pie towards him. "I mean both" he said quickly, and a few people laughed. Albus noticed that he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder as they chuckled.

Albus himself didn't take part in the conversation however. Though he couldn't quite explain it, Professor Blackwood seemed strange to him. Strangely familiar to him, anyway. Had he seen her before?

The feast progressed as it usually did, with Albus helping himself to seconds and thirds and laughing with his fellow housemates every couple of minutes. Finally Professor McGonagall called for bed, and Albus managed to waddle himself down into the dungeons, completely full and rather merry.

They reached the blank stone wall and a prefect- a fifth year named Robert- said the password. Albus entered the quaint and ambient common room and took in its presence. The eerie green light brought him comfort and he wanted to do nothing more than collapse in one of the stone cut comfortable armchairs. He refrained from doing so however, fully aware that the bed that awaited him was even better. Robert directed them to their dormitories, and within minutes he was tucked away in his four poster, yawning and blinking heavy eyelids.

"Night" he said to everyone in the dormitory, and soon enough they were all wishing each other goodnight.

Albus rolled over, exhausted. He yawned once more, and then grinned into his pillow. He was back at Hogwarts. He was with his friends. Soon he would be playing Quidditch and meeting with Mirra in the library, soon he would be faking his way through homework with Morrison and getting top grades in Potions with Scorpius. He fell asleep with the smile on his face. Somehow he knew he wasn't going to wake up sweating tomorrow morning.

## Chapter 6: Courting Rose

Just as Albus had predicted, he woke up refreshed and happy the next day. There was a definite first day of school blues in the air, a certain chill that followed the idea of hard work returning to his schedule, but on the whole, he had a very positive feeling about the day. His friends seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"First day of year four" Morrison said, yawning as they sat down in the Great Hall for breakfast. "You guys realize that this is the middle of our years at Hogwarts right? Three before this one and three after? This year's a turning point, I'm calling it."

He looked over at Scorpius, as though expecting his friend to make some witty remark, but Scorpius didn't seem to be able to. He was sitting up straight, though his eyes were closed.

"Scorpius?" Morrison asked, nudging him slightly.

"Huh?" he said, jolting himself awake.

"You okay mate?" Albus asked him, not concerned but still curious. Scorpius rarely ever seemed tired.

"Fine" he mumbled, pulling a plate of pancakes over to himself and blinking furiously, as if trying to take in the light of the hall and the chatter of students. "Didn't sleep much."

"Well then hopefully we'll have Muggle Studies today eh?" Albus said. "Or History of Magic?"

Scorpius gave a small smile as he delicately poured syrup over his pancakes. Both classes were notorious for being easy to sleep through.

"And speaking of classes" Morrison said as schedules were passed down to their table by the new Head Boy, who Albus didn't get a glimpse of. Morrison handed one over to Albus, then peered over his own and grinned.

"Good Monday" he said. "But no sleep periods, sorry. Still, Care for Magical Creatures first. That should wake you up!" he said, patting Scorpius on the back. His friend gave a grunt and continued eating.

Albus surveyed his own schedule, and saw what his afternoon classes were as well. Double Potions. And like Hagrids class, it was with the Gryffindors.

"Potions on a Monday?" he asked, surprised at the change from the usual Friday.

"Yeah strange" Morrison responded. "But apart from forty five minutes of Transfiguration we're with the Gryffindors all day."

Scorpius was eyeing his own schedule, but then appeared to be deep in thought. "How many classes do we have with the Gryffindors?" he asked.

"Potions, Herbology, and Hagrid" Albus said. "But we only get Potions once a week. Why?"

But Scorpius still seemed to be thinking hard about something. "Just curious" he said after a moment. "Ready to go?"

"Ready to go?" Morrison asked incredulously, splattering his sausages with ketchup and pulling a plate of eggs over to him. "We haven't even eaten yet!" he added, indicating Scorpius' plate of barely touched pancakes.

"Well I'm not very hungry" he said.

Morrison looked at him, then at his pancakes. He slowly pulled the plate over and added it to his own feast. "Well I don't know about you mate, but I have to eat every day."

"Didn't you eat at the feast last night?" Albus said somewhat rhetorically- he had sat next to him after all.

"Yeah. *Last night*. That was yesterday. Technically, I haven't eaten in a day."

And he proceeded to mix all of his food together, demolishing it without breathing.

Scorpius heaved a sigh. "You want to just go down to Hagrids early?" he asked Albus.

Albus frowned. He was a tad hungry too. Sensing that Scorpius wanted to get moving however, he nodded his head and the two of them left Morrison behind at the table.

They left the castle and were met with a very gentle breeze. The fierce, cold wind of the previous night had left them now and Albus felt rather warm as he walked down the grassy slopes towards Hagrids cabin, or, more accurately, where their lesson would take place. He saw that they were not the only ones who had skipped breakfast however. A couple of Gryffindors were already waiting, and Albus thought that a few of their faces looked a bit anxious. Hagrids lessons were always interesting- but usually dangerous.

Scorpius stayed quiet for most of the walk, only speaking to say "Bless you" when Albus sneezed. They reached the group of students and began waiting quietly for Hagrid to emerge.

Scorpius turned to him. "Didn't Hagrid say he had a great lesson for us today?" he asked.

"I don't know" Albus said, racking his brain for the exact wording. "I think he said just during the entire year. It might've been today..."

They waited ten more minutes before students began filing their way down the grounds and towards them. Morrison was near the front, talking to Melonie, the girl he had somewhat argued

with the previous night. Behind him was a familiar looking group of four Gryffindors. Rose and Mirra were walking next to each other, and next to them, Eckley and Hornsbrook.

Albus sneered at the sight of the two of them, and then quickly turned to Scorpius. "Quick, how's my eye?" he asked.

Scorpius squinted at it. "It looks alright" he said after a moment. "Not much better, but it hasn't gotten worse. Just give it two or three more days."

Albus nodded as the group came down to them. Rose merely smiled at them, but Mirra waved. Albus waved back and went to move a bit closer, for he and Scorpius were near the front and they in the back, but Hagrids voice cut him off.

"Lo there kids!" he said gruffly, jogging up to them from his cabin.

"Hello Professor Hagrid" they all muttered back. He didn't seem bothered by their lack of enthusiasm however. He instead clapped his massive hands together and smiled at them.

"Got summat of a special treat fer yeh today" he said, beaming at them. "Had a few of yeh ask me for 'em last year so I thought I'd welcome yeh back with a bang. Jus' hol' on a sec" he said, and he walked into the Forbidden Forest.

"Why's he going in to the Forest?" someone asked.

"Oh gosh I hope it's not those Graphorn things again" someone else said.

It proved to be much more beautiful and pleasant than Graphorns however. Hagrid emerged from the Forest two minutes later leading a pair of gorgeous horses with him, both brilliantly white and with large horns on their heads. Unicorns.

"Ooh" said a few of the girls as the two Unicorns followed Hagrid out. They seemed to be extremely at ease with him, and one of them was even rubbing its head against his moleskin overcoat, something which he didn't even seem to notice as he continued speaking.

"Unicorns" he said. "We've got a bunch of 'em in the Fores', but even if yeh went in there I doubt yeh'd see 'em. Awfully fast they are. These two here are some personal favorites of mine though, they come to me anyway. An' look here!" he added happily. "Their kids want ter meet yeh too!"

From the Forest emerged three much smaller Unicorns, two of them more silvery and the third, smallest one a bright gold. There was another chorus of noises from the girl students, and even a few of the boys seemed a bit taken aback by the beauty of them.

"The foals are gold, see?" Hagrid said. "Those are the younges'. A bit older is silver. Their parents are bright white though yeh see, get that color at aroun' six or seven."

"Do they have names?" asked a girl from Gryffindor.

"No, not really" Hagrid admitted. "They stay on their own mostly, we don't really breed 'em. But a couple of 'em recognize me and I figured I'd introduce yeh."

"Can they use their horns to fight?" asked Donovan Hornsbrook.

Hagrid gave a small chuckle. "They can if they feel really threatened, but they usually don't have to. Like I said, they're might' fast. Few things also on foot can catch 'em. I'll tell yeh a bit more but right now let's just get you lot introduced. Come on up an' pet 'em. Girls first, the older one's prefer a female touch mostly."

The boys hung back while the girls dove in. Albus noticed that the small, golden one seemed to be getting the most attention, and the adults seemed a bit worried at this. More than once one of them stomped it's feet eerily, almost as a warning, before Hagrid stopped his lecture and calmed it down by petting it and whispering to it. Mirra in particular was having a blast with one of the young silver ones. It laid itself down on the floor delicately, allowing her to rub its belly much like how a dog would.

Hagrid stopped talking for a moment and chuckled again. "I reckon he really likes your touch Mirra" he said, and she smiled kindly at him.

"I reckon I kinna' like her touch too" Eckley muttered to Hornsbrook in a rather good impression of Hagrids voice. Hornsbrook sniggered, and then looked around to check that one had heard him.

Mirra hadn't heard him, but Albus had. He threw an extremely nasty look Eckley's way, of which he caught.

"What happened to your eye Potter?" he sneered maliciously, low enough so that anyone who wasn't trying to listen would hear him.

"Now another thin' you have to know is that though they don' *use magic*, they're still very powerfu' magically. The hair form their tails may even be in yer some of yer wands..." Hagrid was saying.

"Playing Quidditch" Albus said, trying to keep his story consistent.

"Couldn't dodge a Bludger?" Eckley retorted, and Albus knew what he was getting at. Eckley was a Beater, after all.

Hornsbrook laughed at this, and Albus, unable to think of a quick remark, merely responded with a "No." He was saved the necessity of one by Morrison however.

"Hey Eckley" he said, a little louder but still out of earshot from Hagrid or the girls petting the Unicorns.



"What?"

"I saw your mom on the platform yesterday. She's ugly and fat and stupid looking and she smells like gasoline."

Albus laughed out loud at both the absurdity and the randomness of his friend's insult. Eckley bared his teeth and looked like he was ready to explode, but Albus' laugh had caught Hagrid's attention.

"You lot payin' attention back there?" he asked them.

"Yes" Albus said, straightening his face. Hagrid threw them a shifty grin before returning back to his lecture.

"Now yeh'll notice that the hooves on all of 'em are that bright gold color, see? The hooves are the on'y thing tha' stay the same all the way through their lives..."

Albus was still smiling when he turned to Morrison. "Does his mother really look like that?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Morrison shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't really see her..."

After a couple more minutes of lecturing Hagrid allowed the boys to begin petting the Unicorns too, and Albus had to admit that it probably was the most enjoyable experience he had ever had in Care for Magical Creatures. Hagrid didn't seem to mind the fact that what they were learning about couldn't possibly kill them all, and seemed to know a great deal about Unicorns as well. Albus began petting one of the older, brilliant white Unicorns with Morrison, and Hagrid even gave them strange berries to feed them with. Albus laughed heartily as the Unicorn tickled his fingers with its tongue as it ate. He turned to see what Scorpius thought of this and saw that he was not there.

"Where's Sco-"

And then he saw him petting the golden foal with Rose. They were talking as well, and what's more, it seemed to be polite conversation as well. His voice seemed airy and had lost its sarcastic edge, and he was laughing a bit unnecessarily at what she was saying.

Albus eyed them with an intrigued expression. The only times that he ever saw them talking they were arguing. Playfully sometimes, but still arguing. He looked over at the middle aged silver Unicorn and saw Mirra was still enjoying herself- only now she was joined by Eckley and Hornsbrook.

Feeling that he had best intrude now, he surreptitiously moved his way from the white Unicorn to the silver one, cutting in between the three of them and striking up a conversation with Mirra as soon as he did so.

"All ready for Potions?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "As long as this new woman lets us partner. It's still not exactly my strongest subject."

"I'm sure she'll let us" Albus assured her. "She seems nice enough. And besides, she'll have to like me if she wants her house to win this year. Since I'm Quidditch Captain and everything..."

He said this last part as nonchalantly as possible, hoping to make it sound like he didn't think it was a big deal but secretly hoping for a compliment. She continued to smile at him, now petting the Unicorn's nose.

"I know" she said. "James told me yesterday."

Albus allowed a small frown to escape him. Stupid James. He continued to pet the Unicorn though, only allowing his attention to waver from it when Eckley began talking about how his brother (who, if Albus remembered correctly, also owned a large amount of Hippogriffs) had once found an injured Unicorn foal and how they both nursed it back to health. He kept a steely grin on his face during the taradiddle. He, at least, told the truth when trying to impress her.

All in all Albus considered it a very successful lesson, and was rather disappointed when Hagrid called for the class to end. He trekked back up the grassy slopes towards the castle, his two best friends walking alongside him as he did so.

"You know, Hagrid knows a lot about a lot" Morrison said thoughtfully as they entered the Great Hall and went to gather their things for Transfiguration. "I mean I know he's all about dangerous monsters and stuff, but he seemed like he had a pretty good idea of what was going on with those horses..."

Albus looked over at Scorpius to see if he agreed, but he didn't appear to be listening. Still, he looked somewhat happier than he did at breakfast, and Albus supposed that the fresh air really had waked him up.

They entered the staircase and went to Transfiguration, where they settled themselves in the back few desks (which are where they sat in basically every class) and waited for Professor Bellinger to begin the lesson.

"Transfiguration" she said before they could even settle themselves in, "Is a branch of magic incapable of being fully understood. But as fourth year students you are expected to extend your knowledge passed the basics and move towards intermediate to advanced work. You are at the middle stages of your learning. If there was ever a year where hard work is more necessary than raw skill, this is it. Your exams-"

"Exams!" Morrison called out from the back of the room. "Again? This is going to be the fourth year in a row!"

A few Slytherins chuckled, though the Hufflepuffs in the room looked back at him with patronizing expressions on their faces.

"Indeed it is Mr. Vincent" Professor Bellinger said sternly. "And if you intend to make it to them I would suggest that you stop calling out in my class. Now, as I was saying, your exams have fluctuated between mostly theoretical and mostly practical. Fourth year exams are your last exams before O.W.L classes are taken, and thus you must be sufficiently prepared in both..."

Her lecture on hard work and determination carried them through more than half of the lesson, and by the time that they were ready to begin actually using magic there was only ten minutes left. Not that this mattered much of course. Ten minutes was all that Albus needed to know that this year would be as difficult as his prior years- Transfiguration had always been one of his worst subjects. They had started conjuring- the branch of magic involving making things magically appear out of thin air, and Albus proved spectacularly bad at it. They were supposed to be conjuring quills with which to write, but only Scorpius managed to do it successfully.

"Well there's one class that gets more difficult every year" Morrison said as they left the classroom. "Why can't she be more like Hagrid eh? Give us new stuff, but all along the same lines, you know?"

"At least she didn't give us homework" Albus said with a shrug as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Think this Blackwood girl will?"

"Not unless she can resist my irresistible charm..."

Scorpius gave a snort as they all moved their way over to their table, but Albus was stopped by a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that it was his brother.

"Alright Al?"

He was standing next to a very pretty girl that Albus had never seen before, though he knew she was a Hufflepuff from her robes. She was eyeing James with a look of longing, though he seemed to be much more focused on his younger brother.

"Yeah I'm fine" he said. "Who's she?" he asked.

James scratched at his head with a shifty grin- he clearly had not been expecting to have to say her name. "It's...ermm. Marg-"

"Maya" she said, not disturbed by the fact that he had been on the verge of getting her name wrong.

"Yeah!" he said. "Anyway, got your tryouts all planned?"

"No" Albus admitted. "The first day isn't even over yet. Why, have you?"

"Oh yeah" he said. "Just got out of Herbology, Neville and I had a nice little chat and I've got the field booked. I suggest you get on it."

"Well when do you have the field?"

James gave a small laugh. "Very subtle Al, but you're not fooling me. You really think I'd tell you when I was picking my team? So you can send your little spies?"

Albus rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah" he said, his tone heavy with sarcasm. "We really need spies after our *crushing* defeat last year."

James narrowed his eyes but said nothing, and Albus took a large amount of pride in this- he very rarely ever shut his brother up.

"Come on, let's go Margaret" he said, taking the girl's hand and walking away to the Gryffindor table in a mock fit of drama.

Albus chuckled and joined his friends at the table, where Scorpius seemed to be a bit hungrier than he had earlier. Albus too had a hefty lunch, and at the sound of the bell they descended into the familiar labyrinth of the dungeons and made their way towards the Potions classroom.

As they lined up outside of the door Albus wondered vaguely about how their professor had gotten this job. Darvy had been placed there through Ares- part of their plan to stay close. And Professor Handit had only taken the position because Fairhart had taken his. Would they finally be getting a competent Potions professor?

The Gryffindors joined them and the entire class began waiting by the door in silence.

"Erm, should we just go in?" Bartleby Bing asked the crowd as a whole.

No sooner had he said it did the door swing open. Albus followed his classmates in and took a seat at the middle table, once again in between Scorpius and Morrison. His position in this class had moved from the front to the back frequently- mostly because he was good at it but did little work the previous year.

He looked behind him and saw Mirra and Rose sitting with their two cronies. Mirra flashed him a smile, which he returned.

Professor Blackwood was sitting at her desk, surveying them all with a blank expression. Albus recalled Fairhart the previous year- how he had introduced himself and permitted them to ask questions. He had the strange idea that Blackwood would not be as pleasant. She tossed her sheet of blonde hair out of her face, and Albus saw Morrison smirk.

"Bing!" she said suddenly, a second after she had snatched up a roll sheet from off of her desk.

"Present" answered Bartleby from the front, a little surprised at her fierce tone. She continued calling names like this, in her straight forward manner, not once commenting or doing anything strange, though Albus thought she smiled slightly at "Hornsbrook."

Only when she reached Scorpius did anything peculiar happen.

"Malfoy!" she called icily.

"Present" answered Scorpius. She stared at him. And it wasn't an ordinary, get to know his appearance stare either. Her eyes bore into his, and something like a sneer curled onto her lips. Scorpius too noticed it, as Albus saw him shrink slightly in his chair. After a moment it was gone however, and Albus was not sure if anyone else had caught on. She continued to call names in her strong, dark tone, and nothing else happened until the last name that she called.

"Vincent!"

"Present" said Morrison. "But please, call me Morrison" he added with a wink. Albus buried his face in his hands, remembering Morrison's jokes about his attempts to woo the new teacher. Surely, he was expecting to get a laugh from her, but she didn't seem amused.

"Excuse me?" she said, standing up from her desk.

Any reasonably intelligent person would have stopped here, apologized, and kept quiet. But Morrison, as Albus knew, was far from reasonably intelligent when it came to dealing with professors.

"Morrison" he said brightly. "I'm sorry; I just like having a friendly relationship with my teachers. May I ask your first name?"

His tone was chivalrous and witty, something that Albus thought perhaps he had acquired from James. Professor Blackwood didn't look remotely impressed. She was staring at him as though she had never seen anything quite like him before. Many of the students in the room were smiling however, entertained by Morrison's audacity. Even some of the Gryffindors seemed rather impressed.

"Ida" she answered him shortly.

Morrison looked as though he had struck gold. "Ida" he said, supporting his face on his hands and looking dreamy. "That's a nice name. What is it? Swahili?" he asked stupidly.

"Ten points from Slytherin" Professor Blackwood snapped, and a few Slytherins made disgruntled noises, while some of the Gryffindors made noises of approval.

Morrison gawked at her, his mouth wide open.

"We have an hour and a half in this classroom every week Mr. Vincent and I will not waste any of it discussing the origin of names. Sit quietly or leave."

Morrison frowned and slumped down in his chair.

Professor Blackwood spun around on the spot, and though still quite attractive, Albus noticed that she didn't seem as appealing now. She turned to face the blackboard and waved her wand. In tiny, neat handwriting words came up.

### *The Draught of Living Death*

"I do not think that any introduction is necessary" she said shortly. "I am your professor and you are my students. To pass my class you will be required to do my work. Our first lesson will be on the Draught of Living Death. Who knows what this potion does?"

Scorpius raised his hand. She turned, saw him, and continued to stare at the students. Rose raised her hand when she realized that Scorpius was being ignored.

"Miss Weasley?"

"It puts you into a sleep so powerful that it mimics the state of death. Apart from extremely powerful revivification spells, the only thing that can cure it is the Wiggenswald potion."

"Correct" she said. Rose waited to be awarded points for her perfect answer, but Professor Blackwood continued speaking without mentioning any reward.

"The Draught of Living Death is frequently taught to O.W.L level students, sometimes beyond. I do not believe that there should be any measurement to Potion Making skills. Logic is far more imperative in the art of brewing liquids. Thus you will be required to make this potion now. The instructions are in your books. I trust that you all know how to use an index. Find the page and make the Draught correctly. You have until the end of the class. Ingredients are in the cupboards."

The class stared at her in silence. Surely, she was not asking them to make an N.E.W.T level potion? She resumed sitting at her desk and appeared to have stopped paying them attention. After a few moments students began begrudgingly pulling out their copies of *Advanced Potion Making* and began walking towards the store cupboards. Albus found the page and took a quick glance at the list of necessary components, then followed them, returning seconds later with his arms full of strange things.

The entire room was silent, only penetrated by the sound of things clanging against the cauldron as they began working. Morrison was casting Professor Blackwood a contemptuous glare every couple of seconds, while Scorpius seemed to be determined to finish his work. Albus noticed that a few people were looking around, unsure if they were allowed to move their seats. Group work,

after all, was frequently done in Potions. He looked behind him and saw Mirra looking at him, apparently wondering the same thing.

There was only one way to find out. He picked up his cauldron-

"You are to remain at your desks" Professor Blackwood said the second that she had seen him.

"Erm" Albus started, feeling sweat drip off of his eyebrows. "We usually-"

"You are to remain at your desks and work quietly" she said, her eyes narrowing into a leer.

"Group work is not permitted. It does not take two people to read instructions."

Albus placed his cauldron back down, careful not to say anything that was on his mind. The class continued to work silently, Albus now joining Morrison in glancing up at Professor Blackwood and giving her an angry stare. Partnering up with Mirra during Potions was one of the things that he had been looking forward to most this year. He glanced back at Mirra and saw that she looked disappointed. Albus furiously began reading the instructions in his book, though he was barely paying attention. Who was this woman, to assign them such difficult work on her first day? And to not let them partner up either?

The class as a whole seemed to be struggling with the potion, though Professor Blackwood was either oblivious to it or did not care. She was still sitting at her desk, eyeing them all with her mouth as thin as a straight line. Twice a cauldron exploded; at which point she did nothing to help the students (first Bartleby Bing, then Dante Haug) to clean up the mess.

Albus was doing a good job however, surprising considering how distracted he was with thinking of rude names to call her. It was only the first day and already he thought that he had never disliked a teacher more- except perhaps Darvy, who he now knew was a murderer. He stared down at the contents of his potion with about half of the class left, glad that it was the "smooth, black currant-colored liquid" that indicated a thus far perfect potion. He glanced sideways and saw that Scorpius was not doing that bad either- though his potion was bubbling fiercely. Albus thought that perhaps he had skipped the step in which aconite was mixed into it.

He next spared a glance at Morrison, who appeared to have given up completely. The flame under his cauldron had gone out, and he was prodding it lazily with his wand every few seconds, occasionally yawning. He turned back to the instructions. He was next supposed to cut up a sopophorus bean.

He held the tiny blue bean up high, squinting at it. It was extremely hard, almost like a marble. Still, it seemed slightly weaker on the edges. It was as though either side of it was much mushier than its hard shell. He wondered vaguely if there was a way to get the juice from it without breaking it.

He set the bean down and, rather than cut it, crushed it with the flat side of his silver dagger. The effect was instantaneous. Juice surged from the soft sides of the bean, spilling out onto his table in large quantities. He scooped the juice up and tipped it into his cauldron, where the potion turned a brilliant shade of lilac.

"Twenty minutes left" Professor Blackwood called out icily, her first time speaking in quite some time.

Albus began reading the instructions a bit faster, desperate to finish. He wanted his potion perfect for some reason. He once more glanced at Scorpius and saw that Scorpius seemed a bit preoccupied. He was cutting up roots to add, though he kept glancing backwards every couple of seconds solemnly.

Albus looked at the instructions. Next he was supposed to stir counter clockwise repeatedly. Easy enough. He proceeded to do so, though he stopped after the sixth or seventh stir. Staring down at his purple potion, he realized that it had made a whirlpool of sorts. The juice from the bean had overtaken the bits of roots from the asphodel that he had added earlier. Looking for a way to reverse it, and possibly balance it out, he stirred the other way. The potion turned to a light shade of pink.

Albus stared down at his potion with pride, holding his nose closed so as not to smell Morrison's, which had an odor not unlike that of vomit. After a few more minutes Professor Blackwood barked for them to stop, then stood up and went to examine their potions.

She walked by most without even glancing at them. The students in the front row all seemed to shrink in their seats as she walked by- and Albus knew at once that she had succeeded in gaining their attention for the entire year. She reached the middle and stared down at Albus'. Albus didn't move at all, but rather continued to stare ahead defiantly. She lifted her head up and their eyes met. She gave a nod of approval before turning to Scorpius' potion. She gave it a disgusting look.

"What is this?" she snapped at him.

"The- the Draught of Living Death?" he said a little uncertainly. Albus thought that this was a fair statement. It was not pink like his own, but it was at least close to the lilac shade that denoted an adequate potion.

She continued to stare down at it. "Did you put *aconite* in it, Mr. Malfoy?"

Scorpius went a bright shade of pink. "Erm-"

Professor Blackwood brandished her wand and waved it. The contents within Scorpius' cauldron vanished at once. Albus felt his eyebrows rise. The potion had not been *that bad*. Certainly, it was better than Morrison's disastrous concoction, of which she had passed over without making a remark.



She inclined her head low so that her voice was only directed at Scorpius. "Reading is necessary in my class Mr. Malfoy. I suggest you have someone teach you how."

Albus and Morrison both looked at Scorpius, whose pink face had turned a ghastly white. Professor Blackwood straightened herself up.

"The rest of you are to fill your vials, mark them, and leave them on my desk. Now."

They all did so, Albus included. His potion was already accounted for however, and it was more to be away from Scorpius, who looked like he was going to explode as he stared down into his empty cauldron in disbelief. With nothing to turn in, he had certainly failed the assignment.

The bell rang just as the last few students were placing their vials on her desk, but it was the only noise. The silence that had filled the room during the entire lesson had stretched itself, and even passed the class period. No one spoke until the door was shut, with Professor Blackwood behind it.

"Wow" he heard someone whisper softly, and he turned and saw that it was Mirra. Rose and their two prat friends were walking ahead, but Mirra had stayed to talk. "That was...terrible" she said with a small attempt at a smile, pushing her dark hair off from her face.

"I thought she was going to be nice" Albus admitted, scratching at the back of his head. "Not a complete...erm..."

"Hag?" she finished for him.

"Yeah" he lied. He had been thinking of a much more offensive term.

"How do you think you did?" she asked him.

Albus shrugged. "She nodded" he told her. "So I guess I passed? How about you?"

She frowned. "Not so good. And it probably won't get better now that I can't partner with you..."

Her voice seemed to trail off slightly as she said it, and Albus had the feeling that she was trying to steer the conversation towards something else. He was distracted by Scorpius however, who was walking ahead of them with Morrison, looking extremely distraught. Deciding that right now Scorpius was a tad more important, he decided that the conversation would have to wait.

"I've got to go catch up with them" he said, nodding his head towards his two friends.

"Oh right" she said brightly. "See you later."

"Yeah, later" he said, and he began walking much faster so as to catch up with them. They turned away from the Gryffindors at this point, most of the Slytherins were returning back to the common room. Neither Morrison nor Scorpius was talking, and Albus wondered who was hurt

more- Morrison at his failed attempt at an impossible and somewhat comical romance or Scorpius at being insulted and having nothing to turn in.

The second that they had entered their dormitories they both tried speaking at once.

"What a b-" Morrison started to shout.

"A zero!" Scorpius shouted a bit louder. "That was my first zero ever!"

Albus sat down on his four poster bed and thought about it. Scorpius was probably right. Albus could not remember a single time in the previous three years when Scorpius had not handed in an assignment. Indeed, being friends with Morrison and Albus sometimes had him handing in three.

"I can't believe her" Morrison said, collapsing on his own four poster bed. "At least she didn't give us homework though."

But Scorpius was still standing up, pacing back and forth in ire. "A zero. Mine wasn't even the worst one. She's out to get me!" he yelled.

"I don't know" Albus said, hoping that he could calm down his friend. "I don't think she's out to get you, she seems like a generally bad per-"

"No!" Scorpius said, waving his finger. "She stared at me when she said my name, and she vanished my potion even though Morrison's was fifty times worse. No offense" he added to his friend.

Morrison waved his hand up lazily while still lying down, indicating that no offense was taken.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to go an entire year with her" Scorpius said, still pacing. "I mean we can't talk during class, my work is getting vanished, we can't partner together-"

"You never partnered with anyone anyway" Morrison said, lifting his head up, then dropping it again.

Scorpius did a kind of nervous dance at this. "Well," he started, "maybe I wanted to start partnering up this year okay?"

He said this very seriously, though it seemed restrained too, as if there was much more to it. Albus pondered on this as Scorpius continued to rant. Who could Scorpius want to partner with? Certainly not Albus, who was too infatuated with Mirra to spend time doing work with anyone else. And what Morrison did could hardly be considered doing work.

Rose, perhaps? Albus almost laughed out loud at the mere thought of it. But then, it wasn't *so* far out of the realm of possibility. They frequently bickered sure, but they were friends nonetheless. But just being friends didn't mean anything. And yet, he hadn't taken kindly to Rose's friend

Lance, had he? The boy who seemed nothing short of perfect? And he had been extremely polite during Care for Magical Creatures as well...

A horrible, mind-numbing thought occurred to him, and he had to blink furiously to keep the still rambling Scorpius in his focus.

"And what's McGonagall doing hiring her anyway, she can't have any experience if she's trying to teach us N.E.W.T work-"

"Do you like Rose?" Albus asked him suddenly, unable to contain himself.

Scorpius stopped mid step. Morrison lifted his head up once more.

"What?" his friend answered him in a voice riddled with guilt.

"Rose" Albus repeated. "Do you like her?"

"Well...yeah, I'm friends with her" Scorpius said slowly, though sweat was already trickling down his eyebrow.

"No," Albus said, shaking his head. "Do you *like* her? Like how I like Mirra..."

"Mate I don't think anyone likes anyone as much as you like M-" Scorpius started sarcastically.

"Just answer the question" Morrison cut him off, now sitting up entirely.

Scorpius looked back and forth between them, his cheeks pink, his cold, gray eyes narrowed. Twice he tried to speak- possibly to stammer out a conversation changer, but he seemed unable to do it. After a full minute of silence, he finally said it.

"Yes" he barely managed to murmur.

Albus felt windswept. The fact that *anyone* could like Rose as more than a friend, especially Scorpius, was nothing short of mind boggling.

He tried to say something, possibly to ask why or maybe even how, but Morrison spoke first.

"Are- are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm not *sick* Morrison!" Scorpius spat out, batting the question away with his hand. "It's not like I have Rose Syndrome or something..."

"I didn't mean it like that! I just meant-"

"I think" Albus cut his friend off before making it worse, "That what he's trying to say is...like...how long? Have you liked her for?"

"Not long" Scorpius mumbled, sitting on his own bed, before muttering something that sounded like "First year".

"First year!" Morrison shouted. "No way!"

"Come off it" Albus said dismissively. "Then how come you've never acted up on it before? I didn't notice it until today..."

"Because I'm better at hiding things than you, I guess" Scorpius said with a shrug. "And really...I don't know. I guess I used to think that I didn't have a chance. Different houses and all..."

"Well what changed your mind then?" Albus asked him curiously.

Scorpius heaved a sigh and ran his hands through his sleek blonde hair. He lay back completely on his bed so that his face couldn't be seen before speaking.

"You" he muttered.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you" Scorpius said, a bit defiantly.

Morrison snorted. "I can't wait to hear this..."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked Scorpius.

Scorpius sat up now, and Albus saw that he was opening his mouth and closing it, as if desperately trying to find the right words to use.

"I don't know" he said with a shrug. "It's stupid..."

"No, I'm serious" Albus said, his tone perhaps a bit more demanding than he would have liked. "How did I do anything?"

Scorpius sighed. "Well last year...I don't know. Remember I told you how I thought you should give up on Mirra? Because you were in different houses and because Slytherins especially didn't mix?"

"Yeah, so?" Albus said.

"Well you still went for it" Scorpius said, averting his eyes. "And you know...you didn't do all that bad. If some other stuff hadn't gotten in the way...prats like Eckley, and your fight with James...something might have happened you know? Something might still happen, to be honest. And I figured...well it kind of worked for Al! It's stupid-"

"No" Albus said quickly, and he looked at Morrison, who was looking perplexed and uncomfortable, as though he shouldn't be here during this private moment. "It's not stupid...I get it."

There was stretch of silence after this, in which Albus still attempted to understand how Scorpius could *possibly* like his cousin. The pieces were beginning to fit now at least, however. Scorpius had not taken kindly to Rose's good looking Hufflepuff friend. And their arguments did usually turn to playful banter...not unlike the arguments of Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione...

He tried shaking the thoughts from his head, and was given the perfect opportunity to do so by Morrison.

"I wish you would have told me earlier pal" he said, changing his position so that he was lying on his stomach, looking very lazy indeed. "I could've given you some pointers or something..."

Scorpius turned his head so fast Albus was sure that he heard something snap.

"Oh come off it" he said to Morrison testily. "You've got just as much experience with girls as me!"

Morrison made a huffing noise and rolled his eyes. "Oh please" he said, though he didn't seem able to continue further than this.

"Who's the last girl you kissed?" Scorpius spat.

Albus felt his cheeks go red and made a mental note not to interfere. Truth be told, his experience with girls was quite limited. Mirra kissing him on the cheek was about the furthest that he'd gotten, and he did not want to admit this to his two best friends- not when Morrison really did seem like he had gotten further. He supposed that it wasn't so out of the ordinary however. Really, a lot of his worry came from James, who was already dating at his age.

"Some girl over the summer" Morrison said, turning his head away. "In America, when I was with my dad. And it wasn't my first kiss either, mind you-"

"Convenient" Scorpius said. "What was her name?"

"Jane" Morrison said quickly, and Albus saw that he was sweating.

"Jane what?" Scorpius asked him pompously, sitting up completely on his bed. Albus suddenly wished that someone else would walk in. Surely, the other two boys in their dormitory must be down in the common room? They must feel like dropping off their bags before dinner...

"What do you mean?" Morrison asked.

"Jane what? What was her last name, Morrison?"

Morrison made another strange noise, this one in between a snort and a sound of confusion, made slightly comical by his deep voice. "I don't know" he said acidly. "She didn't tell me her name, I didn't care..."

"Ha!" Scorpius laughed. "Was it Fake? Jane Fake?"

Morrison stared at him silently. Scorpius, apparently realizing that his job was done, turned back to Albus, who had been chewing at his fingernails so as to look busy during their exchange.

"Anyway" he said. "Back to things that *actually happened*" he added, casting a dark glance at the still silent Morrison. "It's only the first day and I'm already shot. I can't spend Potions with her!"

"That's only one class though mate" Albus said, knowing full well the position that his friend was in. "And it's only the first day! You have all year, and we also have Care for Magical Creatures! Just look on the bright side of things. And besides...I think I can help a bit."

Scorpius raised his eyebrows, as did Morrison, who seemed ready to enter the conversation again.

"I mean- I hang with Mirra a lot. I'm sure I could- you know- pick up some stuff."

"Seriously?" Scorpius asked, looking hopeful.

"Yeah" Albus said, nodding his head in an attempt to reassure him. "I've got your back on this. It's no big deal really...And like I said, it's only the first day."

Scorpius looked to Morrison, who nodded his head as well, though he didn't speak. Looking back at Albus, he nodded his head too.

"Okay" he said. "Cool..."

The three of them traded glances for a moment, allowing the silence to cement their agreement. It was as though for a single moment they were united on a single task. Hadn't they just been badmouthing Blackwood ten minutes ago?

"Come on, let's get some dinner" Morrison said, standing up and walking towards the dormitory door. "Take our mind off this."

"Yeah" both Albus and Scorpius agreed.

"We've got other stuff to focus on to" Albus added. "Like how I've got to go to Blackwood and talk Quidditch tryouts with her..."

Both of his friends gave laughs mixed with groans.

"You guys have any idea what you're trying out for yet?" Albus added as Morrison opened the dormitory door and took the first step down to the common room.

"Keeper" they both said. Morrison stopped on the steps and turned around to look at Scorpius, who was matching his steely gaze.

Albus looked back and forth between them blankly. The silence returned.

## Chapter 7: The Keeper Dilemma

The prospect of having to choose one of his friends over the other proved to be difficult for Albus. Both of his friends, he knew, had been talking about playing Quidditch for years, a matter made only worse by the fact that both of them had, by unlucky happenstance, decided in the same year to try out for the same position. Though he was far from fond of this conundrum however, it came with benefits. He did, at least, have something interesting to discuss with Mirra.

"Well that's part of the responsibility isn't it?" she said to him as they sat in the library on the fifth night of term. Scorpius had already left and both Rose and Morrison had not bothered to join them.

"Yeah I know" Albus said quietly, turning his head around to make sure once again that Scorpius had indeed left. He didn't want to discuss him when he was in earshot. "But I mean really, just my luck, you know? I finally get a bit of power and the first thing I have to do with it is crush one of my friends' dreams..."

"Well is there any chance that one of them can just go for another position?" she asked, turning a page of her notebook and copying more Transfiguration notes into it.

Albus frowned, he had asked both of them this privately just yesterday, and was given the same answer from both.

"They both think that they shouldn't have to. Because they say they've both made it clear before how much they wanted to play Quidditch."

She too frowned at this, turning another page and copying more notes as she did so. "Well... you could always just give it to neither" she said. "I mean, how do you know that they're even good enough to be on the team?"

Albus thought about this for a second. Scorpius he did know was good- he had seen him fly before. Morrison on the other hand had been practicing all summer, and would be probably be in top notch shape. He also had a better build for Keeper. But if someone was better than them both...

"No" he said after toying with the idea for a moment. "Then they'd both hate me, as opposed to just one of them."

A small silence took place after this, in which they both seemed to be thinking of a possible solution. It was interrupted however, by the sound of someone asking something.

"Seen Rose?" someone said.



Albus looked up and saw that it was Lance, the boy from the train. He was standing behind Mirra, who had spun her chair around to answer him.

"I think she's in our common room, actually" Mirra said. "Why?"

Lance scratched at his chin, and Albus saw that the bandages were off of his fingers now, revealing small scars on them. "I could have sworn she told me to meet her here" he said. He then looked passed her and noticed Albus. "Alright Al?" he asked.

"Mhm" Albus murmured quietly, strangely unwilling to speak. It was as though Lance's mere presence was threatening his chances with Mirra. Then realizing how stupid that was, he spoke, "You?" he asked.

Lance shrugged. "Can't complain." He turned back to Mirra. "Well if you do see her, just tell her I was looking for her, okay?"

"Okay" Mirra said, and they both watched him walk passed them and out of sight.

Mirra turned back to him as if she hadn't been interrupted at all. She seemed like she was about to say something, but Lance's sudden appearance had just reminded him of something. He was supposed to be getting details on his cousin.

"So how does Rose know Lance?" Albus said, leaning back in his chair nonchalantly and almost toppling over.

"They met in the hospital wing last year" Mirra answered him, her nose back to her books. "He was visiting James, and she was in there..."

"Lance knows my brother?" Albus asked, intrigued.

"Mhm" she replied, flipping a page of the textbook and reading it to make sure that she was copying it right.

Albus leaned forward a bit and tried not to let himself get distracted by the sight of her tucking her hair behind her ears. He wondered how far he could push this for Scorpius.

"So like how well do they know each other?" he asked, and he immediately looked down and pretended to be interested in his own textbook, which he just realized now was for Charms.

"Like are they close? Or acquaintances or..."

He left this last part hanging to see if she rejected the innocuous term. She looked up from her book and gave him a slight smile. "I don't know" she said. "They're good friends, I guess. Why?"

"No reason" he said quickly. "I just want to make sure my cousin's not running with the wrong crowd you know? I can be a bit over protective sometimes..."

"Ahh" she said, leaning back in her own chair. There was something about her smirk that told him he had come up with a poor cover story however. Feeling as though it'd be best to drop the whole thing completely, he once again changed the conversation.

"So how's your first week back been?" he asked her.

"Oh not too bad" she replied. Then she gave him a playful grin. "I have this new truly *awful* Potion's professor though. She won't even let me partner up with one of my best friends..."

Albus cracked a smile at the words "best friends" but it immediately turned into a sour look. He had forgotten that he still had to meet with Professor Blackwood to tell her when tryouts would be.

The thought of meeting his new professor was even more daunting than the thought of selecting one of his friends over the other for the team. After only four days Professor Blackwood had made herself known as one of the most unpleasant people that Albus had ever met. She rarely came to meals, though when she did she gazed over at the Slytherin table with malice and continued to eye them until they left. She was prone to telling students off in the hallways as well, and even docking points (even from her own house) for the most miniscule of infractions. Indeed, now that Albus thought about it the only house he had never seen her take points from was Gryffindor.

The only benefit of having such a universally loathed professor was that it at least kept his friends talking. They did not seem mad at each other, but Morrison and Scorpius were speaking much less since the revelation that they were both competing for the same position. Only when they all sat around in the common room cursing Blackwood out did they seem to forget about it.

It was with a heavy heart then that Albus finally did go to meet his professor. On Friday afternoon, right after their last class (double Defence Against the Dark Arts) Albus marched his way through the labyrinth of the dungeons and knocked on Professor Blackwood's door.

"Come in" he heard her say icily the second that he had knocked.

Albus pushed the door open and saw one of the most foreboding sights that he had ever seen. The entire classroom was dark, bar for a single candle on Professor Blackwood's desk. She was sitting at it, looking very stern indeed, her face half in the shadows and the other brightly lit by the flame. She had a quill in her hand and there was an unfolded piece of parchment in front of her.

"Erm" he started, taken aback by her ferocious appearance. For a moment he wondered who she was writing to.

"Yes" she said slowly, looking up from her letter.

"Erm...I'm captain of the Quidditch team" he said. "For Slytherin" he added stupidly.

"And?"

"Well- erm-" he stammered, realizing that he was so intimidated by her that he was playing with his fingers. "I'm supposed to talk to you about setting up a time for tryouts" he finished all in one burst.

She rolled her eyes, and Albus had the very strange feeling that she couldn't care less about the Slytherin team, or Quidditch at all for that matter.

"So?" she said. "What date do you have planned?"

"Huh? Oh!" he said, surprised. He had thought that it was going to be a discussion, not merely him telling her his plans. And now that he thought about, he hadn't made any plans at all.

"Sat- Saturday?" he suggested. "Around noon?"

She waved her hand in an exasperated fashion. "Fine" she said airily. And with another wave of her hand, Albus took his cue to leave.

"Creepy" said Scorpius, when Albus had explained to his friends the scene a few hours later. "Any idea what she was writing?"

"Her letter of resignation, hopefully" Morrison chimed in.

All three of them laughed. They were sitting in the Slytherin common room, which despite the strange green glow was not nearly as eerie as the dingy dungeon that Albus had just left. He had deliberately mentioned Professor Blackwood first- knowing that it would make his two friends ignore the thought of competing against each other the next day. Instead they were conversing normally, all intent on making the most of their Friday evening.

"So what are we doing?" Scorpius said, rifling through his bag and pulling out books. "I'm not doing homework this weekend, I want this done tonight. Muggle Studies essay, Al?"

Albus shrugged. On Wednesday they had been assigned an extremely long and probably boring essay on Muggle law enforcement.

"I suppose" he said, and he begrudgingly began pulling out his books as well.

Morrison frowned. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"I dunno" Scorpius said, flipping through pages and dipping his quill in ink. "You had Divination Wednesday. What did you do?"

Morrison scratched at his chin. "Divination...Divination. I napped" he concluded after a moment of thought.

"You napped?" both of his friends asked.

"Yeah. Napped. There was perfume...and the little poufy things got even more comfortable over the summer...she said something about a diary...and I napped."

"Well I guess you're done for the night then, aren't you?" Albus asked, grinning.

"I suppose so..."

Albus watched as his friend glanced backwards at the bulletin board, where a few people were reading the sheet of paper that Albus had posted to it, detailing the time of tomorrow's trials. Morrison gave a tremendous yawn.

"I think I'm just going to head to bed" he said. "Get some rest. Night you guys."

"Night" they both replied, and Albus watched as his friend started his trip up the steps to their dormitory. He turned to Scorpius, who, after a moment of silence, flashed him the thumbs up. Albus gave a wry smile and turned back to his essay. He couldn't possibly see how he was going to choose the next day.

Albus awoke the next morning earlier than usual, intent on being the first on the pitch to reinforce the fact that he was captain of the team. He shoved down a light breakfast consisting of nothing more than toast, then departed to the field, his broomstick slung over his shoulder and the cool breeze welcoming him.

He flew around for about an hour, and found that the pitch was as familiar as he could have hoped for. Dashing through the sky on his state-of-the-art broom was refreshing; invigorating. He closed his eyes and swooped in and out of the goal posts, dived down and pulled out at the last second, even soared as high as he could go to readjust himself to the feeling of flying. He brought himself back down to ground level only when he heard noises from the pitch. Smiling at the thought of all the Slytherins eager to join the team, he walked towards the crowd of people and gave a startling jump at what he saw.

There was quite a bit of arguing going on. In addition to the twenty or thirty Slytherins that had shown up (including both Morrison and Scorpius, who had their brooms slung over their shoulders in a dignified manner), there were around fifty Gryffindor students. Albus could see both Eckley, a member of the team already, and Hornsbrook among them.

"What's going on here?" he snapped, marching towards the group of them, surprised that he was approaching many Gryffindor students older than himself with no fear. "What are you lot doing here?" he barked, addressing the side of the crowd that seemed predominantly red and gold.

There were shouts back at him, though they ceased when someone emerged from the center. His brother.

"What are *you lot* doing here?" James said, and the Gryffindors all muttered in approval.

Albus stared at him blankly, noticing the broom in his hand as well. "Get off the field" he said quickly. "I'm having tryouts."

"No, *I'm* having tryouts" James said, his eyes wide open as if it were obvious.

"What are you on about?" Albus said. "Professor Blackwood gave me permission to use the field just yesterday."

"Okay, well Professor Longbottom" James started, and the Gryffindors behind him cheered while the Slytherins next to them hissed, "Gave me permission days ago. I had permission first."

"Exactly" Albus argued. "My permission was given yesterday. It's more valid. It overtakes your permission. Get off the field."

James gave him a look halfway between a grin and a sneer, and Albus knew why. Albus very rarely opposed him...James had always been the bigger brother after all, the star, even the bully. He was clearly intrigued by Albus' refusal to let him get his way.

James leaned forward a little bit, while his housemates all waited for him to respond.

"No" he said simply. They cheered.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Albus asked, a bit quieter. "Over there?" he added, indicating the goal posts not too far away, but certainly out of earshot.

James nodded. Albus turned to the Slytherin side of the crowd and started to address them. At the same time, James turned and did so with the Gryffindor side.

"Okay," Albus started loudly, "due to a series of extremely unforeseen circumstances-"

"Alright" James announced loudly, "since my brother's being a little crybaby over this-

"- I'm going to find a way to organize this so that things end up fair for both sides-" Albus continued.

"- I have to sort things out real quick. Just hold still, I'll have these guys off the pitch in no time" James finished.

The noise from both sides of the crowd was overwhelming; Albus couldn't tell if it was positive or not. Either way, he led James away and towards the designated place, where he immediately began speaking.

"What is wrong with you?" he shot out. "What are you doing here?" he added. He felt the most agitated that he had all week, including in Blackwood's class.

James scratched at the back of his chin while the crowd continued to argue from the distance. "How do I explain this to someone your age" he muttered to himself. He then straightened himself up and cleared his throat. "I'm the CAPTAIN" he said, shouting the last word and smacking his chest. "It's my job to PICK," he continued, still emphasizing the last word, only now he pointed at his nose, "the PLAYERS," he pointed back at the crowd, "who will be on my TEAM" he finished, pointing up at the sky. "Do you- do you need me- do you need me to go over it again?" he asked slowly, barely suppressing his grin.

"I know what a captain is. I'm a captain too. That's why I booked the field, see? Understand?"

James now allowed his grin take over his entire face. When he spoke it was with an air of understanding in his voice, as if he was willing to compromise. "Okay" he said, holding up his hands. "I suppose this scheduling conflict is neither of our faults. So let's be fair about this. Why don't I take the field today...and you can have it tomorrow?"

Albus nearly toppled over. "No!" he shouted, so loud that the bickering crowd stopped and glanced over at the two of them for a few moments. "That's not fair at all! Look, the only way we're doing this is if we split the field. Each gets half. Either we split it, or no one gets it, because I'm not budging on this!"

He said this last sentence with so much force that he was actually surprised at himself. James too seemed shocked.

"Come on mate, " he said a little bit quieter. "I almost died last year..."

"Don't pull that!"

"Okay, okay, fine!" James snapped, his voice returning to normal. "Let's do this..."

They both turned on their heels and marched over to their classmates, who seemed on the verge of attacking each other. Morrison and Hornsbrook in particular were looking close to a fight; they were bumping their chests' up against one another's forcefully, shouting incoherently.

"Everybody settle down..." Albus said, though he was ignored by both houses. "If everyone could just please listen..."

"Shut up!" James shouted, and all of the talking, from both houses, ceased at once. He leered at them all maliciously. "Now here's what's going down! We're splitting the pitch for tryouts-"

There was groans and yells from both sides.

"I said shut up!" he repeated, and silence fell once again. Albus, deciding that he would be better suited now that they were all calmed down, took over.

"There was a scheduling conflict" he told them. "And as both of us have arranged for today specifically, the only way that we're going to be able to do this is if we split the pitch equally. No one's practicing, we're just picking. We'll each still have three hoops and a considerable amount of flying room. We'll pick our players in different orders so that we can use all of the balls without interference. Now sort yourselves out. Slytherin's, to the left hoops, Gryffindor, to the right."

The Gryffindors looked at James, as if waiting to see if they were to take orders from his younger brother. He nodded, and they departed to the right while the noticeably small group of emerald clad students went to the left.

"What do you want first?" James asked, turning to him.

Albus made up his mind in an instant. Wanting to postpone Keeper tryouts as much as humanly possible, he decided to take the Quaffle last.

"I'll pick my Beaters first" he said.

"Got it" James said, and he left to get the chest of equipment, coming back moments later and removing the Quaffle from it, leaving the chest to Albus.

Albus carried it over to his side of the field, hoping that the Bludgers wouldn't interfere with James' tryouts.

"Okay" he said, "I'm picking Beaters first. Remember, just because you were on the team last year, that doesn't guarantee you a spot this year. If you're trying out for Keeper or Chaser, go sit over in the stands."

Roughly half of them carried their brooms over to the stands, and as Albus looked over he saw James dividing his applicants as well. Their group had doubled however. Whereas the only Slytherins in the stands were the ones attempting to make the team, almost the entirety of Gryffindor house was now watching as their team was picked. He could clearly see Lily and Hugo in the audience, sitting up front- he had a feeling that Hugo was frightened of heights, and Fred was way in the back to get the best view. He wondered vaguely if Mirra was in the audience, but before he could get sidetracked he turned his attention back to his own group.

He saw Morrison and Scorpius flash him grins from the stands, and then he turned to the small group of people trying out for Beater. He recognized one of them immediately as Holden Rawn; a square jawed menacing looking sixth year that was on the team last year. The rest all seemed to be around the same age, and as Patrick Parcher had graduated with Atticus last year, it seemed that many thought they could occupy his position.

"Here's how we're going to do this" he announced to them all, thinking of a method on the spot. "I'm going to be flying. I'm going to release two Bludgers, and you lot are going to be trying to knock me off, understand?"

They all nodded, and Albus was a little bit perturbed that they didn't seem to mind the thought of him getting seriously hurt in the slightest. Still, he had decided that this was the best way to determine their skills- it was Seekers, after all, who were generally the primary targets of the Beaters. He was also comfortable enough of his talent on a broom that he was willing to put himself in harm's way. Besides- if Mirra *was* watching, and just so happened to look over, he wanted to be in the air.

"On your mark" Albus announced as they all dug into the equipment chest to get the small Beater's clubs, " Get set- and go" he finished dramatically, and he kicked the chest, right at the lock attached to the straps of the Bludgers, which immediately circled the pitch.

Albus kicked off in an instant, going so fast that the whistling of the wind blocked even the sound of the Gryffindors from ears. For ten minutes he flew, dodging the Bludgers being hit towards him effortlessly as those who he was testing began sending them at him with increasingly more aggression. He had to admit it was fun, flying circles around students much older than himself and occasionally catching his brother glancing at him from a distance. He finally landed with a large grin on his face, while the exhausted Beaters slowly lowered themselves, panting heavily as they touched down on the ground and looking at each other in embarrassment. Not a single one of them had landed a successful hit.

"Alright, good job guys" he lied through his teeth, wondering how in the world he was going to pick the two best. He glanced over across the pitch at James, who seemed to be having just as much trouble in picking his Chasers and Keeper. They were still in the air, anyway.

In the end Albus decided to keep Holden on, for he at least had the experience on the team that the others lacked. For his other Beater he chose Alabastor Kurgish, a rather burly seventh year with dirty brown hair and a rather confident smile. He had not been the best flier, but he had packed the most power and shown a great deal of aggression. The same aggression, Albus realized that those who had not been picked were starting to show.

"That's my final decision!" he announced acidly at the small group of students twice his size, all of them holding small clubs. He was much too worried about picking his Keeper to be intimidated by his fellow housemates. "Now either sit in the stands and watch the rest or get off the pitch completely!"

They continued to leer at him, but all slowly made their way to the stands. He signaled for Chasers and Keepers to come over to him, and then walked over to James while his two new Beaters snatched the Bludgers out of the sky.



"You done with the Quaffle?" he asked when he had approached his brother. This was something of a rhetorical question however; he could see that they were all touched down on the ground.

"Yeah I've got my offense picked", he said, then added in an undertone, "And they're a bunch of scrubs, between me and you. I guess I'll be carrying this team *again*."

Albus rolled his eyes and shoved the Beater's Bats into his brother's arms, then took the Quaffle in return. Marching back to his side of the field while his Beaters flew over to drop off the Bludgers, he eyed them all with interest. This was a much bigger bunch, and they were all more varied as well- few were burly or big.

"Okay, I'll test each Keeper at a time" he told them. "Chasers, fly up. I'm judging based off of scoring *and* teamwork" he added, glancing at all of them and realizing, just now and for the first time, that he kind of enjoyed telling people what to do. He made a mental note to return a Prefect Badge if he ever got one.

They did as they were told, with Damian Peesley, the only Chaser from last year's team still in school, giving him a shifty grin and a thumbs up, which he ignored. He was much too focused on Morrison, who had been first in line and had flown up to the goal posts.

Albus could not help but notice that he seemed a bit awkward on a broom. His considerable height combined with his rather thin and gangly body made it a bit humorous, but Albus refrained from laughing so as not to distract him. He watched as the Chasers passed the Quaffle back and forth, finally resulting in the first shot being fired-

It went in. Despite flying right in front of the middle hoop, the Quaffle shot right passed him, soaring right under his arm with ease. Albus cringed and glanced at Scorpius, who was last in line behind two other people, both in sixth year. He was not grinning or frowning- merely looking up at his friend with concentration.

The next shot fired was much fancier, and it came from Damian Peesley. He did a neat little spin in mid-air and threw the ball with lightning speed towards the left hoop for what was surely a guaranteed goal-

Morrison stopped it. In an amazing display of athleticism he dove straight down and to his left, knocking the Quaffle away with the tips of his fingers while Damian stared, mouth wide open in surprise. Had the first one just been a freak error?

But the rest of the tryout went like this. Every other shot, it seemed, had a completely different result. Albus noticed that his friend seemed to slip up on the easier ones, frequently letting the Quaffle slip through his fingers or soar right through his outstretched arms. The more difficult shots however, were saved with relative ease. After ten minutes of this enigma Albus called for Morrison to come down, which he did so, grinning.

"How'd I do?" he asked when he had landed.

"Weird" Albus answered him, unable to think of an actual answer. "Just go stand over there for now..."

The next two participants were a bit like Morrison when it came to the easier shots, but nothing like him with the more difficult ones. Albus even closed his eyes and shook his head after one truly horrible failed attempt at a save that resulted in a student nearly falling off of his broom. Both tryouts were ended within five minutes, and it was Scorpius who stepped up next. Morrison, for all of his inconsistency, was still the front runner for the spot.

Scorpius flew towards the goal post elegantly, hovering calmly in the air in front of the middle hoop and looking determined. Albus called to begin, and the first shot was taken. A rather easy looking shot from a fifth year named Clark-

Scorpius batted it away with a flap of his hand. Damian Peesley scooped it up and threw it at the hoop farthest from where Scorpius was. Again, it was blocked. Time and time again he blocked each and every shot, all of the easy ones, all of the intermediate ones, and all of the hard ones.

Albus noticed that as good a flier as his friend was, he didn't seem to be focused on how good his tryout was going. His face was stony and determined the entire time, cringing when he nearly missed a save and not even cracking a smile when he made a truly spectacular one; he looked more serious than he ever did with schoolwork, and that was saying something.

Albus spared a glance at Morrison to see what he thought of the tryout, and cringed himself when he did so. Morrison was staring at the ground, kicking at the grass as if he had already conceded defeat. Figuring that he might as well put an end to it now, he called for a halt.

"Alright, come on down, come on down," he yelled, waving his hand around. The action stopped at once and they all flew down, the majority of the Chasers, like the Beaters before them, looking visibly upset from their inability to perform their only assigned tasks.

"I'll pick my Chasers first" he told them once they had reached the ground. "Keeper is going to be real close" he lied, loud enough for Morrison to hear him. "So that'll take a bit more time..."

In the end he picked what he thought was a relatively mediocre bunch. Damian Peesley, like Holden Rawn, was kept primarily for their experience. He also picked two seventh year boys named Judd Faulkner and Tyler Graham, both of whom were very tall and very fast. He then turned to the batch of Keepers, three of whom seemed rather gloomy and the other one, the palest of them all, looking quite stern and concerned.

"I put a lot of thought into it" Albus said loudly, sizing them all up, though of course he was only focused on his two friends. "And after a *very* close tryout...I'm going to go with Scorpius."

Scorpius smiled at him, but this was all that he caught. He instinctively turned to Morrison, who unlike the other two losers, did not merely shrug and walk away. He instead stared straight, looking betrayed.

"Party in the common room!" Damian Peesley yelled at the stands, and the noise was so overwhelming that the Gryffindors, who were still trying out, looked over.

Everyone turned to leave, Albus included, barely managing an apologetic grin towards the first friend that he had made at Hogwarts.

The party was raucous, loud, and agonizingly long. From the moment that some of the older Slytherins went and retrieved food from the kitchens the noise didn't stop for a moment. Going on well into the night, with the WWN blasting the entire time, it seemed like everyone was having a good time. Albus simply watched them from a distance, neatly settled in one of the armchairs and trying to ignore the badgering of his housemates.

"Speech, speech-"

"No, really-" he tried fighting them off.

"Atticus *always* gave a speech when he picked a new team-"

"Well I'm not him-"

Two people were dancing exuberantly near him now, whether so as to provoke him to dance as well or not he was not sure. He raised himself from his spot and moved around the crowded common room, finally settling himself at the food table, where he helped himself to a small plate of treacle fudge. With a stabbing pain in his gut he was reminded of Morrison's love for it. He turned around to see where exactly Morrison was but couldn't find him amidst the enthusiastic party goers.

"Treacle fudge, huh?"

He turned to his left. Scorpius was standing next him. Albus nodded.

"Good tryout today" he said, poking at it with his fork. "Real good tryout..."

Scorpius nodded, but didn't seem to be able to say anything. He took a swig of pumpkin juice, followed by a long sigh, and Albus knew at once that he was feeling guilty.

"You seen Morrison?" Albus asked him.

"Not for a bit" Scorpius told him. At this very moment the music got even louder, so much so that Scorpius had to shout his next sentence.

"You know I could always-" he started to yell.

"You had the better tryout" Albus announced back, his voice the most authority like that it had been all day. "I'm putting together the best team. He'll get over it."

Scorpius nodded and walked away, though he seemed to be smiling slightly. Albus, for some reason however, felt slightly agitated. Scorpius, he knew, was about to offer to step down. By why should he? Why should Morrison deserve anything? He had been given an equal opportunity to shine after all. If Morrison did not like the decision that he had made, then that meant that he didn't think that Albus was a capable captain.

He stormed up the stairs to their dormitory, now furious, knowing that he would find Morrison there. And sure enough, as he knocked the door open, he saw his friend lying back on his bed; curtains lazily flung aside, his legs crossed. He was holding something in his hands however, examining it. It was the Hand of Glory.

"What are you doing with that?" Albus said as the thumping of the loud music continued under him.

Morrison shrugged. "I dunno" he said. "Just playing with it."

Albus rolled his eyes and snatched it from him. "What is with you? Man up!" he yelled.

Morrison sat up straight, his eyebrows raised. "What are you on about?" he snapped.

"You! I know you're mad! Because I didn't give you the spot!"

"Pffft" Morrison moaned, rolling his own eyes. "Yeah right..."

"How come you're not downstairs then?" Albus said, just now realizing that he was holding the scabby, decayed Hand of Glory and waving it around.

"Because it's loud..."

"Yeah okay" Albus said sarcastically. "And you hate noise so much..."

There was a brief silence between them, of which Albus looked for a place to put the Hand down. He was right about to set it on the counter when Morrison finally spoke.

"What's with you!" he shouted. "I've wanted to play Quidditch since first year! I even wanted to take flying lessons, back when you were too afraid to sit five feet up in the stands!"

"Well Scorpius has wanted to play for a while too!" Albus battled back, and it was perfectly true. "His mom is finally letting him. He was waiting for his shot too. You both did good out there, but he did better. Now you're a reserve Keeper, and he gets the top spot. Maybe you should have tried out for something else..."

"I shouldn't have had to..." Morrison said, crossing his arms over.

Albus threw him a contemptuous glare, and realized that this was probably the closest that he'd ever gotten to being in a fully fledged argument with one of his two best friends. Strange, he always thought that it would be Scorpius...

"What would you have me do?" he said, tossing his arms up, still grasping the motionless, disgusting hand. "Take it back? Say sorry Scorpius, I've done some thinking and Morrison deserves it more? Is that my best option?"

Morrison didn't say anything at first. He merely turned his head away.

"No" he finally murmured, and it was the most satisfying "no" that Albus thought that he had ever heard.

"So then what?" Albus said. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing" Morrison mumbled.

The silence resumed after this, but it was a much more peaceful silence. Morrison, having all but acquiesced, seemed to have realized the futility of his argument and the immaturity of his anger. And it was all for the better too, for Albus noticed that his palms were sweating. He had been nervous about the prospect of losing his friendship over something so utterly stupid.

"You want to go back downstairs?" Albus asked.

Morrison shrugged, but it was a light shrug, rather than an angry one.

"They've got treacle fudge..."

Morrison looked up. "Hagrid's?" he asked, excited.

"Probably not" Albus admitted. "But still-"

He was cut off from the noise downstairs however. Or rather, the lack of it. The loud, thundering music had been cut off abruptly and all chatter that accompanied it seemed to have died out. Albus turned and departed down the stairs curiously, Morrison getting up and following after him.

When he reached the common room he saw the source of the interruption at once. All of the students, first through seventh year, were backed up against the stone walls looking petrified. Professor Blackwood was standing in the center of the room, looking very agitated in her dark blue robes, her blonde hair tied back into a formidable looking ponytail.

"It is past midnight" she said in barely more than a whisper. "And this noise is unacceptable."

She took a long look at the entire room, her eyes sweeping over the table of food and the trash on the floor. "Disgusting" she snapped suddenly, and a few students pressed themselves back up

against the wall ever further, if such a thing was possible. "You are students' at the most prestigious school of magic known to wizards, carry yourselves as such! And what is this!" she yelled, pointing a shaky, slender finger at the food. "Where did this come from? From the kitchens? Who has taken food from the kitchens! Who organized this party?"

Even before it happened Albus knew that all heads would turn to him. He had of course done no such thing, had not even been a part of the celebration, but he was captain of the Quidditch team. This party was thrown because of the team that he had assembled.

All of the students turned to him, bar Morrison and Scorpius, who kept their heads down. Professor Blackwood moved forward, towards Albus. Her next sentence was directed towards him.

"Twenty points will be deducted from Slytherin" she said, and no one moaned or made any noises of indignation, despite how utterly unfair it was. "I understand that you feel the urge to celebrate, Mr. Potter, but noise of such a level, at such a time of night, is completely-"

She stopped mid sentence, and it took Albus a moment to realize why. Her eyes had slid from his face down to his neck, to his hand, which was still gripping Scorpius' Hand of Glory...

He hastily tried to hide it behind his back, but before he could move a centimeter she said something.

"What is *that*" she barked, now pointing her long thin finger at the Hand.

"No- nothing" he stammered, and he spared a glance at Scorpius, who had turned a faint pink. Albus couldn't tell if he was more curious as to why he had it, or more afraid that a birthday gift from his father may be taken away.

"Hand it here!" she snapped. "Now!" she added, even as he was in the midst of handing it over.

"It's just a joke shop item" he quickly said, as she took it from his hand. "From Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes-"

"And additional five points from Slytherin" she said coolly. "For lying" she added, examining the hand and then holding it at a distance as though she abhorred it. "This is a dark object Mr. Potter, used for thieves and plunderers, neither of which I will permit one of my students to be! Whatever you choose to do at home is up to you, but I will not have *this* being used here! It will be confiscated. You may have it back at the end of the school year."

"The school year!" Scorpius shouted from next to him, and Albus could not blame him. It was, after all, only September.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy, the school year" she said through gritted teeth, eyeing him hatefully. Albus saw his friends fist clench up, could have sworn he heard his teeth gritting together as well...

Professor Blackwood stowed the Hand of Glory away in her robes, before turning away from Albus and addressing the room as a whole. "I will not be so tolerable of this behavior in the future. To bed. All of you. Now!" she demanded, once more before the students could even register her first request.

No one objected, no one disagreed, no one so much as coughed as they all filed in an orderly fashion and began marching towards the sets of stairs that led to their dormitories. Albus, fuming and wishing that he could apologize to Scorpius immediately, turned back at Professor Blackwood for a moment. She was leaving, but before she reached the blank stone wall she turned back and stared at the group of them, a nasty smile curled onto her lips.

## Chapter 8: Photographs and Fabrications

"Look, I'll get your Hand back-"

"You've been saying that all week-"

"Well I've meant it all week! Let me figure out how!"

It was a Thursday, and they were in Charms. Professor Flitwick had told them to practice the Banishing charm, the opposite of the Summoning charm that they had learned last year, of which Albus had a little grasp of. The noise provided by the sound of objects toppling over provided them with the cover that they needed for a conversation about something much more important however.

"Look, I told you not to even worry about it" Scorpius was still saying. "It's still out of my house, that's what I wanted right? I'll just wait until the end of the year."

"It's not the point, the point is I got it taken" Albus rebutted. "So I'll get it back..."

"What were you doing with it again?" Scorpius asked curiously.

Albus heaved a sigh. "I *told* you, I tripped over your trunk and it fell out. I was bringing it down to ask you where it belonged."

Morrison flashed him a quick smile before returning to the cushion that he was aiming at. It had been motionless for the entire period.

"I hope you boys are practicing!" Professor Flitwick squeaked from behind them, and Albus hastily pulled his wand out of his pocket.

"Yes Professor Flitwick" all three of them chorused. Their tiniest teacher turned to Scorpius, who had also hastily pulled out his wand.

"Well then give it a wave, Mr. Malfoy" he said.

Scorpius flicked his wand lazily at the purple cushion a few feet away, which flew back several more feet and landed neatly on a stack in the corner. Professor Flitwick gave him a wide smile before continuing to pace around the room and help his students. As soon as his back was completely turned Scorpius stowed his wand back in his robes.

"Well that's all for this class today" he muttered.

Morrison chuckled, still waving his wand at his own purple cushion, which remained where it was. "You're getting like me, mate" he said.



"Don't be ridiculous" Scorpius snorted, supporting his face on his hands. "I'll never be that poor of a wizard..."

"Haha..."

Albus ignored his friends and began frantically rubbing at his eyes, which had been unusually watery since he had woken up. He had woken up bathed in sweat once more this morning, still with the sound of a maniacal cackle running through his ears. His dream was a bit clearer however; he could have sworn that Professor Blackwood was in it, though he did not picture her having such a laugh.

"You okay mate?" Scorpius turned his head towards him.

"Mhm" Albus said, still wiping at his eyes.

"You sure?" Morrison asked, apparently abandoning his attempt at the charm. "You look like you're about to cry..."

"I'm not about to cry" Albus retorted stubbornly. "I'm just tired. It's like I'm losing sleep, but I can't remember being up. I'm exhausted."

They both continued staring at him, apparently waiting for him to continue, which he did so.

"I'm just- I'm having weird dreams" he said plainly.

"Recurring dreams?" Scorpius asked.

"Huh?"

"Like the same dream, over and over?"

"Oh" Albus said, trying to search through his mind for more clues. "I don't think so. I don't really remember them. I just wake up sweating. And sometimes my eyes sting..."

Scorpius turned to Morrison. "You're in Divination, you know all about dreams. Diagnosis?"

Morrison laughed. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"It's got nothing to do with Divination" Albus said, still rubbing at his eyes furiously. "It's just...I don't know."

He remained quiet for the rest of the period, while Scorpius and Morrison bickered back and forth over which class was less important, Muggle Studies or Divination. Albus was pleased to see that they were getting along. Morrison had made no mention of his initial resentment of his friend, and Albus was quite proud of him for this. They were talking completely normally, in fact. Albus was glad that there had been no arguments. Already feeling guilty over getting

Scorpius' Hand of Glory taken, he thought he would be utterly depressed if he ended up having to pick between his two friends.

The bell rang, signaling their next class, arguably the worst of the week. Double History of Magic with Professor Binns, who had consistently been their most uninteresting teacher since first year.

"Alright, what's the score now?" Morrison asked as they departed, pulling out a sheet of parchment from his bag for them to use as he did so. "I think Al's in the lead with five."

He was referring, of course, to hangman, which they'd been playing every History of Magic period since the start of term.

"I think me and him are actually tied" Scorpius said thoughtfully. Albus stayed a little behind them both, trying desperately to remember his dream, even as they walked through the hallway and towards the stairs.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Albus nearly toppled over. For a single second he had recalled something, an image, of someone illuminated by a blast of green, all seen through golden vision.

"Al!" Morrison said, reaching out and grabbing him by the arm as they neared the stairs to the third floor corridor.

Thanks to Morrison he managed to hold himself steady. Then he blinked his eyes furiously again.

"What color are my eyes?" he barked suddenly at Morrison. Scorpius had stopped mid step and was watching him with intrigue.

"Erm...green?" Morrison responded, giving him a strange look. "Why?"

"Nothing-" he said, and he resumed rubbing at his eyes, somewhat shocked at how direct he had been with his question. "Never mind."

They all returned to walking down the stairs, though it was noticeably quieter now. Neither Morrison or Scorpius were speaking, they seemed to be focused entirely on him.

"Is there something bothering you?" Scorpius asked, and he and Morrison both slowed down slightly. Albus slowed down with them, thinking about what he wanted to say.

He still had not told his friends what had happened during the riot, what had *really* happened. The flash of gold that he had just seen- the one attributed to his dream- he knew for sure was the same light that he had seen during the riot. The same strange light from the Department of Mysteries the previous year.

He slowed down now to a near halt, then looked behind him and saw no one. Everyone was far ahead of them, walking to class. He did not want to frighten them, and yet, he wanted to tell *someone*.

"Okay, remember the riot that I was in..."

Pressed for time due to their imminent History of Magic class, Albus quickly explained the more meticulous details of what had transpired in Diagon Alley, including his helpless position and what had nearly happened because of it.

"So then...you lied?" Scorpius asked.

"Huh?"

"You lied" he repeated. "You said it was like a sucker punch, about your eye I mean."

"Well- yeah- well not really. I fabricated" he said earnestly.

"It's the same thing" Scorpius said shortly. "They have the same meaning."

"No they don't" Albus said darkly. "If they did, they wouldn't be different words."

"Not necessarily" Scorpius argued. "'Little' and 'small' mean the same thing."

"I'm sure there's a small difference" Albus said hotly.

"Or a little difference" Morrison chimed in.

"Look that's not the point!" Albus practically roared. Why did they get off topic so easily?

"Okay whatever" Scorpius said, waving his hand dismissively. "You're right, it makes no difference. Has it happened again?"

"No..." Albus admitted. "But I still feel like it's all connected-"

He stopped abruptly. He had the strange feeling that someone was listening. Turning around, he saw no one there. Or no one who could possibly be interested in what they were talking about anyway. But Professor Blackwood was walking behind them. What was she doing on the third floor, when her classroom was in the dungeons?

"Move along!" she snapped when she was in talking distance. "You'll be late for your next class!"

They did as they were told, and within minutes they were in their History of Magic classroom. Professor Binns flew through the blackboard, nearly invisible due to the glare from the windows. Without even glancing at them all he began to drone on.

" The Signing of the Ministry Of Magic-Centaur Location Treaty was signed on the twelfth of June, 1752, first by the then Head of Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Herbert Forrester, and then by-"

Albus saw Morrison give a wide yawn and bury his head in his arms, a smile curled on his lips as though he was about to experience a very nice nap. Scorpius stared blankly ahead. Albus himself took a look around, and then buried his head in his arms.

Only two weeks into school and he was already having headaches. Why was he having these dreams? Why had he been forced to pick between both of his friends? Why had it been he who had gotten Scorpius' Hand of Glory taken?

He had indeed told Scorpius that he was going to get the Hand back, though how he was not sure. He supposed that he could at least ask for it, explain the situation and mention that it was not intended to be used, but he had the strange suspicion that Professor Blackwood would just do something completely unreasonable, like dock more points from her own house.

But of course, she didn't even have to *know* it was gone. How often was she really going to check that it was there? He could just ask James to steal it. It wouldn't be the first time he'd broken a rule.

But wait. Why James? Why not himself? He could steal it back. It wouldn't be the first time that he'd broken into a professor's office. A dangerous smile curled onto his lips. For some reason he felt like doing something dangerous. Calculated, yes, but dangerous...

"That's the dumbest thing you've ever said" Scorpius said when they had returned to their common room a few hours later. "Steal it back" he whispered. "Why not just tickle a sleeping acromantula while you're at it..."

They were doing their Potions homework, an entire foot long essay on the moonstone and its various properties. They had their books spread out over the table, and they were searching tirelessly for anything that they could use.

Morrison ran his hands through his hair, and Albus noticed that he only had his first sentence written. "Don't be such a prat about it" he said to Scorpius, and he flashed Albus a grin. "Al's willing to be caught, tortured, and executed for you! For your stupid birthday present! You should be thankful!"

"She's not going to torture or execute me" Albus said coolly, skimming through his own book. "She's not even going to catch me. I'll have the Cloak, won't I?"

"Cloak doesn't make you intangible mate. What are you going to do when she opens her door and knocks into you?" Scorpius said, scribbling something down. Morrison leaned over slightly, but Scorpius merely rolled his eyes. "I'll let you copy later..." he told him.

"That's not going to happen" Albus said slyly. "Believe me; I'll know when she's coming..."

They both gave him a curious look. He smiled slightly, and then leaned forward so that no one else in the common room could hear him. "I have the Map" he muttered.

Both of their eyes widened. "The Map!" Morrison bellowed in excitement.

"Keep it down!" Albus shot out. "Yeah, the Map. James gave it to me last year..."

"Way to tell us about it" Scorpius said sarcastically.

"At least I didn't wait two years to tell you" Albus countered.

"He makes a fair point" Morrison said with a shrug, once more leaning over and trying to peek at Scorpius' paper.

"I said I'll let you copy!" Scorpius yelled at him. "But you know what" he said irritably, and he pulled his paper farther away. "Now I'm not going to."

"Oh come one-"

"No, no copying for you. You have to learn to be patient. And it's a shame too, 'cause this is grade O work right here" Scorpius added, scribbling nonsense onto his paper in an attempt to infuriate his friend.

Morrison frowned at him, and then began rifling through his own book. Scorpius turned back to Albus.

"Anyway" he said, "Okay, well the Map changes things a bit. But still, just because you know she's coming doesn't mean she'll be any harder to avoid. And when do you plan on doing it anyway?"

"This week..."

"No, I mean what time of day" Scorpius said, shaking his head. "I barely see her at dinner, so that's out of the question."

"I'll think of something" Albus said, though he had to admit, this did deter him slightly.

"Hey, you" Morrison said hoarsely to a third year boy who was sitting by the fire, doing his own homework. He had a rather dark look to him, what with his dark brown hair hanging over his face, and there was an irritated look to him as well.

"What?" the kid said, looking up.

"What's your name?" Morrison asked him.

"Barnabus" the kid replied.

"Well I'm going to make you an offer Barnabus" Morrison said quietly, trying to look impressive. "Why don't you skim through this book-", he tossed *Advanced Potion Making* over to him,"- Find the term ' moonstone' a couple of times, jot it down-", he slid his nearly blank piece of parchment over as well, " - Put it in, you know, some paragraphs, and I'll give you-", he dug through his pockets, " - A shiny silver sickle, eh?" he finished, waving it around.

Barnabus rolled his eyes and slid the book and parchment back.

"Fine" Morrison said with exasperation. "*Two sickles*, then."

Barnabus merely shook his head and returned to his own work.

"Done thinking?" Scorpius asked Albus, who was snapped out of the distraction.

"No, not yet" he said icily. "But she can't stay in her office all day."

"How do you plan on breaking in? What if she's got the door locked so that *Alohamora* won't work?"

"Look, do you want your damn Hand back or not?"

"Hey, Melonie" Morrison called out across the common room towards Melonie Grue. "How would you like-"

"No" she said blandly, and Albus saw that she was reading a thin paperback book and had not lifted her eyes from it.

"You don't even know what I-"

"No" she repeated.

"Fine, be that way-"

"No" she said once more, turning a page but cracking a smile.

Morrison turned back to the two of them looking sulky. "Fourth year sucks" he said.

Despite Scorpius' tiresome warnings against it, and Morrison's refusal to even comment on it, Albus entered his first class the next day with his bag considerably heavier and his pocket a bit more weighed down. This was, of course, due to his Invisibility Cloak being tucked away with his books and the Marauder's Map being stowed safely in his pocket. He knew that his brother had once owned the Map and his father the Cloak- but how often had they been used together? How often were they risked? If one thing went wrong he could lose both...

He immediately thought about what James would say if his precious Map, his gift from the year before, was taken. Then he imagined losing the Cloak- a family heirloom. But then he smiled at the thought of his Potions Professor pulling at her long blonde hair ferociously, looking very aggravated as she rifled through her desk drawers rapidly, and looking for the Hand of Glory that she'd taken from some of her most hated students.

"Al, are you listening?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah..."

Professor Longbottom gave him a warning glance before returning to the vile green, thorny plant that sat in front of him. "Now the Croatian Crocodile Cactus actually has nothing to with crocodiles" he said. "Can anyone tell me why then, it's named as such?"

Rose's hand shot up at once. "For its color" she said before even being called on. "And because its jaws are similar in the sense that they're very powerful when closing, but relatively weak when opening."

"Perfect" Professor Longbottom raved. "Take ten points to Gryffindor, I couldn't have said it better myself. Now, Croatian Crocodile Cacti have more weapons than their jaws however. As you can see, the thorns are actually treated like hinges, sprouting outwards when in danger so as to catch unsuspected enemies trying to eat it. Once their 'predator' has a mouth full of sharp objects, the predator becomes the prey..."

"You okay?" whispered a soft voice from his left. Albus turned and saw that it was Mirra. She was separating him from Rose, Eckley, and Hornsbrook, but she had moved intentionally closer so as to speak to him. "You seem nervous."

"No" he whispered back. "Not nervous at all. Nothing to be nervous about" he lied. He had told no one apart from his Slytherin pals his plans. He had the feeling that Mirra in particular would not approve, and if Rose caught word of it, she'd probably rat him out.

"Really?" Scorpius whispered to him, looking grim. "I don't know, I'd be pretty nervous if I were you. I mean, it takes a lot of guts to-"

Albus stepped on his foot, hard. Scorpius pursed his lips from the pain.

"What's he talking about?" Mirra whispered, sounding a bit too concerned for Albus' liking. Or then again, maybe he liked it quite a bit.

"Nothing, he's just being a prat-"

"I don't want to have to take points" Professor Longbottom said suddenly, his voice slightly raised and aimed directly at Albus.

"Yes Professor" Albus said, and all three of them fell silent.

"Now" Professor Longbottom started, and he turned back to the snarling cactus. "Today we'll be pruning these fantastic creatures. If they grow too many thorns they can harm themselves, and they are not yet old enough to prune themselves. Typically a parent would do it. Dragon hide gloves, the thorns are extremely sharp and will penetrate flesh easily. Groups of three or four now, whichever is preferable."

Albus cast a side glance at Mirra, and noticed that Eckley did as well. To his immense relief however, Mirra moved her bag over towards Albus, a small indication as to which side she would be partnered with. Albus grinned widely and saw Eckley throw him a look of utter loathing.

"You don't want to partner with us, Mirra?" Rose asked.

Mirra shrugged. "Well I figured Morrison doesn't really do work, so Al and Scorpius need a third person. No offense by the way" she added quickly towards Morrison, who once again gave his hand a slight wave in recognition.

"None taken" he said lazily, eyeing the ferocious looking Crocodile Cactus in front of them uneasily.

Albus had a good time pruning the cactus, it even helped take his mind off how much trouble he could get himself into later. Mirra did most of the work while Albus tried to make simple conversation with her. Morrison was trying to sleep standing up, with his eyes open. He seemed to be having a hard time of it. Scorpius was most interesting of all however. He kept leaning over in Albus' direction. It didn't take Albus long to see why.

"So anyway" Rose said from one work station away, not exactly loud, but hardly quiet. "Lance mentioned that he overheard Professor Handit say that the first Hogsmeade trip was scheduled for November, they're still trying to get extra security, what with all these riots. And then he asked me if I'd like to go with him and some of his friends-"

Eckley and Hornsbrook were nodding their heads and grunting to show that they were listening, a stark contrast to Scorpius, who was craning his neck and seemed to be close to ripping his ears open so as to hear better.

"Mirra" Scorpius said quickly, cutting Albus off mid-sentence. He had been about to ask her what her favorite color was.

"Yes?" she said, leaning over slightly, as Albus was in between.

"Can you switch spots with me?" he asked tensely.

She gave him a quizzical look.



"It's just- it's Morrison" he said. "He smells. *Really* bad. I've been putting up with it all morning-"

Morrison snapped out of his sleepy stupor and blinked his eyes a few times. "Huh?" he said.

Mirra giggled and switched places with Scorpius so that she was now nestled between Albus and Morrison. Scorpius was now situated closest to Rose's work station. Perfect for eavesdropping. And eavesdrop he did. For the rest of the class Albus saw him do nothing but sit still, his ears perked up like a dog, his face a bright red from how hard he was concentrating.

By the time that the bell rang and they were all dismissed Scorpius was scratching at his chin thoughtfully, looking surly. Albus waved goodbye to Mirra as they turned their different ways when entering the Great Hall, and the second that it was just the three of them again he turned his attention to him.

"So what did you find out?" he asked, and Morrison looked over expectantly.

"She kind of has a date with Lance" Scorpius said solemnly. "But not really. It's weird. He invited her to hang out with his friends in Hogsmeade, but then she invited him to hang with her mates. I couldn't hear the next bit because that arse Eckley was laughing, but it seems like they're all going together."

Albus frowned. "Sorry mate. I guess you can just hope they don't connect..."

Scorpius scoffed at him. "Yeah right. I've got a plan."

"Murder?" Morrison asked.

"No. Worse. Sabotage."

Albus rolled his eyes. "What are you on about?"

"I've got it all figured out" Scorpius said as they sat down at the Slytherin table for lunch. "Al, you're going to ask Mirra to go to Hogsmeade with you."

"Oh I am?" Albus said incredulously.

"Yes, you are. Obviously, Mirra will say she's hanging out with Rose. You will be invited, and thus, I will be invited."

"And me" Morrison said, pulling a plate of steak and kidney pie towards him.

"Shut up Morrison" Scorpius said blandly, before turning back to the task at hand. "It will be us, the Gryffindors, and Lance's group. At some point, when it's just me and Lance, I'll tell him exactly why Rose isn't worth his time. Once she's crushed from his rejection, I'll-"

"Okay, I don't need to hear any more of this" Albus said, taking a swig of pumpkin juice. "I'm not going to participate in some elaborate scheme to hurt Rose. I'll help you get her-"

"Oh yes you will help with my elaborate scheme!" Scorpius practically shouted. "You owe me this! You lost me my Hand!"

"I'm going to get it back-"

They bickered like this for the duration of lunch, with Morrison surprisingly staying quiet and eating. The afternoon classes breezed by quicker than Albus could have hoped, though he supposed that the amount of attention he was giving his plans for later assisted in that.

Why *did* he want to steal the Hand of Glory back? Scorpius was even telling him not to. What were the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak- arguably his two most valuable possessions- doing stowed away, ready to be used at will? Ready to be risked?

Somewhere deep in his gut, he knew the answer. It was because he wanted to get back at Blackwood for being such a terrible person. He wanted the satisfaction. It was the type of thing that James would do. Breaking rules for the sake of knowing you could get away with it. He cringed at the thought.

The Marauder's Map wasn't pulled out until dinner, at which point one quick glance told him that Professor Blackwood was in the Potions Room, where her office evidently was as well. He spared it looks every couple of bites, hesitant to reveal it to his housemates, each time groaning when he saw that she was sitting completely still.

"Why don't you give it a rest mate?" Morrison asked, shoving a forkful of roasted turkey into his mouth. "It doesn't have to be today."

"But I want it to be today" Albus said through gritted teeth, quickly eyeing Scorpius, who was eating quietly, apparently not trying to listen.

All throughout dinner she stayed in her office, and soon enough it was well passed curfew. Albus stayed in the common room, sitting in a corner while students gradually made their way up to bed. He was pretending to read his History of Magic book now so as not to look suspicious, though he was still checking the map every ten minutes or so, despite knowing that it was no good.

"You coming?" Morrison asked him as he started the walk up the stairs to their dormitory. Scorpius was right behind him.

Albus heaved a sigh and looked at the clock in the wall. It was past ten thirty. "I'll be up in a bit" he said morosely, and he watched his two friends walk up the stairs. Truthfully, he didn't know why he didn't join them. Perhaps it was because he had hyped himself up all day, been thinking

of the risk; perhaps the adrenaline was keeping him awake. He watched the clock. Quarter to eleven. Then eleven on the dot. Eleven thirty...

The common room now completely cleared, he pulled the Map out from his pocket once more. One more look. Just to see if she had moved an inch.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good" he muttered, tapping the wrinkly piece of parchment and watching with little interest as lines magically began appearing. He let his eyes drift to not far from where he was, just through the labyrinth of the dungeons and into Blackwood's office, where she surely was...

It was empty. Blinking his eyes to make sure what he was seeing was correct; he saw no trace of her in her office. Where was she at, just a half of an hour shy of midnight? He began searching frantically, his eyes a blur as he examined every corner of the Map. She wasn't there.

Utterly confused, he thought about where she could have gone. The Room of Requirement, perhaps? But no, that room was quite a secret, there's no way that she found it after being here for such a short time. Had she entered the Forest, like Ares and Darvy?

But what did it matter? She was gone, wasn't she? Now was his chance, his opportunity. And suddenly he felt his stomach grow unsettled. Now that he was moments away from his task, the danger of his mission seemed clearer than ever. This was not intelligent. This was not calculated. This was him leaving at midnight, surely to be caught by a prefect, surely to lose the Map and the Cloak, surely to get into loads of trouble. This was him running into that riot. This was not what a Slytherin did.

But even as he said it to himself, he remembered Eckley calling him a coward, way back in his first year. He instinctively glanced around the room, finding what he wanted at once. A tapestry on the wall of a hook nosed man, with oily black hair hanging over his face, an unpleasant sneer curled onto his lips. The bravest man that his father had ever known...

In one quick sweeping motion he opened his bag and removed the Invisibility Cloak. Still keeping an eye on the Map and Blackwood's empty office he left the common room and began walking down the hall quickly. All of the prefects and the Head Boy and Girl seemed to be neglecting the lower portions of the castle, the closest person patrolling was on the fourth floor. He wouldn't have to deal with them anyway due to his Cloak, but it was still a comforting thought.

He reached the Potions Classroom much quicker than he thought that he would- he had barely even felt his feet moving. He took out his wand and aimed it at the door-still with one eye cautiously focused on the Map- and tapped it.

"*Alohamora*" he said quietly, and with a great deal of satisfaction, he heard the lock click successfully for the second time in two years.

"The security in this castle is a joke" he muttered to himself, shaking his head as he opened the door. Though then again, now that he really thought about it, what was he expecting? How many teachers really expected their students to try and steal from their offices in the middle of the night?

He quickly closed the door behind him and lit his wand for some light. Where should he look first? He would start with the classroom and then progress to the back office if he was unable to find it. He did not know how much time he had, but so long as he had a heads up, he thought that he could use it correctly.

He went behind the desk, which had nothing on it save for a few sheets of paper, and laid the Map out across it. He began opening drawers wildly now, and he had not realized just exactly how many there were. Long thin ones, small ones near the bottom, even some that blended in seamlessly with the wood. He opened them all up, his eyes searching for a scabby hand.

Nothing there. He supposed that he could rifle through them, so long as he tried to at least put everything back in order. He started with the first, longest drawer. There was crumpled up pieces of paper in it, a few quills, some old photographs...

He found it. It looked in bad shape, like it had just been crammed in there and never touched again, but it was still there. He quickly picked the decrepit hand up and stashed it inside his robes, inadvertently knocking a few of the photographs out of the drawer. He hastily picked them up and began putting them back inside the drawer, though the one on the top had a flash of red in it, illuminated by the light of his wand, which caught his attention. He threw the others back into the drawer but examined this one, his mouth wide open at what he saw.

It was old and dusty, but it was moving- it was definitely a wizard's photograph. In the middle stood Warren Waddlesworth, his magnificent red hair flowing over his shoulders, a grin on his face. He looked much younger, and despite the state of the photograph he still seemed to sparkle. His was wearing a truly spectacular looking white tuxedo, with a red tie that matched his hair. He was the most prominent person in the picture, though there were three others. To his left was The Hammer, looking exactly the same, with his bald head and vicious sneer on his face, standing slightly behind and looking like a bodyguard. On Waddlesworth's right was Professor Blackwood.

Though she did not look quite like how she did now. She looked...happier. There was a smile on her face and her long blonde hair seemed, though as straight as ever, more elegant and neat. More taken care of. It was amazing what a smile could do for someone's overall appearance, and Albus was actually slightly taken aback by her beauty.

The fourth person Albus could see nothing of. Standing slightly behind Blackwood, with their dark cloak up and pulled over their face, the hooded figure was the only one in the picture not moving. Not even their face was visible, but there was something about the way they were

standing- something about the slouched shoulders, the head hung low- that told Albus whoever it was, they were not proud of being in the picture.

But more mysterious than this shrouded figure was the photograph itself. What in the world was Professor Blackwood doing standing next to two members of Wands and Redemption, one of whom was their leader?

*"Move it, kid!"*

Albus nearly dropped the photograph in surprise. He knew it. He *knew* he had seen Professor Blackwood before. She had been the lady in the riot. She had been trying to help Waddlesworth. She too was a member of WAR. But why was she teaching at Hogwarts then? And did no one know what she was?

He glanced at the Map and felt his heart sink. Professor Blackwood was back on it, and she was moving very first down the stairs leading to the dungeons. Where had she come from?

He quickly placed the old photograph back on top and closed the drawer, then proceeded to close all of the others as well. He pulled the Map back under the Cloak and made sure that every inch of him was covered.

"*Nox*" he murmured, and the light on his wand went out. He strode towards the door, glancing back to make sure that everything look identical to how it had-

The door opened. With lightning fast reflexes he pressed himself up against the wall, where the swinging door came just inches from his face. Trying his hardest not to so much as breathe, he shimmied down the wall and watched as Professor Blackwood entered her classroom, looking flustered but otherwise normal. She heaved a sigh and walked right passed her desk towards the door that led to her office. She tried to turn the doorknob, then stopped, removed her wand, and tapped it so that the lock clicked. She was right about to open the door when she suddenly came to a halt. Turning around quickly, she stared at the open door that Albus was about to exit through.

Albus could hear his breathing. He knew at once what she was thinking. Why had only one of her doors been locked? Who had unlocked the first? She continued to stare at the open door, her cold eyes sweeping the classroom, twice looking right at him. He had to make a break for it now.

As quickly as he could without making noise he pushed off from the wall and walked through the door briskly, careful not to bump into it or touch it at all. He looked over his invisible shoulder once he had left and saw that the door was still wide open, he broke into a run now, not caring about noise, only of getting back to the common room...

He was out of breath by the time he reached the blank stone wall. He removed the Marauder's Map once more and saw that Professor Blackwood was in her office. She had not given chase. She had no idea he had been in there. He was successful.

"Ashwinder" he said to the blank wall, and within seconds he was safely back inside of his common room, the fire extinguished and the eerie green glow his only source of light. He removed the Invisibility Cloak and folded it up neatly, then wiped the Map clean before heading to his dormitory

"Scorpius" he muttered to his sleeping friend after he had put the Cloak and Map away. "Scorpius" he repeated, shaking him slightly.

"What?" his friend said sleepily, opening his eyes slightly. "Whatareyoudoinup?"

Albus threw the Hand of Glory onto his bed. "Put that away" he said. "And don't bring it out again all year."

Scorpius picked up the Hand of Glory and gave it a sleepy grin, then tossed it under his bed and collapsed back down onto his pillow.

Albus crawled into his own four poster bed, relieved yet still excited. He had done it...

He knew that it was late, knew that he should get some sleep, but the picture of Blackwood was still on his mind. That picture was quite old, yes, but they definitely knew each other. She was definitely a member of WAR. She may even have been relatively high up if she was taking pictures with their leader and his bodyguard.

And yet, what was her purpose at Hogwarts? Who had let her teach here? He reminded himself of how terrible and nasty she was, and then he remembered Waddlesworth, who's oily, persuasive voice was the complete opposite of her own harsh cold one. And then he realized that he had no qualms with Waddlesworth. He had even agreed with him on something, hadn't he? Hadn't there been a moment when he had envied the people signing up for WAR? But if Blackwood was a member...did that mean they he envied her? That they agreed on some things?

*We understand that the right thing may sometimes be the hard thing. That sometimes we must torture and do even worse...that sometimes to defeat the enemy; we must fight like the enemy!*

Albus rolled over at these words, which somehow stuck with him despite being said weeks ago. *And do even worse.* Like kill?

"Scorpius?" he muttered through the darkness, rolling over once more to face his friends' bed.

"Huh?" Scorpius responded sleepily.

"Do you think...do you think its okay to kill someone? If they want to kill you?"

Scorpius rolled over now so that they were both facing each other. He still had eyes closed, but there was a frown on his face.

"Eckley's not trying to kill you mate" he muttered. "Just go to sleep..."

Albus smirked and rolled back over, though as he stared aimlessly into space he had the feeling that he was not going to be sleeping tonight. All for the better, he supposed. He couldn't even imagine what his dreams would be like.

## Chapter 9: Crow Post

To Albus' very great surprise, his recent discovery about Professor Blackwood wasn't nearly as surprising to Morrison and Scorpius as it was himself.

"Well it all makes sense" Scorpius said over breakfast the next morning, moments after Albus had told them. "She hates Slytherins right? All Slytherins are Death Eaters."

"How can you say that?" Morrison sneered at him. "Look at us!"

"I'm being sarcastic" Scorpius said dryly, shaking his head and buttering his roll. "There are a lot of popular misconceptions about Slytherin House, primarily because of a few specific people and their time periods. And it's only made worse by the Sorting Hat. Singing about us being power hungry vicious tyrants..."

"Not really" Albus said. "I mean, *we are* supposed to be a bit cunning. And ambitious."

"Oh yeah" Scorpius said, rolling his eyes. "Real cunning and ambitious" he added, jerking his head towards Morrison, who was stacking his waffles up so that they looked like a house.

"Look!" he shouted with glee. "And I cut up my sausages so that they look like little people..."

Scorpius shook his head before returning back to the conversation. "Well anyway, that doesn't change the fact that she hates me in particular. I suppose it could just be the Malfoy name..."

"Hold on, back it up" Albus said, ignoring his own plate of food. "So neither of you guys are that surprised by this?"

Morrison shrugged. "I knew she was a nutcase. Only makes sense that she'd walk around with other nutcases."

"Yeah" Scorpius agreed. "Renegades are really picking up steam right now. I know you don't read the paper, but it's all in there. What I'm really surprised at is how high up she is. I mean really, taking photos with Waddlesworth is pretty big. That high up is like a full time job I reckon..."

"Exactly" Albus said curtly. "So what's she doing working here?"

Nor Morrison or Scorpius seemed to have an answer for this. Morrison merely stared down at his waffle house, deep in thought, while Scorpius too seemed troubled by the question.

"You should tell someone, then" Scorpius finally said after a moment. "You saw the picture, you have proof."

"Oh yeah, smart plan" Albus said, in a tone not unlike Scorpius' earlier. "Just tell everyone I used the Cloak and the Map to break into a teacher's office and steal an illegal object back. No, I'll



figure this out myself. When I know she's dangerous and have more proof. That's when I'll tell someone."

Morrison and Scorpius exchanged an all too familiar look after he said this. Albus sighed.

"This again?" he said, exasperated. "What is it this time? I hate that look!"

"It's just...again mate? Really?" Morrison said with a frown.

"What?" Albus said, honestly curious.

"Well mate" Scorpius said. "I don't know how to tell you this. But you've got- don't take this the wrong way- kind of a catching people thing."

"A *catching people thing*?"

"Well like first year" Morrison said quickly. "You knew about the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist for a while. But you didn't tell anyone. You wanted to know when Mirra was going to act all by yourself..."

"Well I didn't want her chucked in Azkaban!" Albus shouted. "And I was eleven."

"And that's all very chivalrous of you" Scorpius said. "But how about second year? When you knew Ares was running off into the Forest? You wanted to catch him in the act, even followed him once. And you went and told Darvy about it..."

"So you're blaming everything on me then?" Albus spat, feeling his cheeks go red.

"No!" Scorpius said quickly, and he looked a bit worried now. "But people see that as a weakness Al! Don't you get it? Why do you think Ares sent Fango Wilde to snatch you from Hogsmeade last year. Because he *knew you'd make it easy*. Knew you'd give chase. He knew that *you* knew that your dad released Wilde, and knew that you'd want to catch him."

Albus sat still after this. "I highly doubt that" he lied. Still, he somewhat conceded defeat after this. "Fine" he said. "I'll just...watch her from afar. See if anything changes."

But nothing did change. Albus spent an hour and a half each week monitoring Professor Blackwood in class, and then daily checks on her via the Marauder's Map, but all that he could gather was that she was a virtually clean- if not truly malicious- Potions Professor. He had the strange feeling however, that despite some initial reluctance; Scorpius was beginning to hope for a breakthrough himself.

"Another zero then, Mr. Malfoy" Professor Blackwood spat with the viciousness in her cold voice nearly tangible. She waved her wand and Scorpius' emerald potion disappeared at once.

It had been three Potions lessons since Albus had stolen the Hand of Glory back and Professor Blackwood did not seem to have noticed. If she *had* noticed however, Albus could only assume that she was taking it out on Scorpius. Once again he had created a reasonably adequate potion- the immensely complex Morbusennin potion, which essentially worked as a slow poison, making the drinker incredibly sick, only to have it vanished near the end of the period.

Professor Blackwood walked directly passed Morrison's bright pink potion (it was supposed to be acid green) and gave an approving nod at Albus', which was not only the proper color, but even had the steam rising from it in characteristic triangle like shapes. The trick, Albus knew, though it wasn't even in his book, was to add peppermint. Decreasing the temperature of the potion gave it more time to simmer, allowing another vital ingredient- the very rare Nundu skin- to spread itself sufficiently.

Professor Blackwood returned to her desk after surveying a couple more potions.

"We are in October" she said coldly and quietly to the silent class. "And few of you are showing progress, let alone regular competence. I will expect a stark improvement by the end of the month; such inadequacy is not to be tolerated. Dismissed."

The students shuffled out of the classroom quietly, as they usually did, without speaking at all. Only after the class was over did they voice their displeasure. As usual, Scorpius waited until they reached the common room to complain. Only this time it was a single sentence.

"You've got to get her fired mate" he said, collapsing into a stone cut arm chair.

The next two weeks did not seem to treat Scorpius well either. Not only did Professor Blackwood destroy his overall grade with her penchant for vanishing his work, but Rose was becoming increasingly louder about how happy she was these days. They grouped up together in Herbology now, and as Care for Magical Creatures was hardly done sitting at desks, Scorpius was spending more time around her than ever. Albus enjoyed this heartily, it meant more time with Mirra ( even if they were occasionally accompanied by her two git friends), but as Rose spoke of almost nothing other than Lance, Albus found Scorpius plastering fake smiles on himself to get through the day. The amount of empathy that he felt was staggering. He recalled the previous year, when he had been forced to sit through Mirra and Eckley.

Albus thought that the only thing keeping him going was Quidditch. Despite the fact that if his parents heard of his virtually nonexistent Potions grade he would not be able to play, Albus had had several practices, and Scorpius had flourished in all of them. All modesty aside, Albus was a good player. But after a few practice sections, he thought Scorpius may have been their star. Time and time again he made the chasers look foolish, and it was because of this that Albus felt more confident than ever at the prospect of playing James at the end of November. Still, Albus knew it was a small comfort for his friend- being good at Quidditch didn't stop you from

overhearing that the girl you liked was excited about the prospect of a "date" with someone that wasn't you.

"So Lance said that he would go to Hogsmeade with his friends, spend a bit with them, and then meet up with us, so that we don't get crowded" Rose said happily in Care for Magical Creatures one Tuesday morning. She and her gang of Gryffindors were with Albus and his friends. They were all feeding kneazles, cat like creatures that Hagrid seemed to enjoy despite their inability to eviscerate his students.

"A bit later in the day, or what?" Mirra asked, suppressing a giggle as the fury feline like creatures licked at her hand to get the juice from the food that Hagrid had given them to use.

"I'm not sure, not *too* late" Rose said, grinning. "He wants to be able to spend a lot of time with us."

Albus saw Eckley and Hornsbrook, who had been relatively quiet compared to usual, heave silent sighs. Albus knew why at once- they were used to being the center of attention, the one's talking or the one's talked about. Albus smiled slightly at this, and then remembered how hard this must be for Scorpius, who looked predictably sad as he pushed tiny nuts into his kneazle's greedy mouth.

"Well we'll have to plan it all out before hand" Mirra said. "I'm sure he knows what he's doing, he's a smart guy."

"A *very* smart guy" Rose said pretentiously, as if she was already dating him and his intelligence somehow made her a better person. "Did I tell you already that he got ten O.W.L's?"

Albus looked up so suddenly and with so much concentration that he accidentally squeezed his hand, concealing the food he was giving to the kneazle and aggravating it. It gave a hiss and scratched at him.

"Ouch! Damn! Wait, what?" he asked Rose, dumbfounded.

"Mhm" she said smugly, mistaking the purpose of his question. "Ten."

Morrison too had looked up from his own kneazle, which looked quite close to exploding. He had been rapidly feeding it in excess without even noticing. Albus took this moment to glance at Scorpius, whose eyes were wide with shock, before hearing Morrison speak.

"You mean like- like- like O.W.L practice tests?" he stammered.

"No, like actual O.W.L's" Rose said.

"How old is Lance?" Albus said, knowing that he sounded demanding but not caring.

"Sixteen" Rose said a little defensively. "Seventeen in March. Why?"

"No reason" Albus said, returning to his kneazle, though he found it hard to suppress the smile formulating on his face. The thought of what Uncle Ron would do to a seventeen year old wizard- a wizard of legal age- who was dating his daughter was nothing short of hilarious, if not slightly gruesome. He found himself wishing, for a single moment, that Rose *would* start dating Lance, just to see how it panned out, but this thought ended quickly with a single look at Scorpius.

He was looking more distraught than ever. Albus knew why. Scorpius did not see the humor in it; he was only more intimidated by it. Lance's age only worsened the situation. Feeling that his friend was seconds from breaking down right then and there, Albus acted fast...

"Hey Mirra" he said, rather suddenly. "You know I've been thinking, last year Hogsmeade kind of got cut short. Would you be up for hanging out again? I promise I won't go chasing after any known felons..."

She gave him a perturbed look, with a hint of a smile thrown in. There was no time to analyze his own fortune however; he had work to do for Scorpius.

"Erm" she started. "Well I was going to spend the day with Rose-"

"Well that's what I mean" Albus said, and he realized that all other conversation had stopped. No one was feeding their kneazles either; all eyes were on the two of them. "Me and these guys could tag along. If Lance isn't bringing his friends then there should be plenty of room..."

Mirra spun around. "If no one else minds" she said.

There were murmurs of "no" and "not at all" from her three Gryffindor friends, though Eckley was looking nothing short of murderous.

"Cool" he said, giving Scorpius a slight, subtle smirk, before returning to his kneazle. "So that's settled then..."

Class ended shortly after this, and almost the second that they entered the castle the subject of Albus' boldness was brought up.

"Whoop!" Morrison yelled, slapping his hand in slow motion. "Check out fearsome Al! Steal my friend's Hand of Glory? I'll steal it back. Try and steal my friend's girl? I'll help him sabotage you. Even if she is my cousin..."

"Will you keep it down!" both Albus and Scorpius said simultaneously. Scorpius then turned to Al.

"Thanks mate" he said, and he truly did sound grateful. "Really."

"No problem" he said. "It's all up to you now though. By the way, did you see Eckley's face when I asked Mirra if she wanted to hang out in Hogsmeade! Priceless..."

They continued walking towards the Great Hall for lunch, Albus feeling reasonably pleased with himself. It was only when they were seconds from sitting down to eat that Albus realized something. So excited at having spoken to Mirra about Hogsmeade, he had left his schoolbag down at Hagrids.

"Just get it later..." Morrison said as Albus heaved a sigh and rose from the table.

"No, if I wait until after lunch I'll be late for Bellinger, and she hates that. I'll get it now."

He walked out of the Hall as more and more students flooded in from their classes. He navigated his way through the corridor leading to the grounds, which were filled with people, most of who he noticed were Gryffindors, and was quite close to the door at the end when he fell to the ground. He had accidentally bumped into someone rather bigger than himself, and had been the only one to fall.

"Sorry about that" he said casually, hoisting himself up and getting a good look at who he'd bumped into it. It was Eckley. And he was still looking vindictive.

"Watch where you're going" he said hoarsely, his straw colored hair plastered down over his forehead, giving his visage a rather unpleasant and intimidating look. Albus however, was not frightened.

"No, *you* watch where you're going" he said, walking up to him so that they were face to face-sort of. Eckley still had two or three inches on him. Albus knew what the meaning of this was- Eckley was still infuriated from Care for Magical Creatures. This delighted Albus. He saw that Eckley's fists were clenched as well.

*Do it*, an eerie voice in his head said. *Take the first swing. Give me a reason.*

What in the world was he thinking? He did not want Eckley to hit him! He wouldn't stand a chance in a fist fight and probably not in a wizard's duel either. He wished Morrison or Scorpius were here...

*No I don't. I don't need them. Do it. Pin me down, like that man from the riot. Only this time no one will interrupt. This time I'll be unleashed...*

"You bumped into him on purpose!" a small, rather squeaky voice said.

Albus spun around, glad for the distraction. The eerie tone in his head was gone, replaced by the relief that someone had interfered before he was beaten into an embarrassing pulp. Looking down, he saw Hugo standing off to the side, a determined look on his face.

"What?" Eckley said, his expression softening from surprise. He looked thoroughly nonplussed as he stared back at Hugo.

"I watched you! You moved into him!" Hugo said, his lip quivering.

Albus merely stared at his younger cousin, impressed, if not taken aback himself, by the interference. He looked back at Eckley and saw that he was wearing an odd expression. Albus thought he knew why. What was he supposed to do to a twelve year old? Let alone, Rose's younger brother. He looked truly at a loss for words.

There was an awkward stalemate as the three of them stood there while crowds of people walked passed them obliviously. Nothing happened until a fourth person joined the fray.

"What's going on here?" someone said, and Albus could have sworn it was James before seeing who it was.

"Why all the standing around?" Lance said. His backpack was slung over one shoulder in a cool way that Albus could never hope to mimic, his eyes glinting with curiosity as he surveyed the situation. Albus could have sworn that he saw Eckley roll his eyes.

"Charlie bumped into Al on purpose and knocked him over" Hugo said.

Lance looked over at Eckley. "Not cool man. We don't need that kind of crap here. Keep moving everyone, we need to clear the hall..."

Albus did as he was told, despite knowing full well that Lance was not a Prefect and thus had no control over him. He walked away from the uncomfortable stand off a little uncertainly, casting a glance back at Hugo, who had resumed walking to lunch next to Lance. *Lance*. That had been awfully nice of him, to intrude like that and tell Eckley off. And here Albus was planning against him...

As October rolled by the only topic that people managed to discuss seemed to be the upcoming first trip to Hogsmeade, which was set for the fifth of November. There had been some initial rage over this by the majority of the students, as there was typically a Hogsmeade trip on Halloween day, though Headmistress McGonagall had made it quite clear that the safety of the students was the top priority.

"I understand that there has been a considerable amount of negativity towards the decision to have the first Hogsmeade trip of the year take place a few days later than usual. But the reason for this lies in this very Hall. It is done for the safety of all of you" she announced sternly one morning in the middle of October. "The Ministry of Magic wishes to make sure that there is enough security-"

Albus yawned and began tuning her out. It was still early in the morning after all, and he had had another troubled night's sleep. He really didn't care about when they went to Hogsmeade so

much as he did what happened when they were there. He looked over at Scorpius as he thought this, who was buttering his toast.

"What do we got today?" Morrison asked through a mouthful of cereal once their Headmistress was finished.

"You seriously don't know what we have on which days by now?" Scorpius said.

"No I do. I'm just not sure what today is..."

"It's Wednesday" Albus told him as the sound of fluttering filled his ears. The morning post was arriving in a flurry of owls. "Meaning we've got Muggle Studies first. Well you've got Divination" he added, and Morrison heaved a sigh.

Albus picked at his bacon as the students began opening up their mail from home. He could see Scorpius unrolling his edition of the *Morning Prophet*, but something else caught his eye. A table away, a Ravenclaw student was staring daggers at him. He had the newspaper propped up against his glass of orange juice.

Albus looked over to Scorpius, who looked tense and was right about to stow the *Prophet* away in his bag.

"Let me see that-" Albus started, making a grab for it.

"No-"

But Albus was quicker. He just barely pulled it away from him and laid it out on the table, glancing down at the headline while he did so. He gave a tremendous frown. Not again. Not this year, too.

### **Harry Potter- The Boy Who Hid?**

*Several weeks ago Ministry of Magic representatives revealed that terroristic threats had been issued towards the Ministry by the "Dark Alliance", the organization headed by the still missing Reginald Ares. Though the content of these threats still remains unknown, recent evidence is indicating that more threats have been made. Threats that demand Harry Potter turn himself over in exchange for several innocent lives*

*"The exact wording of the threats that we've received has been a subject of much misinterpretation" says Janine Fischer, Head of the Auror Department who won the position in a landslide victory last summer. "The exact words sent to us were ' Hand over Potter, or deal with the consequences'. There is no proof- or nothing to suggest- that this is not an empty threat, or that anyone is in danger."*

*But should it matter? Some citizens of the Wizarding world think that it shouldn't. "Empty threat or not" says Octavius Glotten, 38. "This threat indicates that Ares is communicating with the Ministry. If turning himself in to this 'Dark Alliance' will bring us closer to stopping them, then Harry Potter should feel obligated to do so."*

*While the Ministry has admitted to contact with the Alliance, the whereabouts of Ares and the vast majority of its members remains secret. Continued contact with them may help change this. There are two sides to the coin however. Warren Waddlesworth, spokesperson for the Renegade organization Wands and Redemption, had spoken out in support of Potter, yet against the Ministry.*

*"Harry Potter left the Ministry of Magic months ago. He is now no more a member of the Ministry of Magic than I am. To assume that he should be contractually obligated to put himself in danger when his job no longer calls for it is a blatant attempt by the Ministry of Magic to continue to put blame on him, despite all but terminating him months ago. It is a sad day indeed when a national hero is forced to shoulder responsibility for the government that turned their back on him."*

*There has been no official comment made by Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter, but as he's clearly not turned himself over, it can only be assumed that he has chosen not to cooperate, despite whatever benefits it might have.*

*"He's scared" says Phillip Stoltz, 52, another citizen of the Wizarding World who lived through both wars against Voldemort, and is in no hurry to live through a third. "He can save lives and help bring us closer to ending this war before it begins, but he refuses the danger in it. He's grown cowardly in his old age-*

Albus slammed the paper shut furiously. His father a coward, as if. Disagree with many of his decisions though he may, he knew that this was not true. That none of it was true.

"That's the *Prophet* for you" he sneered to no one in particular as Morrison picked up the paper and began reading it. "Getting everything wrong. The Dark Alliance isn't even Ares at all, that's just what Darvy calls them..."

Morrison looked up from the paper and Scorpius looked over at him as well.

"How do you know that?" Morrison asked.

"I just do" Albus said. He didn't feel like explaining it, he was much too outraged at what he had read. "I really can't believe any of this. What kind of threat demands someone turn themselves over anyway?"

"It's meant to discredit him" Scorpius said solemnly. "Say that if someone doesn't hand himself over, people will die. If he doesn't, and people die, then he takes all the blame. I do think it's an



empty threat though. There's no way that Ares-or Darvy if what you say is right- is in a position to attack like that already. Not with Renegades roaming the streets anyway..."

"And that's another thing!" Albus said. "What's Waddlesworth doing supporting my dad?"

"He probably wasn't last year" Scorpius said. "But Waddlesworth is the leader of WAR, even if they only call him a spokesperson here. He's as anti-ministry as it gets. If siding with your dad shows that he doesn't approve of the Ministry, then he'll do it."

Albus heaved a sigh and continued to pick at his bacon. Looking passed his friends he saw a few more Ravenclaws eyeing him, and knew that there was probably a few Hufflepuffs doing it from a table away as well.

"Look, don't even worry about it" Scorpius said from what sounded like miles away. "No one in this school reads the damn *Prophet* like that, and the ones who do will forget by the end of breakfast..."

Scorpius turned out to be spectacularly, and uncharacteristically, wrong however. He received numerous glares from students whose names he did not know as he walked to Muggle Studies with Scorpius, and blushed furiously when one older Ravenclaw girl shook her head at him as he went by.

He should have known that this would happen eventually. What happened in the outside world didn't stay a secret for long. He recalled the mean looks that he got in Diagon Alley, right before the riot. He had expected them at Hogwarts, but had been pleasantly surprised when he received none. Here they were however. One article and here they were.

He wondered for a single second if the rest of his family was going through the same thing. He would be unable to ask them, of course, as he saw them so scarcely, but he didn't think so. The Weasley family was kind of a separate family, associated with Potters but not directly a part of them. And he couldn't imagine any hostility towards Lily. Not only was she as feisty as Rose now, but you'd have to be incredibly stupid to do anything negative towards her-not when James was in striking distance. But Albus was the lone Slytherin...far from James' protection but still close enough to be disliked.

He slammed his books down furiously when they reached Muggle Studies, and then did his best to pay attention in what was one of his most boring classes.

"I have your papers on Muggle law enforcement" said Professor Verage, their kind, elderly grandmother like teacher as they settle themselves in. "Mr. Malfoy, if you'd like to return them..."

Albus stayed silent for the entire class, not even caring when Scorpius handed him back his paper, with which he had surprisingly managed an E. He spent the duration of the class period

staring out the window, engrossed in his own thoughts as Professor Verage droned on about the cooperation between Muggle leaders and Wizarding leaders.

"Even our very own Minister of Magic has a special connection with the Muggle Prime Minister. Though they rarely speak, they are formally introduced to each other each time one of them changes, to establish both the correlation between their respective worlds and what tasks apply to which. The Minister of Magic, for instance, will always alert the Muggle Prime Minister when a magical problem arises, and will always tell him which precautions his people should have..."

Something caught Albus' eye. A dark shape had moved passed the window, then moved itself back. It appeared to be a bird of some sort, and it was flapping its wings excessively. It seemed like it was in a hurry of some sorts. How very strange that a regular bird be hovering around the castle. Was it looking through the window? Was that a letter in its mouth?

Albus narrowed his eyes to get a better view of the bird, which he now saw was not a dark shape due to any trick of the light. It was certainly a very black bird, with a white envelope in its mouth. And it was not just staring though the window. It was looking right at him.

"Scorpius" Albus muttered, turning to his drowsy looking friend and giving him a small kick under the table.

"Hmm?" Scorpius replied, turning towards him. Albus turned back to the window and pointed at it- only now there was nothing there.

"Yeah. That's a window Al" Scorpius said sarcastically, forgetting to lower his voice.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Professor Verage said loudly, interrupting her own speech. She slid down her glasses slightly and eyed him.

"Sorry Professor" replied Scorpius. He cast an agitated look Albus' way as Professor Verage continued to speak. Albus ignored it and turned back to the window, which was still empty. He had not imagined it. There had definitely been a bird there...

And it was definitely there again after lunch. During Defence Against the Dark Arts Albus once more glanced out the window- a window relatively close to the ground as it was on the first floor- and saw the bird hovering by the window, an envelope in its mouth.

"There it is again!" He hissed, pointing towards the window while Professor Handit explained the stinging hex. Morrison and Scorpius both looked, but even as they did so Albus knew it was hopeless. The second that he'd pointed the bird had flown away.

"You know Al, hallucinations are a common side effect of sleep deprivation" Scorpius said as they went to dinner an hour later. "You still having bad dreams?"

"It's not a halluc- yes I am- but that's not it! It's a real bird! It's been following me around all day!"

Morrison took an enormous chunk off of his corn on the cob. "If Al's seeing a bird then he's seeing a bird. I believe him. Maybe it's an omen though" he said, chewing and swallowing.

"What like a ghost?" asked Albus, eyeing the Bloody Baron, the rarely seen Slytherin ghost who had just floated by.

"Kind of" Morrison said, grinning at the idea of knowing something important. "I remember hearing about it in Divination last year. There's these omens that kind of follow you- big black dogs for me apparently-"

"It's not a dog" Albus said. "It's a black bird. It's-" he was cut off however, when he saw someone, another older, attractive Ravenclaw girl, eyeing him with contempt from a table away. Suddenly he lost his train of thought.

"People still staring at you?" Scorpius asked as he meticulously cut up his lamb chops.

"Yeah" Albus said, and he noticed that his tone was a defeated one. It was as though the sight had taken all urge to argue out of him. "What happened to people forgetting about it?" he asked his friend.

"They will" Scorpius said. "Give it a day. You remember what Hagrid what said last year. People are fickle."

"Yeah, and look on the bright side" Morrison said. "You still have plenty going for you. Got a Hogsmeade trip coming up, at least."

Albus grunted grumpily, but was distracted-once more- by the bird. Only this time it wasn't hovering in a window or only visible to him, this time it had swooped down across the four tables much like how an owl would when delivering the morning post. All four tables were looking up at it with curiosity, pointing at it and muttering. Albus spared a glance over at the high table and saw Professor McGonagall eyeing it with interest as well, but what really shocked Albus was the person next to her. Professor Blackwood was eyeing the bird with a look that seemed uncannily like-could it be- fear?

The black bird circled high above the Slytherin table while all of the students continued to mutter and point at it. The bird slowly descended while people wondered who it was going to- but Albus of course already knew.

"It's a vulture!" a first year Slytherin girl said stupidly. Morrison scoffed at her.

"It's a raven" he said.

Scorpius merely shook his head. "It's a crow" he said with certainty. "Ravens are bigger."

Whatever it was- a crow according to Scorpius- it flew down low enough so that Albus could touch it, though he didn't. It dropped the envelope right on his plate, made an eerie, annoying sound, and flew off. The rest of the Hall watched it depart with interest.

"Who sends a crow to deliver a letter?" Melonie Grue asked.

"Couldn't tell you" Morrison answered her. "I want to know why it didn't come during breakfast..."

"Open it up!" barked the third year boy Barnabus Curder.

Albus picked it up but didn't open it. He was burning with curiosity, and a curiosity that only intensified when he saw his name scrawled on the envelope in unusually untidy-but still somehow quite legible- handwriting.

"Can he read his letter!" Morrison bellowed down the table. "Damn!"

Though only fourth year, Morrison's rather large size got most people to return to their meals. The only students bigger than him- the much older one's- were also too far away to be a bother as well. The other three tables had gone back to eating like nothing had happened, apparently uninterested now that they realized the letter was meant for a Slytherin. Trying to take advantage of his privacy while he still had the chance, Albus hastily tore the letter open and unrolled the piece of parchment within it.

He did not know who he expected it to be from- but he certainly expected it to be longer. There was less than a paragraph written in the unusual writing.

*Albus-*

*DO NOT go to the first Hogsmeade trip of the year. You are in danger if you do.*

*- A friend*

Albus stared at the letter blankly, reading it several times over to try and uncover any hidden message that it contained. After several moments, he realized that there was nothing more to it.

"Who's it from?" Morrison asked him.

"A- a friend" Albus said uncertainly.

He made to hand the letter over, but was forced to drop it on to the table as he did so. It had begun to catch fire. Albus watched as it shriveled up and disintegrated, finally resulting in a pile of ashes sitting next to his plate. Albus exchanged a glance with both Morrison and Scorpius before returning to staring at the pile, now not only grumpy, but incredibly confused as well.

## Chapter 10: Warren Waddlesworth

As the Hogsmeade trip drew closer Albus found the anonymous note hanging over his head with increasingly more interest. He had by no means disregarded the note- but he had not given it much thought either. Indeed, most opinions on the matter were discussed by his friends.

"Come on mate, it was *clearly* Eckley" Morrison said as he pressed his eye up against his telescope. It was Tuesday night, meaning that they had Astronomy- another class that tended to drag, even if it wasn't very long. "Seems like the thing he would do. He wants Mirra all to himself, so he sends you a phony letter telling you that you're in danger. Yeah, in danger of snatching his ex girlfriend away..."

"I don't know" Albus said, focusing intently on the red planet in his view and marking it on his chart. "Really? Why use a strange black bird though? And why send it so late in the day?"

Morrison heaved a sigh. "You've never tried intimidating someone before, have you Al? It's done for dramatic effect. No one listens to owls. It's all about ravens now..."

"Crows" Scorpius corrected him icily, staring down at his near completed chart and looking deep in thought. "I'm leaning more towards Lance, actually. He's on to us, and he knows you're the link. Seems like the kind of conniving thing he would do."

Albus narrowed his eyes on him. "Not everything that kid does is bad. He's actually kind of nice."

Scorpius muttered something that sounded uncannily like "Traitor", but Albus ignored it. He was instead focused on voicing his own opinion, and he had a feeling that his friends would disagree with it.

"I think it was Blackwood" he said suddenly, though calm enough to make it seem like he was just throwing it out.

Morrison rolled his eyes and moved his telescope over. "Well she's definitely a bitter old hag" he said, before looking over his shoulder wildly to make sure that she couldn't hear him, despite her being seven floors away. "But I don't know, why wouldn't she just tell you that you can't go then? And why wouldn't she want you to go in the first place?"

"I don't know" Albus shrugged. "Any number of reasons."

Scorpius shook his head. "I hate her too mate, but you're reading in to this thing too much. I knew this was going to happen after you told us about that photograph."

"This isn't just some whim or random guess" Albus defended himself. "She looked right at me when I got that letter, and she looked scared too, like she was hoping I would believe it. And then it caught fire? That's the mark of a dark wizard."

Scorpius laughed as he filled in more positions on his chart. "A dark wizard? You can't be serious! She's part of WAR!"

"Well they're a pretty shoddy bunch" Albus said. "And what are you doing defending her anyway?"

"I'm not" Scorpius said plainly. "I just don't want you stuck on this. There are more important things for us to worry about..."

Albus was not entirely sure what Scorpius meant, but he had the feeling it was one of two things. For starters, he knew that his friend was anxious about Hogsmeade. Whatever diabolical plan that he had to ruin Lance and Rose, it most likely depended on his cooperation, and more importantly, his concentration. Albus could not help but wonder if this was Scorpius' true intention in making the mysterious letter out to be nothing of importance- it seemed his style. At the same time however, he may have been referring to Quidditch.

The Hogsmeade trip was in four days, but the first match of the season wasn't long after that. Albus was not so much intimidated as he was eager- but he still had the feeling that his brother was no slouch when it came to captainship. No matter what he said about his team being "Scrubs", Albus thought it would be an extremely bad move on his part to underestimate anything that his brother had assembled. Scorpius seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"Aim for the right hoop!" Scorpius sneered at the chasers, who were still unable to score on him. "Don't you see me veering too far to the left! You have to watch *me*, the hoops aren't going anywhere!"

Damian Peesley chucked the Quaffle as hard as he could to the right, but Scorpius was so fast that he managed to block it. It was the second practice session in three days now, only two days before the Hogsmeade trip. Albus had been forced to book the field so quickly after their previous session because James had it booked so sporadically that he never knew when he would get it otherwise. Also, he knew that it was completely up to him to sort any scheduling conflicts- he could not imagine Professor Blackwood giving him any assistance at all.

"He's right!" Albus called out through the chilly afternoon air, wincing as a rain drop hit him square in the eye. It had begun to drizzle. "There's three of you, everyone take a hoop and keep track of his movements. When he goes too far one way, pass it the other!"

His chasers grunted, and one of them, Tyler Graham, did it with so much attitude that he nearly didn't see an oncoming Bludger, rather well hit by Holden Rhawn. He managed to duck just in time, though he nearly fell off of his broom.

"How did Atticus do it..." Albus muttered to himself, shaking his head with embarrassment and turning to make sure that no one was looking. To his very great surprise however, someone was. For the second time this year, he was taken aback by Hugo's appearance. He was sitting on the

very lowest of the bleachers, chewing at his fingernails and watching timidly. Albus had no idea how long he had been there or even why he was, but he knew at once why no one else had pointed him out. He was awfully small now that Albus could see him from a distance. Even for a second year.

"Keep playing guys" he called up to his team. "Beaters, aim for Chasers, Chasers, aim for the Keeper, Scorpius, just- just do what you do" he said.

Scorpius nodded his head and knocked the Quaffle away with relative ease as Albus turned around and began walking towards Hugo, his broom slung over his shoulder and his face wearing a curious expression.

"What are you doing here?" he asked when he reached him, sitting down beside him.

"I wanted to talk to you" Hugo said, somehow. He was still chewing at his fingernails. "But I can wait until after you're done..."

"Nah, don't worry about it" Albus said, glancing over at his team. He watched Scorpius kick the Quaffle away with the tip of his foot, then turned back to his little cousin. "What's up?"

Hugo frowned slightly and did something very strange; he kicked at the dirt with his feet slightly. "I just wanted to ask you if it was true. In the paper. About your dad and-"

Albus heaved a sigh. "You getting a lot of crap for it?" he asked. "What about Fred? And Molly and Lu-"

"No, not us" Hugo replied. "Not really. But someone spit at Lily the other day."

"What?" Albus barked, feeling his face boil up. "Who?" he demanded, though he was not entirely sure why. What could he do about it?"

"Some kid from Ravenclaw" Hugo said. "It's okay now though, he's in the Hospital Wing. James..."

"Ahh" Albus said. "Well no. Well I don't think so" he admitted. "I don't really- me and- I haven't been talking to my dad that much recently" he said. "But this 'Boy Who Hid' garbage- I don't buy it. Don't worry about it. They're just finding excuses to blame him for stuff. It'll blow over."

Hugo nodded. "And my dad...?"

Albus smiled. "Uncle Ron's never hid from anyone. 'Cept maybe your mum..."

Hugo laughed, and he looked noticeably more cheerful afterwards.

"Why are you sitting at the bottom?" Albus asked him, eager to stay away from his team, so as not to shout criticism at the vast majority of them.

"I don't like heights" Hugo said, shrugging. "Fred makes fun of me for it...but I don't care."

Albus gave a slight frown and leaned in a bit. "You know before I started flying," he started, "I used to be afraid of heights too. But my friend Morrison made me sit in the middle, and that really helped. Why don't you move up a bleacher or two? And just get used to that. Work your way up..."

Hugo nodded and moved up two bleachers, not looking frightened in the slightest. Albus gave him a grin and ran back to his team.

"Alright guys, let's run a few more plays. Beaters focus on just one player, put all the pressure on, and then switch. I want to see some Sloth Grip Rolls..."

Even with Quidditch firmly on their minds, Hogsmeade was still the big day. Albus dressed carefully the morning of the fifth, knowing that as important as this was for Scorpius, it was something of a big deal for himself as well. This was, after all, kind of a sort of almost date with Mirra. And after the disaster last year, that's really the most that he could hope for.

Albus met his two friends in the common room early, wishing that he could glance out at a window to see how the weather would be on this particular Saturday.

"Probably cold" Morrison said, leaning back casually in one of the stone cut arm chairs.

"November and everything."

"Think I'll need a jacket?" Albus asked, checking that his collar was right. "I don't want to cover up my shirt."

Morrison stared at him. "That's a pretty bland shirt mate. It's just all green."

"It's a collared shirt" Albus said. "It matches my eyes. And it shows sophistication. And solid colors are in."

"Oh yeah" Morrison said. "They're right behind polka dot on the popularity scale, I believe. Why don't you throw some overalls on too, while you're at it? Really take the cake."

Albus frowned at him, but before he could retaliate Scorpius had interrupted them both.

"Stop" he said. "Let's focus. Does everyone know what they're doing? I'm persuading Lance to not pursue Rose. Al?"

Albus rolled his eyes- they had went over this for an hour the night before. "I'm separating Rose's group from him so you can go to work."

"Correct. Morrison?"

"I do not speak unless spoken to" Morrison said, smiling widely.



"Correct. I think we got this" Scorpius said, though his face still looked stony, and Albus saw that he had combed his already slick hair back. "And Al, change that shirt. It's bland."

It took them more than an hour to dress according to each other's wishes, with Morrison threatening to go naked for a considerable amount of time as well. By the time that they entered the Great Hall however Albus still had one more thing he wanted to discuss.

"We're sure about that note though right?" he said, trying not to let the uncertainty in his voice betray him. "Just an attempt to get me to not go right? There's no *actual* danger, right?"

Morrison began stacking pancakes on his plate while they were still standing, only sitting down when his first forkful was in his mouth. "Mate, it only makes sense that way" he said reassuringly. "If you really were in any danger, then the person wouldn't have been such a prat about it and signed it as your friend. They'd have told you straight up who they were. I mean, who does that? If it's really that important that you not go, they'd give you a name. And an actual reason."

"He's right" Scorpius said, neatly folding his toast over so that the egg was packed inside perfectly. He then looked over at Morrison. "Wow. You're right. Is this- is this a dream?"

Morrison ignored him and continued. "The only thing that makes sense is that whoever sent that doesn't want you to go to Hogsmeade, doesn't want you going for a different reason. They want you here. So *technically*, it's actually safer that you go to Hogsmeade, because whoever wants you for something wants you somewhere that isn't Hogsmeade. Get it?"

"I guess" Albus said.

"And it's probably just a practical joke anyway, remember?" Scorpius added. "We already agreed it was Lance."

"No, we agreed it was Eckley-" Morrison battled back.

"We didn't agree on anything" Albus said, looking down at his full plate. He couldn't eat. Why was he getting nervous now? He hadn't given the letter of warning much thought since he'd received it, but now it seemed to be all that he could focus on. He should really be more worried about things with Mirra...

"It's just," he continued. "Last time I went to Hogsmeade...I *was* in danger. I put everyone in it."

There was silence at the table. Even the chatter of the other students merrily discussing Hogsmeade was noticeably more quiet as both of his friends looked at him.

"Mate that's last year" Morrison said after a moment. "Don't even- don't even worry about that. Last year was different."

"Yeah" Scorpius said mildly. "There's extra protection now, and we're going to be with a much larger group of people. Plus no one's after you mate. All this Dark Alliance crap... Don't even worry about it. Just try and have a good time."

Albus nodded his head but kept quiet, and soon enough Neville was calling for them to line up to exit the castle.

"Third years and above!" he announced, waving his hands emphatically as if his students didn't know where the doors leading out were. "Remember, no permission forms, no leaving. That's the rule."

"Is it true that there's extra protection now?" Albus heard a Gryffindor girl ask as the students crowded together.

"Yes" Neville said calmly. "I will be there, as will numerous other professors and Ministry of Magic members as well. You are very safe" he said pompously.

"All ready to go?" someone said from behind Albus. He turned and saw they had been met by Mirra and her group. He frowned when he noticed that she hadn't dressed up as well. Last year she had worn a neat little blouse, though this time she was dressed quite regularly. All of them were actually- Eckley had even neglected his stupid Gryffindor earmuffs.

"Yeah, we're all good" Scorpius said, and all seven of them strode towards the door.

"What time is Lance meeting up with us?" Albus asked his cousin as they left the castle. Scorpius had told him to ask this straightaway.

"In a little bit" she said, her hair blowing fiercely in the wind. "I figured we'd shop around a bit, and then meet in the Three Broomsticks. He still has to spend some time with his friends before us- he's very popular" she added smugly.

"Mmm" was all that Albus could muster.

It was a very strange walk to Hogsmeade. For one thing, the weather was weird. Normally such intense cold meant that they were trudging through snow, hands wearing gloves and scarves wrapped around their necks. There was no snow now however, just bitter cold and forceful wind that nearly knocked Albus over a few times. He had underestimated the cold actually; apart from his jacket, he had nothing. He recalled the previous year, on one particularly memorable trip to Hogsmeade, when it was so cold that Eckley had wrapped his arm around his girlfriend. That would not happen this time.

Another thing of note was how little communication seemed to be going on. Albus wanted to initiate conversation with Mirra, but seemed unable to think of anything of interest. Though his friends would normally help him with this, Morrison seemed unsure as well and Scorpius stared

intently at the ground for the entirety of the walk. Most of the talking, of course, was done by Rose.

"Now Lance and I may wander off a bit on our own- we may go see the Shrieking Shack. Normally I wouldn't go, it creeps me out just being by there, but he tells me it's *really* a sight up close. I mean, it's one of the most popular staples of Hogsmeade, it's been there for more than fifty years now-"

Albus tuned her out for most of the walk, and it was something of a great relief when they reached the village, where the busy streets and flashy shops gave them something to discuss. They all stood motionless at the entrance to the village, apparently deciding on where to go first.

"Honeyduke's?" Morrison said, pointing over at the candy shop, which was closest to them.

"I think we should vote on it" Rose said in an authoritarian manner.

Morrison rolled his eyes. "All in favor of getting out of this cold as fast as humanly possible?" he asked, raising his own hand as he did so.

They all laughed- minus Eckley and Hornsbrook of course, and entered the shop. This proved to be a good idea. It wasn't long before Albus had Mirra talking.

"Come on, just try one!"

"No!" she laughed.

He waved the Acid Pop in front of her face. "They're really not that bad. James dared me to eat three in a row once, I did it!"

"And your mouth was okay?" she asked curiously.

"Oh no way" he said. "I had a huge hole in my tongue and everything..."

She laughed again and picked up a Fizzing Whizbee. "*These* are the best things in the shop" she said. "Make you levitate when you eat them."

Albus gave a hollow laugh. "I don't need to levitate; I can fly whenever I want..."

"Not better than James" Mirra said cheekily.

"Oh please..."

They bantered back and forth for a bit while Morrison paid for a large slab of Honeyduke's famous chocolate. He turned his head back to Scorpius, expecting to see him hard at work with Rose, and was quite disappointed. He was standing alone. Rose was instead talking to Hornsbrook and Eckley, who seemed rather pleased with themselves at finally getting some

attention. It was at this point however that Albus realized Scorpius wasn't doing anything wrong at all. His purpose today was not to get with Rose. It was to get her away from someone else.

They went to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop next, as both Rose and Mirra wanted new ink, including a certain kind that apparently changed colors. Albus could not imagine when this would ever be useful, but he at least had fun watching Morrison put different quills up against his lip and pretending to have various different kinds of mustaches.

"Almost as fake as your other one, eh?" Albus muttered to him when everyone else was out of earshot.

Morrison grinned at him and shrugged, though even as he did so he hilariously put a pink feathered one up against his face.

After their trip to the Quill Shop they went to Dervish and Banges, as Hornsbrook needed a fresh roll of Spellotape for something. Following this they finally began the walk to The Three Broomsticks, where they would meet up with Lance. Rose seemed absolutely giddy as they did so. Albus exchanged a meaningful look with his two best friends as they entered. This was it.

Lance was already in there when they entered, and Albus saw that he had not dressed up either, though this hardly mattered. His flowing blonde hair was still dangling effortlessly in front of eyes, and his smile completed the welcoming picture. Had he not been moving Albus thought that people may have thought him to be some kind of beautiful painting. He was leaning back in his chair at a completely empty table- he had clearly reserved them all seats- and as they approached him he turned to the bartender.

"Eight Butterbeers please" he said, pulling out a handful of gold and silver.

"You don't have to do that" Albus said at once, feeling guilty immediately.

"Least I can do" Lance said kindly, handing the money over.

"Least you can do for what-" Albus started, but he was ignored as Lance slid a dusty bottle over to him. Butterbeers were passed all around the table, and Albus noticed that Rose had taken a seat next to Lance before anyone else could even sit down.

They all sat in silence for a moment before Lance started the conversation.

"So what do you guys think about Blackwood?"

Albus had to admit, this was a brilliant way to get everyone talking. Only Hornsbrook for some reason remained quiet as they verbally bashed their Potions professor. Rose huffed and puffed about not getting points for answering questions, Morrison complained loudly about how she turned him down, and Albus and Mirra both commented on how not being able to partner was a

nuisance. This conversation gladly took them into the subject of their other classes, which Albus had a good time talking about.

"Muggle Studies" he said, less than a second after being asked what his most boring class was. "I thought it was History of Magic for the longest time-"

"How can you say that?" Rose said. "History of Magic is fascinating!"

"- but Muggle Studies takes the cake" Albus said. "I just- I just can't do it" he said, trying not to laugh. "It's so hard to learn about stuff that will *never* be useful! Remember that paper on electricity Scorpius?" Albus asked, nudging his friend in the ribs.

"Hm?" Scorpius said, he had been looking slightly dazed.

"Oh, do you take Muggle Studies too Scorp?" Lance asked.

Albus heard Hornsbrook and Eckley snigger slightly at this. Scorpius eyed Lance with a look of intense dislike, and Albus knew why at once. He hated being called "Scorp". Lance of course did not know this, but Albus highly doubted that Scorpius would excuse it.

He watched as his friend took an enormously long, drawn out swig of Butterbeer before answering. Indeed, he may have been chugging an empty bottle. When he finally put it down on the table he answered in a voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes" he said while the rest of the table went quiet.

"Is it really as bad as Al says?" Lance asked, apparently not disturbed in the slightest by the look of malice he was receiving.

"Yes" Scorpius said once more, identical to his previous answer even in tone.

"It must have changed since I took it" Lance said shrugging. "I got an O on my O.W.L for it but I had to drop it so I could focus more on other subjects. So if you ever need any help, don't hesitate guys. Both of you..."

"Thanks" Scorpius said through gritted teeth, his eyes leering. How could Lance not see that? They were saved from any more awkwardness however, as someone had just arrived.

"Alright guys?" Albus head his brother say, and looking behind him he saw James. He watched as his brother went over to another table, where three people were saving a seat for a fourth. He dragged the chair away nonchalantly while they tried to tell him off, but he ignored them and added it to their group, and then sat down.

"Bitter out isn't it? Figured you guys would be here."

He gave Albus a clap on the shoulder then leaned over and extended his hand to Lance. It became apparent quite suddenly that Lance and James knew each other way better than Albus had thought. Within minutes they were reminiscing of old times, despite Albus having never even met him until earlier in the year.

"Priceless" Lance said, wiping a tear of laughter from his eye after James mentioned the time that Professor Handit's pants had fallen down in the middle of a lesson. "Oh, how about this one!" he said smacking his hand on the table. "Remember second year, when I dared you to melt that doorknob!"

James cringed at this, though Albus laughed. He remembered hearing about this now infamous occasion. An entire hallway had accidentally been set ablaze because of it. He had had no idea that Lance was in any way involved however. He looked over at Scorpius to see if he was laughing, but he was looking as surly as ever. His expression was stony, and Albus knew what he was thinking. Was there no one who disliked Lance?

The answer was quite clear however. Both Eckley and Hornsbrook had remained rather quiet the entire time that they were at the pub. Both of them seemed to be rather displeased with the fact that Lance was garnering the most attention. Rose and James were the one's doing the most talking with him, and even Mirra seemed to be listening to everything, a wide grin on her face at the funny stories. Still, there wasn't much help there. Scorpius was depending on him for his plan to work. He had to divert Lance away from Rose somehow.

"Oh!" James said suddenly, looking over at the door, where the very pretty and slightly bewildered looking girl that Albus had once seen him with stood. "That's Matil- Maya" he changed his sentence quickly. "I got to go" he said, raising from his seat and slapping all of the guy's hands, then waving to Rose and Mirra before departing.

Lance was still wiping away tears of laughter as James left. "I miss that guy" he said, shaking his head. "Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs used to have a lot of class together back in the day" he said. "But now we're taking different subjects and all- I barely get to see him."

He took a rather large swig of Butterbeer before turning to Albus. "And Al" he started, more seriously. "Real quick, and I don't really want to mention this, but I feel like I have to, I've been reading what the *Prophet* says about your dad and I don't believe a word of it. I've always thought that the Ministry puts the blame where it doesn't belong, and this time it's just a travesty."

Albus frowned and nodded. Why was he supposed to hate this guy again?

"Do you support WAR?" Hornsbrook said, and Albus nearly jumped. He had not heard the voice for a considerable amount of time, and was slightly taken aback by it.

Lance shrugged. "I don't support them, but I don't disagree with them either. I'm pretty neutral really. I just want all this to end."

Rose nodded and smiled warmly at him, which he returned. Albus once more turned sideways and looked at his two friends. Morrison had kept quiet- had done his job. Scorpius wanted to do his. Albus had to act first however.

"Rose" he said, rather suddenly. "Can I talk to you real quick? Over there?" he said, jerking his head towards a lonesome looking corner at the end of the pub. "No offense to anyone else" he added quickly. "It's just- it's private. It's about this whole thing with my dad."

"None taken" Lance said mildly, still smiling and giving his hand a slight wave. "Go right ahead."

Rose gave him a curious look but stood up from her seat. Albus exchanged a quick, meaningful look with Scorpius before directing his cousin over to the corner.

"What's going on?" Rose demanded in a quiet tone once they reached the corner and was out of earshot.

"Look I'm not going to lie to you" he said, mentally kicking himself, as that was precisely what he was going to do. "But this isn't about my dad. It's about you. You're screwing up!" he hissed.

"Screwing up?" she asked. "What do you-?"

"Oh come on Rose" Albus said. "It's obvious that you like Lance. But you're doing terrible. You must see that?"

Her face went red and she looked like she was about to cry. Albus felt a pang of guilt deep in his gut. What had he gotten himself into?

"What am I doing wrong?" she squeaked, and she sounded on the verge of tears.

Albus heaved a sigh, trying to improvise on the spot. "You're smothering him Rose" he said.

"What? How?"

"Well first you invited him here" Albus said. "And he had to ditch his own friends. Now he's hanging out with people he barely knows. What's he supposed to talk to Morrison about, huh? He's clearly uncomfortable. And you're nonstop talking to him...he's starting to feel the pressure. Go on, look at him. See how nervous he looks?"

They both glanced over at their table, where Lance was casually leaning back on the hind legs of his chair, looking very cool as he sipped Butterbeer and spoke to Eckley.

"Not really..." she admitted in a small voice.

"Exactly" Albus said, unable to believe that she was falling for it. He was much too good at this for his own good. "When someone looks like that, they're wearing a mask Rose. That's a facade. This guy is starting to second guess being here."

She brought her fingernails to her mouth, and Albus was immediately reminded of Hugo. "What do I do?" she asked, panic stricken. "*I don't know guys like that Al*" she mumbled.

"I know" he said. "But it's okay, I'm going to help you out, you just have to do what I say, okay?"

She nodded.

"First off, this looks suspicious. If anyone asks, we're really talking about my dad. Second, you need to go."

"G- go?" she said uncertainly.

He nodded this time. "That's right. Get Ec- Charlie and Donnie and Mirra and go somewhere. Just leave Lance with us."

"Why?" she asked, and he could not believe the power that he had over her now. There's no way he was this good. Or was it bad?

"Because then you don't seem overly eager. He can just relax with us, lounge around, talk about Quidditch, you know? It won't seem like a date then. No date, no pressure. Then when you come back he'll be ready to talk and all that. But you have to be subtle! Make it seem like you're leaving for a different reason, and give use twenty minutes to just hang out with the guy, get him thinking this is just a regular Hogsmeade trip. Understand?"

She nodded. Albus felt his heart beat slow down. Scorpius would be pleased. But was he? What kind of monster was he...?

They walked back together, Rose wiping at her eyes furiously before she sat down. They resumed chatting for a few minutes, this time about what beasts Lance had thus far dealt with in Care For Magical Creatures, when Rose said something.

"Shoot!" she said. "I've just remembered now! I have to go to the Post Office and drop something off- a letter to my dad that I forgot to send" she said, looking over at Albus. "Mirra? Come with me?"

"Erm, sure" Mirra said, though she looked quite intrigued. "But I don't remember you saying anything about a let-"

But Rose cut her off. "And guys? You too?" she said, tapping Hornsbrook and Eckley on the shoulders. They both stood up at once, eager to leave regardless of the reason. Lance too stood up.



"No" Rose said quickly. "You haven't even finished your Butterbeer" she said to him.

Albus put his palm to his face. Rose was terrible at being subtle. No one had finished their bottle. Lance didn't seem to notice however.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yes" she said firmly. "We'll be right back, this won't take long. You guys just- just finish up."

And with that, she led the other three Gryffindors out of the pub. Albus felt sickened with himself, knowing what was to come next. All that Scorpius needed to do was play his cards right.

And he certainly looked like he had a good hand. He lounged back in his chair as if his plan had already worked; taking a sly sip of what was surely an already drained bottle of Butterbeer and leering at Lance like a wolf that had caught a scent.

The table, now consisting of the four of them (including the incredibly quiet Morrison, and Albus, who was still feeling guilty over what he had done to Rose) seemed to be the most uncomfortable that it had been all day. Albus could not help but think that Lance may have caught on to the set up. Either way however, he was still staring at them all cheerfully, no doubt eager to continue being a stand up guy.

"So Lance" Scorpius said in a long drawl, balancing his bottle on the side of the table. "Is this your first date or what?"

Albus looked over to him with fear. There was no way that Scorpius was going to blow this. Not after what Albus had just had to do.

"Huh?" Lance said, appearing to be honestly bemused.

Scorpius grinned at him. "Come on mate, we're all guys here. We all know what's going on. Is this your first date with Rose or what?"

Lance looked thoroughly shaken by this statement, but he smiled. "I- I guess. Yeah. Why?"

Scorpius smiled at him- though Albus recognized it more as a confident sneer.

"No reason" Scorpius said. "I guess I'm just- well I- I guess I'm really glad that's all. That Rose is willing put herself back out there again."

Albus looked over at Scorpius, and saw Morrison do the same.

"Back out there?" Lance said, leaning forward slightly and looking bewildered. "Huh?"

"Well you know" Scorpius said with an expertly false sense of innocence on his face. "Like back to dating. After her last boyfriend and everything- I'm just really glad she's comfortable with you."

"What last boyfriend?" Lance asked, his eyes narrowing.

Scorpius opened his eyes wide with shock. "Never mind" he said hastily.

"No- you can tell me-"

Albus almost buried his face in his hands. He could not believe how naive Lance was being. Though he supposed that Scorpius was really the bigger variable here. He was playing it like an expert.

"It's nothing" Scorpius said quickly. "I really shouldn't have- I suppose it was- I guess I assumed you knew- not a big deal anyway-"

"What's not a big deal?" Lance said, and his perfect blonde hair seemed slightly frazzled.

"Well it's not a big deal" Scorpius said. "Really not my place to say- I just mean I'm glad she's so comfortable. And you're awfully brave aren't you? But I mean- well no. Not my place to say. I'm sorry I thought you knew..."

"Knew *what*?" Lance said, looking more than just curious. Rather fearful, in fact.

Scorpius made to speak, and then stopped. He leaned forward slightly now, like Lance, then stopped mid way and reclined back, looking confused himself. It was nothing short of perfect. The way he moved; the way he blinked. Everything from the subtle hand motions to the way he tilted his head- it was perfect acting. Albus knew that it had been rehearsed; there was no other possible explanation for it. In fact, if he didn't know any better, he'd say Scorpius had been in front of the mirror just this morning.

"Well mate, I don't know how to tell you this," Scorpius finally said, rather quietly but still loud enough to seem dramatic. "But Rose's dad isn't very big on boyfriends. I mean, you know he's an *Auror*, right?"

"Yeah, I know" Lance said. "But she said he's nice. And funny..."

"Oh he is!" Scorpius said. "He's great! But he's protective mate! A bit too much, really. I mean, her last boyfriend actually *left* Hogwarts. I doubt you'll ever even hear Rose mention him."

"What happened to him?" Lance asked, his eyes shining with fear. Albus couldn't help but feel a bit bad. Well, very bad actually. He knew it was no fault of Lance however. This had been pre-meditated. Scorpius knew what he was doing, he knew it very well. Albus himself was nearly convinced that Rose had once had a boyfriend.

"It's not important" Scorpius said quickly. "It's just- it's just best not to talk about it. Bit of a mess, right Al?" he added, turning to him.

Albus gave him quite possibly the hardest stare he'd ever given someone in his life. It was one thing to lure Rose away. To give Scorpius the chance of doing what he wanted- but this was too far. He was actually asking Albus to aide him in his malicious- if not incredibly well constructed- lie.

But the look on his face sold it. What was he supposed to do it? Call the whole thing off? Tell Lance what was going on? Morrison was eyeing him intently now too.

"Yeah" he finally said, his head turned down to the table, in disgust with himself. "Messy business" he grumbled. "Best not to talk about it..."

Lance was looking nothing short of terrified now. Scorpius didn't relent however.

"But that's not a shot at you or anything mate!" he said quickly. "I'm just saying I think it's great that Rose is ready for dating again. And I really commend you- you're awfully brave mate."

Lance stared blankly ahead. His eyes had lost their welcoming nature. He had been successfully duped. Albus hoped that it would end here.

"And then of course," Scorpius continued, and Albus nearly groaned with anguish. How much would he be responsible for? "There's always just how she is sometimes. That takes guts too mate."

"What do you mean how she is? She's nice..."

"Oh yeah!" Scorpius said, once more holding his hands up innocuously. "She's great!" he added. "Real nice, funny, smart, charming, all that...But I mean come one mate. I know you've seen her on her- well her- how can I- on her *bad* days."

"What bad days?" asked Lance, looking over at Albus for confirmation. He avoided his gaze.

"Well you don't have to pretend mate" Scorpius said. "You hang out with her all the time; I know you know what I'm talking about."

But Lance shook his head. Albus wished he could bury his face in his hands.

"I don't hang out with her *that* much" Lance said.

"Oh" Scorpius said, looking down. "Well...Sometimes...When things aren't really going her way...she can be a bit- err- what's the word-"

But Albus knew that Scorpius had a very good idea of what word he wanted to use. He probably had every word planned out for this particular moment.

"A bit *cantankerous*" he finished. "Wouldn't you say Al?"

"And belligerent" Albus added automatically, surprised he even knew such a word.

"And *mean*" Morrison added as well, speaking for the first time in quite a while.

"Shut up Morrison" Scorpius said quickly, and he fell silent.

Lance was looking quite dazed. His arms were pinned at his sides as he took turns staring at the three of them- mostly Scorpius- with shock on his face. And Scorpius, it seemed, was ready to put the icing on the cake.

"But like I said" he continued, looking grim. "I just think you're really brave for-for dealing- with all that. I mean, this is only your first date and all..."

But Lance did not look like he wanted it to be a date anymore. He was sweating profusely, turning his head every once in a while and looking over his shoulder as if he expected Rose to be there. He was tugging at the collar of his shirt as well, and occasionally scratching at the back of his head nervously. Albus tried to look away from it- but he was met with a much more cruel sight. Scorpius grinning ear to ear; his mission all but accomplished.

"And this is all between us, right?" Scorpius said after a few more moments. "I mean, I thought you already knew all of this stuff..."

"Oh yeah" Lance managed to croak. "Yeah, just between us..."

By the time that Rose returned with her group of friends they were all ready leave The Three Broomsticks, Albus noticing that Lance was noticeably more quiet as they walked the streets of the village. Rose continually tried initiating conversation with him, but he frequently just nodded or made a noise of recognition. This meant that Eckley could resume being Mr. Popular again however, and it wasn't long before Albus was forced to listen to an incredibly false story.

"And then, if you'll believe it, the Minister of Magic himself showed up! Said he was a big fan of hunting Nogtails- apparently its Ministry tradition or something. And then my dad said ' Sure thing Mr. Shackbolt, you're welcome to join us'. This was years ago though, before all this happened..."

Albus tuned him out, but this was more for his own personal solace than because he desired to not hear any of Eckley's stories. He was feeling incredibly bad now. He had tricked Rose, helped trick Lance, had told lie after lie. And for what? Because his friend wanted him too? Lance was a nice guy. If he wanted to be with Rose, it should only be up to him. And the look on Rose's face...The look when he had lied right to her...It gave him goose bumps. He had all but ruined what could have grown to be a very nice relationship...

He saw Scorpius grinning at him from a little ahead. His friend quickly flashed a thumbs up, which Albus did not return. He did not feel like he had accomplished anything. He was snapped out of his stupor when someone tugged at his shirt however. He turned and saw it was Mirra. He had not even noticed her walking behind him. He slowed down a bit to see what she had to say, and saw that she was looking grim.

"You know it's weird" she murmured. "Rose didn't seem to be doing that bad to me" she said coolly, eyeing Albus with a look of dislike that he was not used to from her. He hated it. She knew. She was not blinded like Rose had been. She had figured it all out...

Albus had no response for this. They continued walking, side by side, all together as a group seeking a destination. Albus managed to ignore the loud conversation Eckley was having with Hornsbrook long enough to once more take notice of Rose, who was looking visibly distraught as she tried to coax Lance into a conversation that was simply not going to happen. Then he felt another hand on his shoulder, but this was not a tug or a small pull. It was a burly hand; a firm one. A big one. He spun around and gasped.

It was Zydrunas. Or The Hammer, whatever he was called. Up close he was one of the most frightening sights that Albus had ever seen- standing well beyond the height of anyone he had ever seen bar Hagrid and the French lady from his kitchen. His yellow teeth were bared and his bald head was turned downwards, looking at him.

"Come with me" he said, and Albus was surprised by his voice. It was sharp and cold, but definitely powerful. A bit more powerful and demanding than Blackwood's actually. There was no accent however, which Albus had expected.

"Umm-umm" was all that he managed to stammer. Everyone else in his party turned around and saw what was going on. There was a silence as they viewed the scene, before Morrison finally spoke.

"Hey! Get off him pal! He didn't do anything!"

"Your friend is not in trouble" The Hammer said to all of them, before turning his head back down at Albus. "Mr. Waddlesworth seeks an audience with you."

Albus tried loosening The Hammer's grip with his own fingers, but all ten of his fingers could not loosen the five holding him still. "Wa-Wa-Waddlesworth?"

The Hammer nodded.

"Someone get help" Mirra said, sounding fearful. Lance immediately began to walk forward.

"That won't be necessary" The Hammer said, his voice still low and cold. "He is not in trouble or danger. He will be back momentarily."

"I'm not going anywhere" Albus said, still prying at the Hammer's fingers.

"Come with me" he repeated. "Mr. Waddlesworth wants to speak to you. You are in no trouble. We can do this the hard way."

He looked over at Mirra and Rose, the only two girls in the group, as he said this. For a wild moment Albus thought that he was certainly bluffing. A grown man would not attack children. But then he remembered something else. The Hammer was a member of WAR. And he did the dirty work. He had no reservations about who he hurt...

"Okay, okay" Albus said quickly. "I'll go. Just- no one gets hurt."

"Al!" several of them shouted with concern. Only Hornsbrook and Eckley stayed quiet.

"I'll be fine" Albus said, though he was actually quite frightened. "I'll be right back...right?" he added, looking up at the leering, bald and towering figure still gripping him. Once more, he nearly nodded.

"Al don't!" Mirra shouted.

"I'll get a teacher-" Scorpius started.

"I'll take this chump right now-" Morrison added.

"No!" Albus said. He didn't want anyone getting hurt. "Look just walk around for a bit. I'll be okay..."

He looked up at the Hammer once more and nodded himself. The Hammer loosened his grip slightly but still began steering him in the other direction, through crowds of people who seemed oblivious to what was going on.

"What does he want with me?" Albus asked fearfully after five minutes of walking.

"To talk" The Hammer replied.

"I can walk by myself" Albus said, trying to sound confident as he tapped the burly fingers gripping his collar.

"I prefer to lead you. We are almost there."

Even as the scary figure said it however, Albus realized he could not tell where he was. They had taken what seemed like a shortcut somewhere, and were now in what seemed like a grimier version of the beautiful village. Albus recognized it vaguely as being around the same area where had chased Fango Wilde months ago...

"Where- where are we?" he asked.

"The outskirts of Hogsmeade" The Hammer replied. "Otherwise known as the Hogpenn. It is not as bad as it seems" he added as they walked passed a dirty man sitting on the floor counting bottle caps as though they were coins.

They walked for five more minutes, finally stopping outside of a small shop. The sign on it read *Quality Quidditch Supplies*.

"Quality Quidditch Supplies?" Albus asked. "There's one of these in Diagon Alley."

"Yes" The Hammer said. "There are many. This one has been closed for some time however."

It certainly looked it. The door was fine, but the windows on the small shop were boarded up, and the paint that may have once been on had either turned to the color of concrete or was chipping off.

"Well then- then I guess- I guess we can't go in?" Albus asked hesitantly.

The Hammer said nothing. He merely pushed the door open and forced Albus through it. He nearly toppled over, and then almost fell once more when he saw where he was.

It looked like a magnificent sitting room; fifteen times larger than what it appeared to be on the outside- Albus could only assume a charm was put on it, much like the backs of the cars that held their trunks. The walls were lined with beautiful paintings of majestic landscapes, and the carpet was a brilliant shade of red with elegant golden designs on it. Fancy and comfortable looking armchairs were set up all around it, including a few sofas and a very warm looking fireplace. A brilliant and large chandelier hung over them, seeming to sparkle from the light of the fire. Albus thought that he could hear some very light chamber music playing as well, though he could not spot a musical device of any kind.

It was occupied as well. Lounging in all of the chairs were men and women of all colors and ages, some of them chatting with one another as they sipped glasses of what may have been wine, others reading paperback books quietly. They were all dressed in identical black robes as well, all with a small silver emblem on them that Albus could not quite distinguish. Few people even noticed his arrival, and those who did merely glanced his way before returning back to what they were doing.

So this was the headquarters of Wands and Redemption. These people were Renegades- and not just any Renegades. These people were organized vigilantes. He was just looking at someone, an older looking man with a white beard whose face bore an uncanny resemblance to someone he may have known, possibly Donovan Hornsbrook, when The Hammer began steering him through the room.

They walked passed everyone with no interference at all. The people reading didn't even look up, though one of them moved their legs off of an ottoman to let them by. Albus saw that he was being taken to a small staircase at the edge of the brilliant room.

"How big is this place?" Albus asked.

"Bigger than it looks" The Hammer said, leading him up the stairs. They stopped at a long white hallway, and Albus got shivers. It looked awfully similar to the observatory rooms in the Department of Mysteries. The hall however was lined with red doors of the same shade as the carpet downstairs. There was a battered looking wooden door at the very end of the hall, though they stopped just short of this one, instead pausing at the red door to its left, which looked exactly like the others.

The Hammer opened the door and Albus followed him in. They were once more in a nicely designed room with red carpets and portraits on the wall, only this one was much smaller; an office. And sure enough, there was a large desk right in front of him. And sitting right in it was Warren Waddlesworth.

"Mr. Potter!" Waddlesworth said smoothly, looking up from his desk, where a considerably large stack of paperwork was. "Pleased to have you join me- Zydrunas please, let go of the boy would you? He's not going to go running off!"

The Hammer let go of him at once, though remained standing where he was. Waddlesworth was smiling at the two of them, and Albus had the chance to take in his full appearance. His long ketchup colored hair was as straight as ever, softly placed over his shoulders. He was not wearing the same black robes as the members of his organization, but he was wearing a very clean looking black suit, complete with a red tie that matched his hair. He leaned forward slightly and folded his hands.

"Zydrunas I truly cannot thank you enough, but I'd like a *private* word if you don't mind. Yes, if you could just step outside for a moment..."

The Hammer bowed his head obsequiously, then left without saying a word. Albus looked around a bit and saw that there was a chair across from the desk. Was he supposed to sit? What was he even doing here?

"Please, please. Sit" Waddlesworth said kindly, indicating the chair. Albus took a seat and found that it was extremely comfortable. Waddlesworth continued to smile at him for a moment before speaking again. "A glass of wine perhaps?" he asked.

He snapped his fingers. A door to his right- which Albus had not even seen when he had first walked in- burst open and a man with a thick mustache and tamed, slick black hair entered carrying a tray with two wine glasses and a bottle. The butler stood still as Waddlesworth took a glass from the tray.



"Erm- I'm not really old enough to drink" Albus said, staring at the butler uneasily.

Waddlesworth gave an oily laugh. "Don't be silly! You're *always* old enough for a drink!"

There it was, that incredibly persuasive tone. Albus suddenly felt very tempted to take a glass from the tray, just to try it, but then decided against it. "No thanks" he said.

The smile on Waddlesworth's face flickered for less than an instant- Albus barely caught it. He put his own glass back on the tray. Apparently he did not want a drink if his guest didn't either. He snapped his fingers once more and the butler left without a word, taking all of the wine with him back through the door in which he'd come.

"Do you know who I am, Mr. Potter?" he asked warmly.

"Yes" Albus said, still no closer to finding out why he was here. "You're Mr. Waddlesworth."

Waddlesworth gave a loud laugh. "Please! You make me sound so old! Just call me Warren. I would never ask you to address me as anything else Mr. Pot- can I call you Albus?" he said quickly.

"Erm- yes?" Albus said.

"Fantastic" Warren said. "Excuse me for a moment, by the way. On second thought..."

He snapped his fingers once more and the butler returned, this time with only one glass. Warren took it and took a sip, then snapped his fingers yet again. The butler placed a coaster on the polished wooden desk, and then once more left through the door. Warren set the glass of wine down on the coaster before resuming.

"Delicious" he said, smacking his lips. "So foolish of me to have neglected it at first- wine is truly a sophisticated drink. Never in excess of course!" he added hastily, his smooth voice never changing in pitch. "Don't go thinking the wrong thing. But here and there...I cannot resist a good wine."

"Mmm" was, for the second time today, all that Albus could muster. Warren continued to beam at him.

"I'm glad you know me Albu- can I call you Al?" he said.

Albus nodded.

"Fantastic" Warren repeated. "As I was saying *Al*, I'm glad that you already know me, that saves us a truly tremendous amount of time and I'm sure that you're eager to get back to your trip- I hear that the village of Hogsmeade is truly a sight for students, and rightfully so. But anyway, before I digress, I wanted to let you know that I know you as well."

"You- you do?" Albus asked, shifting slightly in his chair. What was going on here?

"Indeed. Well rather, I've seen you before. I will never claim to know a person, never. Not completely. No one knows anyone except for themselves. We can know facades- know what we see and understand, but never someone completely. I've merely seen you."

"When?"

"During the riot" Warren said simply, sitting back in his chair. "Perhaps you do not recognize me, I was the man with blood on my face" he said slyly.

"I don't know anything about that" Albus said quickly, tugging at his collar. "I didn't see anyone- or anything- or- or any of that- I was just-"

But Warren cut him off with a loud laugh. "Al! Al, calm down, you are not in trouble! Why so frightened? Did Zydrunas frighten you? Did he hit you?" he added, his laughter dying as he focused on Albus intently.

"No!" Albus said quickly.

"Because if he did I can assure you I will have him deal with the repercussions..."

"No! Nothing like that!" Albus said, nearly rising from his seat. "It's just- it's never mind. I'm not frightened" he finished, in what he knew was a tone that suggested the complete opposite.

Warren continued to survey him, but said nothing. "Well as I was saying Al, I saw you. You were crawling on the ground. Were you looking for something?"

"My little sister" Albus said automatically. "She got caught in it."

"Oh dear. Is she alright?" Warren asked, and Albus noted that he did actually sound concerned- but he supposed that may have been done intentionally.

"She was fine" he answered.

"Fantastic. Nasty business, that was. I admire your courage however. A rather prominent trait amongst Gryffindors, I have heard."

"I'm in Slytherin" Albus said, his face growing hot. Warren smiled.

"Are you?" he said, taking another sip of wine. "I did not attend Hogwarts in my youth, Al, but I think if I did, that would have been my house of choice. I have known many Slytherins, and one thing I notice about them is that they can do one thing above all else- not manipulate like some would think- but they can see things from different perspectives. They can step back and examine. Bravery and intelligence are certainly wonderful qualities but I cannot think of trait

more useful than the ability to get a good grasp of the situation. Some call it apathy, I call it logic. Do you understand?"

"Erm..."

"Let me explain" Warren said, taking another quick sip. "In any given situation there are different perspectives. Some see something like, say- a riot, and they think of it as a sign that civilization is showing signs of recession. Others see it as a sign that civilization is actually, to quite the contrary, showing signs of improvement. A Slytherin- from what I know of them- can see it from both sides. I know that their colors are emerald and silver, but I always saw them as more...gray. Have you ever felt this way, Al? Ever saw something from two different points of view? One view seems horrible and frightening, and you feel guilty for seeing it- but the other- the side that people can't see- shows signs of a far more benevolent act?"

Albus shrunk in his chair slightly; he did not even want to think about this question. He was much too focused on finding out what it was he was doing here. But now that he thought about, Waddlesworth had mentioned something of interest. From one point of view, what had just occurred an hour ago had been terrible- he had purposefully sabotaged his cousin's relationship with someone who was actually very nice, and had lied to them both to achieve it. But from the other end...he had done it for his best friend, who he had promised he would help...

"Yeah" he finally said. "I have."

Warren smiled at him. "I thought so" he said. "Why, some would even say that such a trait belongs with members of my very own group. Wands and Redemption."

"Ermm...I don't think so" Albus said quickly, surprised at his own audacity but glad that he said it anyway. He expected Waddlesworth to frown or do something that indicating displeasure, but nothing of the sort happened. He merely continued to smile.

"You don't like Wands and Redemption, do you Al?" he said, swirling his glass around. "Don't agree with us?"

"No" Albus said plainly.

"Why?"

Albus raised his eyebrows. He could not believe that he was sitting here, right now, in this office, discussing how he felt about a group of vigilantes, with their leader no less. Hadn't he just been in Honeyduke's with Mirra?

"Because- because you break the law" Albus said.

"Ah" Warren said, his smile remaining firmly where it was. "Indeed, some of our actions seem to take place well outside of the limits of the law. You are referring, I'm assuming, to the Unforgivable Curses? Murder. Torture."

Albus nodded, and he felt his skin crawl at the last two words.

"But this is interesting" Warren said. "Because now more than ever it seems that unlawful and immoral are being used hand in hand, when in fact neither is correct. Did you know, Al? That during the first war with Voldemort, the Aurors were permitted to use the Unforgivable curses?"

Albus stared blankly ahead. He had not known this. But what did it matter? Warren continued through his silence.

"Aurors- like what your father was but months ago- where authorized to kill and torture. Now I must ask you, Al, were they breaking the law?"

Albus hesitated. That was actually a good question. "No" he finally said. "They were told they could do it. By the Minister."

"So if the Minister said it's okay for me- and my fellow members of WAR- to murder and torture- that would be okay? If he said it was okay for us kill innocent children, then it's not against the law? Is the law decided by one person? By one government?"

Albus stayed silent.

"I believe Al" Warren started, " That the only man who can tell him what is right and wrong is himself. When these Auror's kill, it is not against the law. But when we do it- it is? Tell me Al, is a law *really* a law, if only some people have to follow it?"

"I - I don't know" Albus admitted, wishing that he did not have to think about it.

"I'm going to tell you the truth Al" Warren said quietly. "Look me in my eyes."

Albus glanced at his perfectly shaped blue eyes before staring back down at the desk.

"Keep looking!" Warren nearly shouted, and Albus snapped his head up and met his gaze once again, this time holding it.

"I want you to look in my eyes as I say this, Al. So that you know I'm telling you the truth. I never lie when I look someone in the eyes, I wouldn't dare. The eyes are the gateway to the soul, after all."

*Hmmm. And your appearance. Golden eyes? Was it merely the iris, or the entire eye itself?*

"Are you looking?" Warren asked him.

"Yes" Albus said, his eyes boring into Warren's.

"Albus, I am telling you the truth when I say, I don't like hurting people. I don't want people to get hurt. But this is a war. That's why we are named as such, see? Because we are here in times of war. And during any war, people will get hurt. Now some can stand back and let this happen, but I can't. If someone has to get hurt, I don't want it to be the innocent people. I want it to be the people who aim to do the hurting. War is never pretty Albus, but I swear to you, on everything I hold dear, I hate it. I hate the fighting. I hate the newspaper articles, I hate the rumors, and I hate knowing that at this very moment, one of my men may be on the verge of killing someone- someone who aimed to kill kids like you. Like that little sister you tried to save. But it has to end. Someone has to get hurt. I'm trying to find Reginald Ares, Albus, because I believe I can end this war- while it's still in its early stages- if I do."

"But what about other people?" Albus asked. "I heard- I heard that you find other people too. EP's or whatever."

Warren nodded, and their eyes broke at this point; they were no longer staring at one another.

"Do you know what Chess is, Al?"

"I'm fourteen" Albus said dryly, hoping that this would count as an answer.

Warren laughed. "I should have been clearer. Do you know how to play it?"

"Yes" Albus answered.

"Well let me ask you Al. Which is the most dangerous piece on a chessboard?"

"The queen" Albus answered, but Warren gave him a stern look.

"I disagree Al. I think it's the pawn."

"The pawn?"

"Yes. Because you see Al, "and he took another sip of his near empty glass before speaking, "The pawn is the most unpredictable. It's the only piece that captures separately then how it moves. If you don't take a good look at the pawn, you may not see its options. And secondly Al, pawns can become queens if left unchecked. But the difference between the queen you start with and the pawn that becomes a queen, is that the pawn that becomes the queen starts out in opposing territory. Already poised to strike. You know, from the beginning of the game, that your opponents' queen is ready for you. But those pawns...well they come out of nowhere. Do you understand?"

"Erm..."

"Those people, Al. They're pawns. We want the king sure...but we need to eliminate the pawns before they can cause any damage. We need to watch out for them. We need to stop them. It's a difficult analogy to grasp, I understand. But you are still young..."

"No, I get it" Albus said. "It's just... I don't know" he finally finished with.

"There's nothing wrong with not agreeing with us, Al. How could I blame you? You've grown up in a world lead by the Ministry, your own father- who I respect very much- was their most prominent Auror for two decades. But I don't want you to side with me Al. Or your father. In the end, Al, only you know where you belong. I just wanted you to see things from my perspective, because I hate to see people go the wrong way about WAR, and what it is we do. Not when they're not informed."

"So- so that's why you wanted to talk to me?" Albus asked, surprised.

"Oh! Oh no!" Warren said, nearly laughing, his voice momentarily losing its persuasive nature. "My apologies, I grew sidetracked. No Al, I actually had Zydrunas fetch you- and I apologize for that- because I wanted to ask you a question. Is that alright Al?"

"Erm- sure. Ask away" Albus said. What else was he supposed to say to that?

"I wanted to ask you, Al. Is there anything...special? About you?"

"Huh? I don't understand" Albus said, in complete honesty.

"Anything about you" Warren said. "Anything at all that you'd consider worthy of note. Of interest. Any particular qualities?"

"No" Albus said with a shrug, once more in complete honesty. "Sorry" he added, not really sure why he was apologizing.

Warren smiled. "Modesty" he said. "I love it. In my opinion, the most impressive and unique of all possible characteristics. You see, Al, a modest person doesn't even know that they're modest. A courageous person can know of their bravery, a cunning person can know that they're cunning, but a modest person can never understand that they are modest. That's the point of it, you see? Any modest person who tells you that they're modest isn't modest at all. I envy that in you Al, as you can see, I'm not very modest. But surely, there must be *something* special about you. Maybe even something that you...don't understand. But know that it is?"

Albus shook his head. What in the world was he talking about? "Sorry" he repeated. "Nothing that I know of."

For the first time in their entire conversation, Warren frowned.

"Very well" he said. "You may leave now, if you wish, I'm sure your friends are worried about you. But I want you to know, Al. You're welcome back at anytime. To see a bit more of what we do around here, and why we do it. Next Hogsmeade visit, perhaps?"

"Erm sure" Albus said. He had to admit, the conversation had enlightened him slightly.

"Would you like an escort back?" Warren asked. "I'd be happy to call for Zydrunas..."

"No thanks" Albus said quickly, not in the mood to be tossed around. "I'm fine, really."

"Are you sure? We're in the outskirts of Hogsmeade Al, it's easy to get lost-"

"No, I'm fine" Albus repeated. "Thanks though."

Warren smiled at him, a smile that he wore even as Albus strode to the door and left, closing it behind him and staring ahead at the empty hallway in a daze. That was it? That was why Warren Waddlesworth had wanted to see him? To find out if there was anything special about him?

This had been a very strange day, he thought as he began walking down the hall lined with red doors. It would be a gift to go back to the castle, to forget this arduous trip to Hogsmeade that had not been worth so much trouble...

A door opened, and he felt a hand around his collar. He tried fighting it, but was pulled roughly through the door and into a dark room. Still trying to fight off the powerful hand, he withdrew his wand-

There was a flash of red light and his wand had been knocked from his hand. The lights of the room flicked on and Albus saw that the person who had grabbed him had disarmed him as well. He adjusted his eyes to the light and saw who it was.

"*Professor Fairhart!*" he gasped, staring directly at the biggest surprise in an already strange day.

It was indeed his former Defense Against the dark Arts teacher, though he looked slightly different. The right side of his face was still unbelievably disfigured, so grotesque that it was nearly as blinding as the light, and his hair was still jet black. Now it was more kept however; slicker.

"What are you doing here Albus!" Fairhart demanded in an aggressive tone that Albus was not used to from him.

"What are you-" but he stopped mid-sentence. He'd just realized how Fairhart was dressed. He was wearing plain black robes, and there was a small silver emblem on them- it looked like the hilt of a sword, with a wand where the blade would be.

"You're part of WAR!" he shouted. And then he felt his body go numb. The fourth person in the picture. The cloaked figure...

"Kind of" Fairhart said, tossing his wand back to him. Albus saw that he looked nervous. "It's hard to explain. But why are you here! I told you that you were in danger!"

"You told me wha- you! *You sent that note!*"

"Albus listen to me" Fairhart said, and he sounded panicked. "You should have listened to my letter. You are in danger here. You must leave at once, and never return, do you understand me?"

"No" Albus said simply. "I was already here. I talked with Warren..."

"*With Warren...?*"

"It's okay" Albus said quickly. "I'm fine. He just wanted to talk to me. And I might come back" he added defiantly.

"What? No! These people are dangerous Albus!"

"Not really" he argued. "I mean, to other people. But they have a good point on some things, really. And if they're so bad, why are you one of them?"

Fairhart gawked at him. "It is unimportant why I am here Albus. I'm here because I need to be. But you do not know Wands and Redemption Albus. These people are very dangerous, even to you. They break many laws-"

"But are they really laws?" Albus asked. "I mean, if not everyone follows them-"

"Oh dear" Fairhart said, and he brought his palm to his face. "He's already gotten to you" he added, more to himself than to Albus. "Albus I need you to listen very carefully to me" he said. He crouched down and put his hands on Albus' shoulders so that they were face to face. Albus looked to his right and saw that his shoulders were being squeezed. He saw the silver ring glinting on Fairhart's finger as well, which Albus had just realized now, had writing on it...

"These people speak in half truths Albus. They have ulterior motives. You mustn't return here, not ever."

"No!" Albus said, surprised at even himself. He had a great deal of respect for Fairhart, but he was sick of being told what to do. Had he not just discussed this with Warren? That only he knew where he belonged? "I can make my own decisions..."

Fairhart sighed. He stood up and looked around the room, muttering to himself as he did so.

"How can I show you..." he was saying.

Albus too looked around the room, and saw that he was in a room virtually identical to Fairhart's office at Hogwarts. There was the small bed, the smaller round table. And there was the shelf with which a pensieve sat...



There was a sudden knock on the door, and both Albus and Fairhart jumped.

"Stay quiet" Fairhart said softly. "What!" he yelled at the door.

"Sancticus! Warren wants to see you!" yelled a voice through the door that Albus recognized.

"In a few minutes!" Fairhart yelled back.

"He wants to see you now!" The Hammer barked.

"I said in a few minutes!" Fairhart snapped.

"Don't make me break down this door!" The Hammer spat angrily.

"Don't make *me* break down this door!" Fairhart retorted with malice.

There was a brief silence after this, followed by the sound of footsteps walking away. Fairhart strode towards the pensieve on the shelf and dug through it, finally removing something from it. A small glass vial.

"Take this" he said, thrusting the vial into Albus' hands. "Find a pensieve. Watch it. Perhaps then- then you will see..."

"See what?" Albus asked. "What's this a memory of? What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"Go! Now! Try not to be seen. Tell no one we that spoke not even that we met. Show this memory to no one else! Go!"

And he forced him back through the red door, slamming it in his face rudely.

"Hey!" Albus shouted, his voice reverberating all throughout the empty hall. He banged on the door. "Open up!" he yelled. There was no answer. "Open up!" he yelled, banging several more times, though all to no avail.

Albus cursed under his breath, stuffing the glass vial into his robes as he did so. He stared at the motionless door for another moment before turning on his heel and leaving.

Little did Albus know however, that while he was wandering through Hogsmeade trying to find his friends before they left without him, another conversation was going on in Waddlesworth's office.

Waddlesworth was still sitting at his desk, though he was not smiling or drinking wine. Zydrunas was standing next to him, arms crossed, and there was another man in the room now as well. Fairhart was in the corner, leaning against the wall casually.

"Do you think he was lying?" Zydrunas asked Waddlesworth.

"I cannot be sure" Waddlesworth replied. "But if our contact in Ares' group is correct, then Ares wants that boy. Needs him. And if our contact at Hogwarts is correct, then that boy knows that he wields a strange power. Whether he's made the connection or not, I do not know."

"What do we do?" Zydrunas asked.

Waddlesworth turned to Fairhart. "Investigate, Sancticus" he said. "Keep an eye on the boy; find out what makes Ares want him so badly. And if Ares needs him alive...then kill him before he can get it."

Fairhart stared at him for a moment before nodding his head.

"I thought we didn't kill innocent children?" Zydrunas asked, a malicious smile curling on his lips.

"Chess, Zydrunas" Waddlesworth answered. "Sometimes pieces must be sacrificed..."

## Chapter 11: Blackwood's Revenge

Albus spent the next few days recuperating from the Hogsmeade trip. The wind outside had grown bitter and tended to smack you in the face if you didn't hold your arms up, and the general chill of the air made staying inside common place anyway. He instead lounged around the castle, attempting to do his homework and allowing things to mull over in his mind.

What had happened with Warren Waddlesworth? What had made this man- this very dangerous man, who Albus had never met- become so interested in him? Or more accurately, in anything special about him?

"Do you think it has to do with the newspaper article?" Morrison asked from a few feet away. He was sitting by the common room's fire lazily while Albus played Scorpius in chess- something that Scorpius had never beaten him in.

"What could that have to do with it?" Albus asked, sliding his bishop all the way across the board diagonally and taking Scorpius' rook.

"Damn, didn't even see that..." he muttered.

"I dunno" Morrison said, shrugging. "But it's a bit strange isn't it? Same day that article comes out, Fairhart sends you a letter telling you not to go to Hogsmeade?"

Albus shrugged. Fairhart was another part of the mystery. How could it be, that he was a member of Wands and Redemption? Was he not an Auror? Wasn't he supposed to be working alongside his own father, scouring the world for Ares? And Albus had not forgotten the tiny glass vial either, the vial that would supposedly turn him away from WAR, the memory that he was supposed to tell no one else about...

"So what do you think it's a memory of?" Morrison said, grinning when Albus didn't respond to his other answer. He had showed them the small vial the second that they had made it back to the castle from Hogsmeade, and Morrison had been most curious as to its contents.

"I really don't know" Albus admitted. "I haven't put much thought into it really. To be honest I'm not sure if I even want to view it. Can't do that" he quickly added, as Scorpius made to move his pawn up.

"Why not?"

"That puts you in check from my queen..."

"Damn."

"Why don't you want to see it?" Morrison asked him.

"Because he doesn't want to be turned off from WAR" Scorpius said, still glancing down at the board. "Isn't that right Al?"

"No" he said determinedly.

"Oh come on, yes it is! You even told me the other day you thought that Waddlesworth had made a few good points. And that you were thinking of going back!"

"Well he did!" Albus retorted. "And I don't mean like joining! I don't want to kill people. I was just thinking of heading back and hearing a bit more about what Warren has to say."

"Why do you call him Warren?" Morrison asked. "Why not Waddlesworth?"

Albus ignored him. He felt sweat pour off of his neck, he was beginning to feel attacked. "Look, I just don't want to view it because it's Fairhart's business. And besides, I don't know if I'll be able to anyway. The only pensieve I know about is my dad's..."

"Al, Fairhart wants you to see that memory for a reason" Scorpius said sternly, not even taking his move so as to stare him down. "Whatever's in it, it's supposed to help you."

Albus ignored this as well. How did it all connect? Fairhart and Blackwood were both members of WAR? But then what was Blackwood doing here? And why was Fairhart warning him against his own organization?

"Hey Al," Morrison started out of nowhere. "Do you think that Fairhart could be like-I don't know- like a double agent or something?"

"Makes sense" Scorpius said, pushing his pawn up and immediately having it taken by Albus' knight. He frowned before continuing. "I mean, you reckon it was Fairhart in that picture, right? So maybe he was there years ago...and then when they disbanded he became an Auror? And now that they're back, Fairhart goes back to them, and is getting information for like the Ministry or something?"

"Maybe" Albus said dryly, and he could feel a headache coming now. "But I still think Blackwood's connected somehow. And what kind of information is Fairhart getting? What does the Ministry care what WAR does, shouldn't they both be focusing on Ares?"

Neither one of them seemed to have an answer for this. Scorpius merely made to take his pawn with his own.

"You don't want to do that" Albus said quickly. "That leaves your other rook open."

"But it's the only move I have!" Scorpius said angrily. "Otherwise your pawn will take it, and then become a queen!"

Albus stared at the board, where sure enough one of his pawns was extremely close to Scorpius' side of the board. Very close to becoming a queen.

"I don't want to play anymore" Albus said sourly, pushing the board away.

"What like- you forfeit?" Scorpius asked. "Like- I win?"

Albus nodded. "I'm going to bed" he said.

The days were slipping by quicker now however, it seemed that all of the thinking that Albus was doing was making time speed up. Classes tended to end more quickly, dinner was over in a flash, and Albus was in bed before he knew it. When time was regular however, it seemed like he always managed to catch a glimpse of his handy work.

Rose did not look as happy as she did before the Hogsmeade trip now. She stayed mostly quiet in class and he frequently caught her trying her best not to show how distraught she was. Likewise, Lance didn't seem to hover around her, looking for her anymore. This solidified two things. Their date had been a disaster, and Albus was a terrible, terrible person.

"You were trying to help out a friend mate" Morrison said to him as they exited History of Magic one day. "That's it..."

But the friend in question seemed a bit sad as well. Scorpius, who, if Albus remembered correctly, had been supposed to pounce and comfort Rose at this point in the diabolical scheme, was staying quiet as well, and far away from her. Albus thought that he knew what the meaning of this was. He had not expected Rose to become so upset- and thus unapproachable. And now that Albus really thought about it, he must have been feeling even guiltier. If he actually liked Rose as much as he said he did, than surely, seeing her so upset was agonizing?

The one person who seemed to be a conundrum in the whole situation however, much to Albus' chagrin, was Mirra. She had stayed rather cool towards him since the Hogsmeade trip, was very obvious about her lack of interest about his conversation with Waddlesworth, and even went as far as to stand him up at the library once. He knew that she knew what he had done- though he did not think that she had told Rose. Whether this was because she didn't want to upset her friend further or so as to not make things harder for him he did not know.

"We screwed up mate" Scorpius told him begrudgingly one Saturday as they made their way down to the Quidditch practice that he had scheduled. The bitter cold ate at their faces, and Albus knew that his fingers were numb from gripping his broomstick over his shoulder, but he was much too interested in what Scorpius had to say to care. "We screwed up big time."

"You think?" Albus said sarcastically. "Mirra thinks I'm some tyrant who screwed over his cousin. She's going to start dating that arse Eckley again, you just wait and see."

"She looks so upset now" Scorpius said, and Albus knew that he was talking about Rose and had probably not even heard him. "How am I supposed to get close to her if she doesn't talk to anyone?"

Albus sighed. "I suppose we could always just come clean. Tell Rose about what we did, and then tell Lance that everything we said was false."

"I don't fancy explaining that" Scorpius said, with the worry noticeable in his voice.

"Well we don't have to say exactly why we did it. We could always just say it's because we're so protective of Rose..."

"They won't buy that..."

"Yeah I know" Albus said, frowning as he stopped in the middle of the pitch. There was a silence between them as the rest of the team made their way down to the field, all of them fighting the wind. After a few moments of neither of them talking, Scorpius finally spoke.

"We could blame it on Morrison!" he said excitedly, as if surprised he hadn't thought of it earlier. "Say it was all his idea!"

Albus rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to sell out Morrison to help you correct a mistake you made!" he snapped.

There was another minute of silence before Scorpius answered. "Please?"

"No! Fly up to those hoops now..."

Scorpius mounted his broom and took off like a jet to the three rings while the rest of the team gathered around him.

"Alright guys," Albus started, "Same game plan. Chasers, I want team work. Beaters, let's see some double teaming. I know it's cold but we'll probably be playing in even worse so..."

The upcoming Quidditch game was one of the few things on Albus' mind that wasn't bothering him. What with Waddlesworth's voice ringing in his ears, and the thought of Fairhart's memory stowed away in his trunk, with waking up every morning sweating, his eyes stinging, and with Mirra all but ignoring him, the idea of something as enjoyable as a Quidditch game was a comforting thought. Add in the fact that Scorpius' performance had not suffered at all, and Albus would go as far as to say he was confident in a victory.

The only real problem was whether or not Scorpius would even be able to play. So long as he got good grades his mother was all for it- but he wasn't getting good grades in one class. Professor Blackwood's mean streak had continued as of late, and his grade continued to falter, despite

some very adequate, and sometimes even proficient performances. Still, as his parents didn't know about this, Scorpius was supposed to be in the clear.

But there was still one Potions lesson left. The Monday before the game, set for the last Saturday of November, was one of their most grueling lessons yet. They were stuck making the immensely complex Consiliserum, also known as the Drink of the Wise, a potion meant to make you more logical and intuitive for a set amount of time.

"Thirty minutes left" Professor Blackwood snapped, her voice cracking like a whip in the silence of the dungeon, many students flinching from it's sound.

Albus stared down at his turquoise potion lazily. It was all but finished; he figured that he would add a hint of Salamander blood to it in a bit as a finishing touch, but apart from that he was free to let his eyes wander. Morrison had done okay, his potion was a bright green, but it at least wasn't melting his cauldron. Scorpius was stirring his cautiously, and it was a dark shade of blue that Albus thought was very good- though of course, not perfect.

Albus glanced backwards as the crackling of potions filled his ears. He saw Mirra working on her own potion, which looked to be around as good as Morrison's. She looked up and saw him, but turned her attention back to her work without acknowledging him.

Frowning, he turned back to Scorpius, whose eyes were a blur as he read the directions in his book. Albus hoped that he wasn't going too fast- missing a step could cost him. Even as he thought this however, he could have sworn that Scorpius was putting in way to many doxy eggs. The book called for only a handful.

Minutes later they heard the screeching of a chair, indicating that Professor Blackwood had stood up and was ready to evaluate their work. No one lifted their eyes to see her, they all merely kept their heads down in an attempt to tweak their surely inadequate potions.

All except Albus of course. Quite confident in what he had created he glanced upwards at Professor Blackwood as she approached the first student. His eyes widened in surprise. She looked younger. She was closer to the picture that he had seen of her than he had seen all year. What was it that brought about this change in appearance? And then Albus remembered it. It was her smile. She was smiling.

He felt his stomach lurch. If she was smiling, that was a very bad sign indeed. This flew through his mind as she rounded his row, and he saw that her toothy grin was twisted- accompanied by a treacherous thought.

She glanced down at his potion and gave an approving nod as she always did. Albus felt no sense of comfort however, not as she casted a sideways glance at Morrison's potion, before turning to Scorpius'.

He still had his head down, but he was sweating a great deal, and his eyes were darting back and forth as if he was hoping that ignoring her gaze would make her go away.

"Too many doxy eggs, " she said quietly and coldly. And she tapped his cauldron with her wand. The contents vanished at once. Albus heard Scorpius give a low whimper of disappointment.

Professor Blackwood leaned over, forcing Scorpius to recline back and make eye contact. He wore a look of both anger and disbelief, and did not blink as she stared at him nastily.

"Another failed assignment then, Mr. Malfoy" she said in her disturbingly calm, yet commanding voice. "Perhaps poor grades are not getting to you. A detention is in order, I think. To be served on Saturday."

"*What?*" he said, furious, and Albus' jaw dropped. A detention on Saturday... that meant that he couldn't play Quidditch.

"I believe I was quite clear" she said, her smile widening. Albus saw Morrison stare at her in amazement, and indeed, some of the other students around them, the Slytherins, were looking at her in surprise as well. "Detention, Saturday. My office. We will discuss the punishment itself then."

Scorpius mouthed wordlessly at her, but Albus was not going to stop there. Scorpius was not only his friend- he was his Keeper.

"Miss, please" he spoke up. "Scorpius has a Quidditch match-"

"I suggest you find a reserve then, Mr. Potter" she said, her mouth straight. "Mr. Malfoy will not be participating."

"You piece of-" Morrison started to shout, but Scorpius stood up and began yelling instead, much louder, and Albus saw that he was close to tears. Perhaps the pressure of what had happened with Rose was getting to him. Or maybe it was all Blackwood.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" he snapped, and Albus saw Blackwood's nostrils flare, her eyebrows raise dangerously. "You miserable hag! You have no reason to treat me like-"

The entirety of the class gasped, and Albus even saw Rose look up, stunned. He yanked at his friends robes. "Scorpius *shut up*" he hissed.

"Fifty points from Slytherin Mr. Malfoy" Blackwood said. "How dare you say such things to me! I have every right to punish lackadaisical, insubordinate students such as you! I will be speaking to the Headmistress about having you removed from the team entirely, and *don't you dare say another word*" she added menacingly as Scorpius opened his mouth once more, still fuming, his cheeks flushed and his face wearing a look of dislike that was perhaps only matched by the woman standing across from him.



Scorpius snatched up his bag and bolted out of the classroom. Albus watched his friend go, knowing that he was unable to say anything. Morrison did not seem to have this inhibition however.

"You SUCK!" he said, pounding his fist on the table angrily.

"Another twenty points from Slytherin" Blackwood spat. "Hold your tongue Mr. Vincent. Or Morrison, whichever you prefer."

The last five minutes of class went by quietly, Albus still in disbelief at what had just happened. Professor Blackwood resumed sitting at her desk right before the bell rang, and as soon as the door was closed behind them Albus knew what all the talking would be about.

"Who knew Malfoy had it in him-" Bartleby Bing muttered to Dante Haug.

"What an idiot" he thought he heard Eckley say aloud. This was all that he managed to hear however, as Albus skidded through the dungeons, Morrison right behind him. He entered the Common Room and went up the stairs to their dormitory two at a time.

Scorpius was laying down on his bed, the curtains ripped down to the floor, a pillow over his head, his bag's contents spilled all over the floor in front of him. What looked like several books had been chucked at the wall so hard that pages were spilling out.

Not knowing what to say and knowing that Scorpius valued reading, he immediately took to the books.

"*Reparo*" he said, tapping each of them in turn with his wand. He watched as the pages re-inserted themselves again and again.

Scorpius flipped the pillow off of his face when he heard Albus' voice. He sat up straight and Albus saw that his cheeks were still red and his teeth still gritted.

"You okay mate?" Morrison asked him, sitting down on his own bed.

"I just can't believe it" Scorpius moaned, shaking his head. "I *cannot* believe her..."

Albus sat down on his own bed and stared down at the floor, still not knowing what to say. Scorpius had been so looking forward to this. For years he had wanted to play Quidditch, and he was now finally allowed. All those practices...their relevance snatched away before the opening game. All because of Blackwood.

Albus gritted his own teeth and clenched his fists. He stood up. "You're playing on Saturday mate" he said, and Scorpius looked up. "I'm going to talk to Blackwood right now."

"Don't be ridiculous" Morrison said.

"Al don't even-" Scorpius started.

"No I'm going to" he said, and he began walking towards the door. "Because if she doesn't let you play, she's not going to the one talking to Professor McGonagall at all. That'll be me. And I know a thing or two about her..."

He stormed out of the dormitory with a look of determination on his face, ignoring the people in the common room. He exited through the blank stretch of wall and began the trek through the dungeon labyrinth, trying to steady his breathing as he neared the room that he had just left.

What was he doing? He should turn around right now. Starting an argument with Blackwood was sure to lose Slytherin more points, and making a demand was sure to get him a detention as well. It was sure to leave Slytherin without a Seeker.

But no, that's not what he was doing at all. He was playing dirty. Being aggressive. Showing Blackwood that she was a person just like everyone else... only nastier.

He knocked on her door softly. Then, realizing that he wasn't intimidating at all, he knocked again, only much louder and harder.

"Enter" he heard her say.

He opened the door and saw that it was a slightly different scene than their last meeting. She was not writing a letter to anyone and there was much more light than just a candle. But still, she was sitting at her desk, leering at him; unmoving. He briskly walked over to her.

"Yes?" she said, her seemingly placid voice sending chills down his spine.

"You can't give Scorpius a detention on Saturday" he said, getting right to the point.

"Excuse me?" she said, her eyebrows raised once more.

"Scorpius is on the Quidditch team" he said. "You have to let him play. You took points, fine. But not letting him play is- is unreasonable" he stammered out, wishing that he had not screwed up and shown weakness near the end.

She stared back at him viciously, her lips curling upwards. "I do not respect audacity Mr. Potter. I suggest you leave before you lose Slytherin more points."

Albus put his hands down on her desk and leaned over. She did nothing to indicate notice. He swallowed. This was it. This was blackmail.

"Scorpius is going to play" he said. "Because I know. I know that you're a member of-"

She held up her hand to stop him. Albus' eyes widened in surprise. She glared at up at him.

"Stop right there, Mr. Potter" she said, her voice a mere whisper. "Before you continue with your pathetic threat, let me tell you what *I know*. I know that an illegal dark object was in my desk. I know that it belonged to your little friend. And I know it's not in there anymore."

Albus felt sweat trickle down his eyebrow.

"And I know" she continued, "That I lock my doors. And the last thing I know...Is that Mr. Malfoy does not want anyone knowing that."

Albus stared at her coldly, though he slowly removed the pressure of his hands from her desk.

"Now Mr. Potter" she said. "What is it that you know?"

Albus continued to stare, thoughts flooding through his head. She thought that Scorpius had stolen the Hand of Glory back. But that wasn't the main point here. The main point was she knew that he had it. Knew that she could tell the Headmistress about it, and that it would be found. Then Scorpius would have to explain what it was doing here...why he couldn't have left it home...

"So...I'm Keeper then?" Morrison muttered at dinner a few hours later, after Albus had explained the situation to both of them. Scorpius was stabbing at his baked potato, muttering under his breath and not paying attention.

Albus nodded curtly before returning to his roast beef. He glanced up at the high table, where he saw Professor Blackwood sipping her goblet, her eyes lingering on the Slytherin table for a fraction of a second before turning back to her food.

How much did she know, as a member of WAR? What was she doing here, what was her purpose? To spy on someone? Was she in contact with Warren Waddlesworth and the rest of her organization? With... Fairhart?

"Scorpius, mate" he said lowly. "There's nothing that I could do. She has us backed into a corner."

"I hate her so much" Scorpius said, shaking his head as he returned to his plate. "You should have told McGonagall. Who cares if she knows about the Hand? She doesn't belong here; she'll be in Azkaban before they're worried about my family."

"I don't know" Morrison said. "They're not exactly arresting Renegades on sight are they? That big bloke walked up to us in broad daylight in Hogsmeade. We'd have to prove she's dangerous or something. "

"They're all dangerous" Scorpius spat back.

Albus kept his head down, still shoveling food into his mouth. He certainly disliked Blackwood...but he was ambivalent about Wands and Redemption as a whole. He had not forgotten Warren's support of his father or his insistence that he wanted to do nothing more than protect innocent lives. And Fairhart...Fairhart was a member. Perhaps Blackwood was just a bad egg?

He looked up at Scorpius to see if he had anything more to say on the matter, but he had turned to Morrison instead. He gave his friend a clap on the shoulder, a dignified look on his face.

"Mate...Good luck Saturday" he said, and Morrison nodded.

Albus had to admit that he was a bit worried about how his other best friend would play. Even with his mind focused on Blackwood and Fairhart, and the mysterious memory as well, he kept Quidditch at the top of his head, and made sure that his Keeper- even his reserve one, was prepared.

He could not help but feel slightly bad for Morrison however. Learning that he had a job to perform with less than a week's notice was not how he wanted Morrison to play, but as it was now his best shot, he was forced to scrap by with having a single practice before the game. What's more- the pressure was on now more than ever. Many Slytherins had been quite surprised to hear that the talented Keeper that they were hyped up about was not going to participate. Morrison was fresh news- and he would be tested immediately.

The morning of the game came with an air of tension around it that Albus seldom felt when pertaining to Quidditch- every game was important, but this was his first as captain. He was *leading* this team. Against his brother. Win or loss, his record started today.

"Good luck out there guys" Scorpius said morosely, clapping them both on the back. "I'll be heading off to Blackwood's in a bit" he added.

"Any idea what you're doing yet?" Morrison asked him.

Scorpius shrugged. "Lines maybe" he said.

Morrison flashed him a thumbs up, but Albus merely grunted. They both rose from their table, pushing aside their plates (Morrison's was cleared, Albus had scarcely touched his) and began the walk down to the locker room. They got there a little bit before the rest of the team, and were already changed by the time that the rest of the team arrived.

They seemed to be taking to Morrison okay, but they still looked grim as they entered. Albus saw Holden Rawn give him a rather bold stare as he pulled on his shoulder pads, and Tyler Graham was eyeing him up as well, as if trying to see if his bigger build would make him a more formidable Keeper than Scorpius. After several moments of silence Albus realized something. Didn't Atticus always have a speech before each game?

"Alright guys" he said suddenly, and they all looked up at him in surprise. He paced in front of them, trying to improvise. Had Atticus planned all of his words out?

"First game of the season. The first step" he said, still pacing, but pausing ostensibly for dramatic effect- though he was actually thinking of what to say next. "We've got a practically fresh team, and I know we're all eager to get out there and show what we're made of. Now Jam- Gryffindor may think that they're better than us. But that ends today."

They all muttered in approval. Albus swelled with pride.

"The Cup is ours" he continued. "And I plan on keeping it that way. Let's not let those brawny buffoons ever think that they've got a shot of getting it back!"

They cheered. Morrison clapped and whistled even. "Take five gentlemen" he said. "Rest up, get focused."

They began talking amongst themselves while Albus poked his head out of the locker room and into the stands, which were full of chattering students already. The conditions were far from ideal- it was even colder than their practices. But still, no precipitation of any kind meant clear vision. It seemed like it would just be a battle against the wind.

He glanced up at the Slytherin side and saw a few recognizable people- including one surprise. At the very top of the stands was Professor Blackwood. She was looking extremely bored, and her eyes kept searching the sky, as if she was examining the clouds.

Albus spat on the ground. As if she cared about the game. But wait. What was she doing here anyway? Surely, she should be in the dungeons with Scorpius? Wasn't his friend serving a detention? Perhaps she had only come to see the beginning of the game, to see her team fail without their star Keeper...

He next glanced at the Gryffindor side. He spotted Mirra right away; she was sitting between Rose and Hornsbrook. He couldn't really see her face however. The entire rest of the row consisted of redheads, one of which, Albus saw happily, was Hugo. He was sitting near the middle. He thought that they looked like a slightly smaller bunch though. There was Molly, and next to her Lucy...

"Hey Al" Morrison said suddenly, and Albus turned around and re-entered the locker room. His friend was stretching, his gangly arms reaching upwards as he gritted his teeth.

"What?" he answered.

"Good turn out?" Morrison asked while the other players continued to talk amongst themselves.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Morrison continued to stretch, though he turned his eyes towards the ground. "I dunno" he said. "I mean like...Are there a lot of people there? From our house? Like maybe Bartlby and Dante and, I dunno maybe Melonie..."

"Didn't look really" Albus said. "Saw Blackwood though" he added, his eyes narrowing. "Five galleons says she's cheering for Gryffindor..."

"Shouldn't she be torturing Scorpius right about now?"

Albus shrugged. "I'm sure she'll get around to it."

The noise in the pitch had grown heavier now, and Albus had his teammate's line up behind him in anticipation. He heard the announcer holler in a muffled voice, indicating that he was calling out the Gryffindor team.

"I was just out there" Albus said to them all as they waited to be called. "It's cold and windy, but nothing should get in the way. Just throw the quaffle against the wind- nothing fancy."

He was about to add more when he heard the announcer calling out more, and Albus emerged from the locker room first into the icy air, his team behind him.

"And your defending champions!" rang out a voice that Albus did not recognize; the previous announcer, Head Boy Carter Montgomery, had graduated the year prior. Albus looked up and saw that he was a Hufflepuff with spiky black hair.

Almost immediately after he had said the world champions, three quarters of the crowd began booing with indignation. Albus shrugged this off, not even fazed by it any more. He instead allowed the new commentator's words to occupy him.

"Vincent, Peesley, Faulkner, Graham, Rawn, Kurgish, and Potter!"

Albus walked towards the center of the pitch grinning at all of the noise. Wind blasted him in the face, but he took no notice of it as he neared his brother, who was standing in the Seeker position, grinning cockily, his hair blowing in the wind. Albus looked behind him and saw Eckley smirking as well- a far nastier one. And next to Eckley, holding the other Beater's bat, was Fred.

"Really James?" Albus asked as the commentator continued to yell out through the stadium. "You're going to get my own cousin to knock Bludgers at me?"

"Silly Al" his brother responded, shaking his head. "I'll catch the Snitch long before that happens..."

"Captains shake hands!" Mr. Wood said to both of them.

Albus extended his hand and James quickly grasped it; giving it an extra squeeze before releasing. His cocky smirk widened as the whistle blew.

"And they're off!" the announcer said as Albus kicked off, his eyes immediately searching through the sky for a glimmer of gold. "It's Potter against Potter here! Both made team captains prior to the season! One is looking for a repeat of last year's final, the other not so much!"

Albus smirked to himself as he soared through the sky, the fierce wind making the next few words incomprehensible. He lapped around the pitch once or twice, keeping one eye out for the Snitch and the other on James- who he knew was excellent at getting a good jump. It wasn't long however before Morrison was put to the test.

"And Vincent looks to face his first shot as Kennigen streaks down the pitch!" the announcer said. "Vincent coming in as a replacement for rookie Malfoy, who was unable to play- and...Kennigan scores!"

Albus groaned as the Gryffindor chaser, who looked rather small and unskilled, threw the Quaffle right through Morrison's arms. Morrison cursed loudly as he threw the Quaffle to Damian Peesley. Albus wanted to tell him not to worry about it- it was only one goal after all- but he was distracted by sudden movement. James, hovering near his own set of hoops, was streaking upwards fast. Albus saw a flash of gold rather far away ahead of him. He sped up himself.

"Oh no you don't!" he muttered to himself through gritted teeth as he made to cut off his brother horizontally. He needn't have worried however. Halfway there Kurgish, his new Beater, had hit a well placed bludger towards James, who had been forced to veer off track. Trying to capitalize, Albus gained height as well-

He began spinning uncontrollably. The other Bludger had knocked into him, and it took Albus a moment to control his broom and set himself straight. By the time he'd looked back at where the Snitch was, it was gone. Frowning, he turned around to see the culprit.

"Sorry Al" Fred said, a small smile on his face as he hovered across from him, holding his Beater's Bat with pride.

"It's all good" Albus replied, grinning. "Just don't expect a Christmas present-"

But Eckley had hovered up to where Fred was. He patted him on the back and pounded his fist. "Nice shot Weasley" he said, grinning himself.

Albus rolled his eyes. "Don't start fondling each other just yet" he said sarcastically. "Game's not over..."

And he sped off in the opposite direction, careful not to get distracted any further.

"Potter exchanging some words with the Gryffindor beaters there" the commentator said. "But he's back in the game now, and just in time too. Looks like Vincent may be about to face his second shot-"

Morrison saved it. A rather nice deking move by one of the Gryffindor chasers amounted to nothing as Morrison spun in mid-air, knocking the Quaffle away with the back of his Broomstick. The Slytherin quarter of the crowd cheered fanatically, though of course it was nearly all blocked out by boos. Albus grinned however, and did a little loop to signify his joy. Then it was back to business.

Morrison seemed to be settled down now though. He saved four of his next five shots, the only one getting by him being an easy flopper that literally bounced off of his shoulder and through the middle hoop. Unfortunately however, the Gryffindor Keeper was doing even better. He had saved every shot fired against him- though admittedly, most of them were rather easy.

Albus sighed and resumed his search for the Snitch. James had settled himself back into his usual corner, keeping an eye on things from behind his own hoops. Albus shook his head and smiled. That strategy didn't do much last game.

"The Snitch is keeping it low" rang out the announcer's voice after fifteen minutes or so. "The *real* talk here has been how evenly matched the defense is..."

It was certainly true. Morrison had let up one more shot, but considering how many were thrown at him, being down thirty to zip wasn't bad at all. The Beaters were doing their jobs on both ends as well. Albus wasn't hit again- but there were a few close calls, and twice he watched Chasers drop like flies next to him.

*Only down thirty*, he kept telling himself. In Quidditch it was important to get the points right. He didn't want to catch the Snitch when they were down by so much. Ending the game and only winning by ten he hardly considered a win at all; Gryffindor would still be right behind them in the standings. But if he could catch the Snitch now...

Almost as soon as he said it he saw it. It was at a distance however, near the middle of the pitch hovering low enough so that it was a steep dive. James was further away however, still searching the sky near his own hoops. He would have to inch slowly towards the ground.

He slowly lowered his broom, jerking out of the way as one of his own chasers flew by him with the Quaffle. Nice and easy now. He was still looking at James, who had no idea where the Snitch was. Time to pick up speed.

He began accelerating at ground level, the game playing high above him. And then he saw him. His brother had somehow spotted him on the ground like a bird eyeing its prey. He jerked his own head quickly in the opposite direction to see where Albus was headed, and then spotted the Snitch himself. The race was on.



Had his brother gotten faster over the summer? It certainly seemed so. James was descending rapidly, going so fast that he looked like a scarlet blur. Albus was forced to turn his head away however and focus on the Snitch, which was now skimming across the grass.

"Come on, faster!" he yelled to his broom, though he knew it was his own skill that would have to get the job done. And then the Snitch did something unexpected. It randomly shot itself away, skimming across the grass as if it were being chased. James turned out of his dive and hovered above Albus for a moment, before flying directly over him.

"Not getting it this time Al!" he heard his brother shout from atop him, and indeed, Albus could see him pulling ahead slightly as they chased the Snitch along the grass. Albus turned to defense. He raised himself up so that he bumped into his older brother; practically head butting him in the jaw as he did so. Even the sound of wind in his ears couldn't block the booing coming from the Gryffindors.

"Cheap move there by the Slytherin keeper!" the announcer said. "All legal though, if not morally reprehensible!"

James didn't seem deterred or irked however. He merely laughed, then slowed down slightly so that he was no longer pulling ahead. Then he moved himself downwards, and Albus felt a head butt of his own. The Gryffindors immediately started cheering, amidst scattered laughs from the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs as well.

"Oh so you want to play like that huh!" Albus snapped, thinking that he must already have a bump on his head.

"Me!" James hollered over the wind. "You started it!"

"These two are really going at it!" shouted the announcer. "How's that for brotherly rivalry!"

"You know what-" Albus started, and he made to twist his entire body up so as to plow into James' stomach. He was unable to however, by the sound of a strange whizzing. Refocusing his attention towards where the Snitch was, he saw that Fred had hit a well placed Bludger towards the two of them so as to separate them.

Albus flew so low that his stomach skimmed the grass. James on the other hand flew high above, and the Bludger soared between them. Albus still felt that he had the advantage though. He still only had to go straight. James had to go straight and curve downwards.

"Still a race to the Snitch here!" Albus heard, even through the crowd and fierce wind. His lips were going numb from the cold and his nose was runny, but he had to keep his eye on the Snitch.

His eyes focused in on it, calculating it's next jump as it continued to skim through the grass. He and his brother were evenly matched in speed, but Albus had to make no turns. He was getting closer and closer-

He was inches from the Snitch now, and he could hear James flying above him, veering his broomstick downwards to cut him off. It was now or never. He took a swipe, stretching himself off of his broom as far as he could-

"Slytherin wins!"

Boo's filled the stadium once more, but Albus was much too relieved to care. He squeezed the tiny golden sphere in his hand tightly, letting its batting wings warm his fingers. He was shivering now, though this didn't last long. His team had swooped down around him now, and they were all patting him on the shoulder and grabbing at him. He saw Morrison among them, grinning wildly.

Three fourths of the crowd was leaving the scene now, shaking their heads in disappointment. Albus saw James marching back to the locker room, shaking his own head wordlessly, and Albus saw Fred walking along side speaking frantically. Albus thought that he knew why. Had Fred not fired that Bludger, the game may have ended differently.

"Slytherin wins the first game of the season one hundred and fifty to thirty! A sharp performance from both Keepers tonight, and another great catch by Potter!"

Albus grinned as the announcer said this, then looked towards the opposite end of the field, where the Slytherins had stormed the pitch and were now running towards their team. Scorpius was leading the pack, grinning broadly. The first thing that he did when arriving was clap Morrison on back.

"Great job mate- really" he said, and Morrison grinned at him.

"What are you doing here?" Albus asked his blonde friend as Scorpius gave him a clap as well.

"Blackwood never showed" Scorpius said. "I was waiting in there for ten minutes before I decided to just come to the game..."

Albus immediately glanced up at the top of the Slytherin stands, which were mostly cleared, except for one person. Professor Blackwood was still sitting in the top row, staring at the sky as if a game had not even happened. What was she looking for? Why had she neglected to go to her own assigned detention?

And then Albus saw it. A crow was flying over the pitch, circling it. He looked back at Blackwood and saw that she had turned a ghastly white. She was eyeing the black bird with the same amount of fear etched into her face as she had the last time it'd arrived. The crowd on the field was oblivious however. They were all busy laughing and shouting, discussing the party that would surely be taking place in the common room in just a few minutes.

But Albus saw everything. He watched as the crow continued to circle high above, finally flying towards- as Albus had predicted- Blackwood. It hovered over her head and dropped something from its feet. A small white envelope.

Albus watched in awe as Blackwood looked to her left and right guiltily, then stowed the letter inside of her robes and stood up to leave.

"Come on Al!" Morrison said, and Albus was snapped away from his thoughts. "We've got a celebration to be had!"

Albus nodded as Damian Peesley ruffled his hair and made to pick him up, almost as if to carry him back to the common room like a king.

"No really- stop."

But no one was listening. They continued to crowd around him, all of them beaming. By the time that Albus had moved himself out of the crowd and looked back at the stands, Blackwood was gone.

## Chapter 12: The Return Home

Defeating Gryffindor in the first match of the season proved to be much more than just a regular win for Albus. It was certainly nice to have the first game of his captainship be a victory, and he couldn't argue with the re-emergence of popularity either, but it was the small perks accompanied with it that was most staggering. Seeing James walk off the field shaking his head had been grin inducing to say the least, and it was made even better by the sight of Eckley following him.

But even outside the realm of Quidditch rivalries, the victory was an important one; it had cheered his friends up. Morrison was brimming with self confidence now, and Scorpius, though disheartened at being unable to take credit for the win, seemed brighter as well. In fact, both of them were so cheery that they had finally started putting serious effort into theorizing about what was going on with WAR- and its mysterious members.

"This is a chart" Scorpius said happily, pushing over a piece of parchment to Albus on a chilly morning early in December. Albus shoveled porridge into his mouth in an attempt to wake himself up- he had had another troubled night's sleep.

"A chart of what?" He mumbled, pulling the paper close to him, and he immediately grew confused. It had a bunch of jagged lines on it, all with miniscule writing thrown in.

"A chart of the current situation" Scorpius said. "From what I've got here, I've got a bit figured out. First off, Fairhart is a part of the Ministry" he added, pointing his finger at a small, poorly drawn stick figure with half of it's face missing.

"I did the illustrations" Morrison said, grinning at his work from across the table.

This much was obvious. Blackwood's drawing, for instance, had some very noticeable lady parts added to her stick figure.

Scorpius traced the line next to Fairhart over to Blackwood, who was standing next to a big, bald stick figure, obviously meant to portray the Hammer. "Fairhart is undercover at WAR" he said. "Probably because, like you know from that picture, he used to be a part of it. Now Blackwood, is undercover at Hogwarts."

"What?" Albus asked. "Look, we shouldn't even be talking about this now anyway..." he said quietly, eyeing the rest of the Slytherin table, though no one else was paying attention.

"No one's listening in" Scorpius hissed dismissively. "Anyway, like I was saying, WAR put Blackwood here. They're still communicating, too, if you really did see that crow again."

"I don't think that's WAR though" Albus argued. "It might just be Fairhart."

"Regardless" Scorpius batted it away. "Fairhart is technically a part of WAR, so there. What I'm interested in, is what message she's receiving. You got a warning. What's hers?"

"Whatever it was, it must have been pretty important to get her away from punishing you though, eh mate?" Morrison said.

"That's right" Scorpius said. "I think that Blackwood is here for you Al" he said suddenly.

Albus scoffed at him. "For me?" he asked.

"Yeah, for you" he said quietly. "I don't know why she hates me, but Waddlesworth knows something about you if he thinks you're so special. And the only way he's getting that is from Blackwood. Fairhart tried to stop you going to Hogsmeade though. I think that he wants Blackwood to report to him, so that he can feed Waddlesworth false information-

"What- what are you on about?" Albus said, dropping his spoon. "I don't need this complicated rundown" he said. "Just be simple!"

"Basically," Morrison said. "Fairhart is a good guy, and Blackwood is a bad guy."

Albus rolled his eyes. "You needed an elaborate chart to figure out *that*" he said, grabbing the sheet of paper and crumpling it up.

"This is important stuff mate" Scorpius said. "Your life could be in danger here."

"I'm not in danger" Albus said coolly, picking up his bag and slinging it over his shoulder as the bell rang. "And I think you guys are over thinking a lot of this" he added, walking away from the table and heading towards the stairs. "I don't think Fairhart's as big in all this as you lot do."

"Why not?" Morrison asked incredulously. "He was an Auror."

"Yeah but that's not as dangerous as being some undercover in a group full of Renegades" Albus countered. "I mean what if he was figured out? What's he supposed to do against that lot? He's got too much to lose, he's got a kid and all that-

Scorpius stopped in his tracks. "A kid?" he asked. "What are you on about?"

"Oh right" Albus said thoughtfully, stopping himself. "I never told you. I saw a picture last year, when Fairhart was packing his things. He was with this pregnant girl."

"Doesn't mean he's got a kid" Morrison said. "Maybe he just likes taking pictures with soon-to-be mothers?"

"I highly doubt that" Albus said. "And I think he's married, he's got a wedding ring. Family men can't be spies. My dad wouldn't let it happen."

"Lots of guys wear rings" Scorpius said. "They're stylish. As for the picture...I don't know. Fairhart never said anything about having a kid."

"Well how often did you talk to him?" Albus asked as they entered the Charms classroom, where Professor Flitwick was standing on a stack of books, using his wand to write on the blackboard. "We had a few chats, and he never said he didn't."

Scorpius shrugged. All three of them sat down in the back while the rest of their house joined them. Morrison leaned over and began speaking to him however, in a low tone.

"What about that memory though?" he asked. "Going to give it a peek come Christmas break?"

"Maybe" Albus said with a shrug. Then, wanting to drop the whole thing, he turned to Scorpius. "Think I could copy some Muggle Studies while we're in here?"

As the winter holidays grew closer Albus found the general atmosphere of the castle changing. Hagrid began carrying massive Christmas trees into the Great Hall, giving it a cheerful look that brought smiles to Albus' face every morning, it had finally begun snowing, meaning that the warm and cozy common room was being used now more than ever, and some of the teachers were being just downright lazy.

Professor Handit had them recap every other day, and sometimes just let them talk amongst themselves. Herbology and Care for Magical Creatures had been cancelled due to inclement weather, meaning that most days were cut in half, and Albus found that his naps during History of Magic were some of the most comfortable of the year. Predictably however, one professor was not sharing in the Christmas joy.

"Thirty minutes" Professor Blackwood announced shrilly on the last Monday of term. Even with there still technically four days left, Albus felt like vacation would start as soon as the bell rang. Scorpius too seemed to be chipper. He was nonchalantly dumping ingredients into his potion, not even caring of the result. Albus knew why- Blackwood could not take his vacation away from him.

Albus did as he usually did. His potion immaculate and already finished, he tilted his chair back and yawned cautiously, checking to make sure that Professor Blackwood didn't dock points for something that he couldn't control. He also once more turned around to face the back and glanced at Mirra, who was staring determinately at her potion, paying no attention to anyone else. Next to her was Rose, who still looked sullen.

Albus heaved a regretful sigh and turned back to his potion. Two problems here. One was obviously Mirra, whose lack of communication had steadily worsened now to the point where they hadn't talked at all in a week. The second was Rose, who still looked nothing short of crushed. Albus had a great deal of fear for this too- with the holidays coming up, they would

probably be spending a considerable amount of time together. What was he supposed to say to her?

He heard the screeching of a chair, and the entire class looked up. Professor Blackwood had shot straight up. She tossed her beautiful blonde hair out of her face, and Albus saw that she appeared to be sweating.

"Everyone stop" she said, and the class immediately obeyed and ceased working at once. Professor Blackwood looked at them all anxiously. "I have just remembered- I have something very important to do. Fill your flasks. You are to be dismissed early."

The entire class began exchanging looks of confusion, Albus among them. He looked over at Scorpius, whose eyebrows were raised, and at Morrison, who was wearing an identical expression. The class however, remained sitting quietly.

Professor Blackwood strode over to the door and flung it open. "Fill your flasks and leave!" she barked.

There was a screeching of chairs and a hissing sound as students scooped up their potions into flasks and labeled them. No sooner had they returned to their seats did Professor Blackwood begin ushering them with her hands.

"Consider it an early Christmas present" she said sharply as they slung their bags over their shoulders and filed passed her. Albus thought that this was a pretty accurate statement- many of them looked absolutely ecstatic at being dismissed half of an hour early.

Morrison was the first to comment once they left and began walking through the stone, dimly lit passages of the dungeon. "She really hates us huh?" he said, "Couldn't even last the full hour and a half."

"I'm not sure that's it" Scorpius said. "It looked like she was in a bit of hurry."

They approached the blank stone wall. "*Phineas*" Morrison said, and the wall slid open.

Albus commented once they had entered the common room. "She said she had something very important to do, didn't she?" he asked.

"Probably kick some puppies around or something like that..."Morrison suggested.

Scorpius chuckled, but Albus was on to something much more serious. "What if she had somewhere to go?" he asked.

"During school hours? Come off it mate" Scorpius said. "How would she even leave? McGonagall is in control of the protection around this place. There's no apparating or anything of the sort."

"Well let's find out" Albus said quickly, and he started running up the stairs to their dormitory, pulling out his wand as he did so. Scorpius and Morrison followed after him. He dug through his trunk and pulled out the Marauder's Map.

"What are you expecting to see on that thing Al?" Morrison asked him.

"Anything" he admitted, sitting down on his bed and holding the wrinkly piece of parchment up. "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good" he said, tapping it once. As he was now used to, lines instantly began drawing themselves on the sheet of parchment. He unfolded it as it did so, following them and waiting for the names indicating people to pop up. He saw that Professor Blackwood was pacing around her classroom.

"Let's see what you've got to do that's so important" he muttered to himself, keeping both of his eyes firmly on her.

"She's just pacing" Scorpius said, looking over his shoulder.

As soon as he said it however, Professor Blackwood left. Albus followed her up the stairs, and then another pair after that, and then another, until she was on the third floor. What was she doing there?

She walked towards the middle of the hall, and then merely remained motionless. Albus could see students walking by her quickly, attempting to get out of her way. Soon enough the entire hall was clear and it was just her standing there alone...

She vanished. He didn't have to blink, her name had disappeared from the Map in an instant, and Morrison, who was looking over his shoulder as well, gave a whelp. Where had she gone?

"This is the second time!" Albus shouted. "This is the second time she's left the Map!"

"Huh?" both of his friends asked him.

"Remember when I got your Hand back?" Albus asked Scorpius quickly. "That night she'd vanished off the Map entirely! And then she just reappeared."

"So you *can* disappear out of Hogwarts" Morrison said knowingly to Scorpius.

"No, you can't" he said through gritted teeth. "Read *Hogwarts, A History, the Revised Edition* you idiot. And besides, if she could do it anywhere, why didn't she just do it from her office?"

"There's something about the third floor" Albus said darkly, keeping his eyes on the very spot where she had vanished. And without wasting another second, he stowed the Map away inside his robes. "And that's where I'm going" he said firmly.



"Albus wait-" both of his friends began, but he had already stood up and made his way to the door. He exited his dormitory, then the common room, and navigated his way through the dungeons fiercely, his heart racing.

This would certainly clear things up. It was time to find out where Blackwood had vanished to, what was so important that she do...

He reached the third floor and sighed with relief when he saw that it was empty. He pulled out the Map again and examined it- there was no one close enough to interfere. Most were in their common rooms, including Morrison and Scorpius, who apparently stayed behind for what they deemed a fool's errand.

He walked right to the center of the hall, where Blackwood had been when she vanished. There was nothing there, bar an exceptionally ugly statue of a one eyed witch. He frowned and turned back to the Map. Something strange had happened however. A small speech bubble had appeared next to his name. It read *dissendium*.

Albus stared at it curiously for a moment. Now that he looked carefully at the Map, he saw that it branched off from this point in the hallway, right from where the statue was. Had that been there before?

"Dissendium?" Albus practically asked the statue. Nothing happened. He frowned again and turned back to the Map, where, spectacularly, more words were forming. These words however, were written on the side of the Map, outside of the actual castle grounds.

*Tap it with your wand you prat- MWPP*

Albus stared at it, eyes wide open. He pulled out his wand and tapped the statue a few times, this time saying "Dissendium" as he did so.

The statue slid out of the way at once, revealing a small dark entrance. A tunnel, or a secret passageway of some sort. Albus poked his head in cautiously before determining that it was too dark for him to see anything. But it certainly led somewhere...

"Somewhere else in the castle maybe?" Morrison suggested after dinner. Albus had waited until they were back in the safety of the common room to tell his friends what had happened.

"No, she's vanishing off of the Map completely" Albus said. "That passage leads out. My guess is to Hogsmeade.

Scorpius leaned up against one of the glowing green walls. "To meet with WAR? I mean, their headquarters are right there."

"That must be it" Albus said, nodding his head. "She's secretly meeting with her Renegade pals."

"Wait" Morrison said, holding his hand up to stop them. "How'd she find out about that passage anyway? We didn't even know about it, and we own the damn Map!"

Albus' immediate thought was "What do you mean 'we'", but he held it back. Instead he replied with an answer. "We were never exactly looking for it, were we? But these blokes- Wormtail and them- they were ruddy geniuses. And maybe Blackwood knew her way around the school already? Or someone told her?"

"That's not what interests me most" Scorpius spoke up. "I want to know why she's meeting them. I think this pretty much confirms that Fairhart is contacting her separately. If she's meeting Waddlesworth and them in person, then it's Fairhart she communicating with by mail. What I want to know is why the two are separate."

"And how close those two are" Albus added, casting a shifty look around him and returning back to the Map. Blackwood was in her office now- she had come back during dinner.

"Well we've got a week left before break" Morrison said. "Care to do a bit of snooping?"

"Oh sure, *now* you guys are all up for a mystery" Albus sneered.

"I confess I'm interested" Scorpius said coolly.

Albus looked back down at the Map, letting his eyes wander all the way across it to Gryffindor tower. Mirra was in the common room corner next to Rose. "Maybe after break" Albus said. "I want to get something done this week though. I want to talk to someone."

He had had the idea in his head for some time now, had clung to the thought that it was just a phase and that he and Mirra were as good as gold on every issue. Perhaps she was a bit ticked at him for doing what he did, but he couldn't imagine it stretching this far. He had now made a promise to himself to confront her about their silence. She had no right to be angry at him for something that didn't even affect her directly. And really, it wasn't her business at all. And on top of that, she didn't actually *know* what had happened during Rose's date with Lance, so that made her accusatory. Yeah, that's what he would say if she tried that card. He had this under wraps.

But as the days slowly passed by, Albus found himself incapable of approaching her at all. No Care for Magical Creatures lessons cut his time with her in half, and it was too much of a risk for him to approach her when she was near Rose, lest she be brought into it. He also didn't want to talk to her when she was surrounded by Eckley or Hornsbrook either- not that he was scared of either of them. He just wanted to get her on her own.

He finally got his chance on Friday, the last of term before the winter holidays. Checking the Marauder's Map regularly for updates on her location, he finally caught her almost alone around midday. She was sitting in the library, curiously, with only Hugo for company. Albus thought that perhaps she was making the best of her last hours with the precious Hogwarts Library, and

Hugo had probably asked to come along for help with second year work. This would probably be his last chance.

"Alright, I'm off" Albus said, wiping the Map blank and looking over at Morrison and Scorpius, who were playing a game of chess by the common room fire. Scorpius was smirking smugly at his impending victory.

"Off to do what?" Morrison asked grumpily, his eyes still on the board.

"Talk to Mirra" he said, strolling towards the common room exit.

"Good luck" they both called to him, and Albus faintly heard Scorpius announce checkmate as he was leaving.

Albus went through the dungeon labyrinth and up the stairs; within a few minutes he was at the library. He walked passed row after row of books, peeking around each corner until he found her. She was indeed sitting with Hugo, a huge stack of books beside her. They both seemed rather interested in their studies. He had the sudden urge to abort, but he fought it.

He quickly walked towards them, pulled out a chair, and sat down across from them. Mirra looked up at once, her black bangs nearly blocking her view. She frowned when she saw him. Albus ignored it and instead took pride in a considerably warmer welcome from his cousin.

"Al!" Hugo said, beaming. "Are you here to study before the holidays too?"

Albus watched as Mirra gave his cousin a "Are you kidding?" kind of look. Albus actually grinned at this before addressing his cousin.

"No" he said shortly. "I was actually wondering if I could have a quick, private word with Mirra. Fourth year stuff" he said.

"Sure" Hugo said politely. He scooped up a few books. "I'm actually heading back to the common room now, need to give these to Rose" he said. "See you tomorrow Al!" he said excitedly.

"Mhm" Albus said, momentarily forgetting what he was referring too, and then remembering their departure tomorrow. He waited until Hugo was completely out of earshot before saying anything to Mirra.

"So" he said quietly, leaning across the table and trying to seem cool and unconcerned. But then again, he was cool wasn't he? Quidditch Captain and all? "You uh...you've kind of been ignoring me recently" he said, scratching underneath his right ear so as to have something to do with his hands.

"Mhm" Mirra said, mirroring him perfectly, her face still pointed down as she scratched more notes into her book.

"Is there like- I don't know- a reason for that? Or what?"

"Yes" she said simply, still scratching away.

"Okay look" he started, giving up his cool demeanor at once. "What is wrong with you? What did I do?" he asked.

"You know what you did" she said swiftly, turning a page.

"Care to tell me?" he said sharply, waiting for it. This was his one chance to call her out on making a blatant accusation, to turn the conversation in his favor-

"Why, so you can just say I'm accusing you of something and put it all on me?" she said coldly.

*Well there goes that*, he thought bitterly.

"No" he said defensively. "It's just- well- I'd like an actual reason."

She looked up at him, her face stony and blank. It was a mean look, and it caught him completely off guard. He had not seen it since first year, when they had argued because he'd read her mail.

"My reason Albus?" she said. "My reason is that you purposefully ruined Rose's date."

"*What?*" he said, trying to laugh off the truth.

"And then you don't even take responsibility for it" she said. "Rose is my best friend, and you- for some reason- made sure that her date didn't go well. I don't know, maybe one of your friends likes her or something? Or maybe you just don't like seeing her happy. Either way, things were going perfectly before you sent her away from the table to have your little guy to guy talk with Lance, and then they fell apart!"

Albus stared, surprised at how accurate her first guess had been. He was not going to comment on that however- he was not going to betray Scorpius. When he didn't speak, she continued furiously.

"And what was *I* supposed to do Al? Tell my best friend that her cousin stabbed her in the back? I still can't tell her, she'd get even more upset than she already is. She *really* liked him Al! And you ruined that day for her!"

"Her day was ruined!" Albus shot back, not sure where he was going, but knowing that he needed to go on the attack. "I got drug away to the lion's den by some three hundred pound bald guy with biceps bigger than my head, okay! So I had a pretty bad day too! I don't see you all upset over me nearly not surviving though" he said.

"I'm glad you're okay" Mirra said, and her voice sounded like it was cracking. "And I was telling everyone to get you help while you were gone. But that doesn't change what you did to her."

"Well that's her!" Albus barked, suddenly angry. "What's that got to do with you? Why are *you* mad at me?"

She stood up, and Albus got slightly frightened, though he didn't show it. She began packing her things. "You want to know why I'm angry with you Al?" she asked. "I'm angry at you because you're not even angry with yourself, and you know you should be."

"You have no idea what I'm angry with!" he said, standing up himself so that they were both standing at opposite sides of the table. "You don't know anything!" he added stupidly, and he immediately regretted it.

She opened her mouth as if to say something very loud- one last yell before leaving. But when she spoke her voice was quiet, calm, and to a certain degree, soothing. "You know what Al?"

"What?" he mumbled back.

She looked for a moment like she was unsure if she really wanted to say something. Then, apparently, she decided that she did.

"Sometimes you can be the sweetest, nicest boy I've ever met" she said, and this time her voice almost did crack.

He looked at her in surprise. What did she just say?

"And sometimes" she continued. "You can be the biggest prat in the world. It's like you're two different people" she added, shaking her head. She swung her bag over her shoulder and, without looking back, walked right by him and towards the exit.

Albus cursed under his breath as she left. Whatever. What did he care? What was she going to be mad at him forever? This would blow by over winter break.

But at the same time, her words agitated him throughout the rest of the day. He did not tell Morrison or Scorpius exactly what she had said (he had merely commented that it had went bad) but he did go over it again and again for the next few hours. She had called him nice and sweet- and a prat. Just how close was he to being with her? Or more importantly, how close was he to losing her completely? He wasn't even sure which direction he was going. He shouldn't even be thinking about this! He was fourteen years old and he was experiencing yet another hectic, confusing year at Hogwarts.

He wished that he could talk to Fairhart. James would be up for advice, but as this somewhat pertained to Rose, it was completely out of the question. Fairhart had given him good advice before. No matter what he was- whether he was a Renegade or a spy or anything in between, he

had been a real help the previous year when it came to Mirra. It was easy to look up to him; to want his advice again. But now it seemed that the closest he'd come to seeing him again would be viewing the memory stowed away inside of his trunk.

He went to bed early, desperate to let sleep wipe away the troubles of his day and seamlessly bring him closer to the train ride home. He couldn't imagine home being that much better- not if Rose was staying with them or with his own personal qualms with his father. It was still a change of scenery however; an escape from the redundancy that was Hogwarts, with its mysterious professors and arguments with Mirra.

He had yet another troubled night's sleep however, as he could have anticipated. He tossed and turned all night, and though he wouldn't remember it in the morning, he had one of his strangest dreams yet.

He was in a cage of some sort. Not really a cage actually, more of a giant glass square. He wasn't trying to fight his way out of it however. He was merely leaning up against the glass, his forehead pressed against one side. It was like he had conceded defeat or something. The area around him was pitch black.

Then a flash of gold caught his eye. Walking towards the glass cube that he was inside of was himself. Everything from their height to their hair was the same, except one difference. The Albus Potter walking towards him had those ominous golden eyes, those eyes that shined their light effortlessly in the darkness. This Albus grinned at him. He didn't grin back.

Ares stepped into view from behind the Albus with golden eyes. He looked tired and worn, his face withered away underneath his gray mustache and beard. When he spoke however, it wasn't in his normal gruff voice. It was his father's voice.

*Someone once told me ' It is our choices that show who we truly are, far more than our abil-*

But Ares- or his father- whichever one- was cut off by a hand grabbing him on the shoulder. Albus spun around, away from his golden eyed twin, and saw Warren Waddlesworth standing behind him, inside of the glass square. He gave a jump of fright. When Waddlesworth spoke however, it was in Fairhart's voice.

*It takes a powerful wizard to use the killing curse. But it takes an even stronger one when to know what gives them the right to use it, and to use it for the rig-*

But now Waddlesworth was the one cut off. Albus turned around as soon as he had heard it. He saw that he- the golden eyed version of him anyway- was now talking, in Darvy's voice.

*It is what we hate that shows what we truly are.*

No one cut him off. And at that very instant he turned around, away from the glass box, and Albus saw someone else. He saw Mirra cowering against an invisible wall in the darkness, her

black hair tangled and in front of her frightened face. She put up her hands and winced as the golden eyed Albus walked towards her smiling.

"No!" Albus said, pounding on the glass with his fists. "Stop!" he shouted, banging still, even harder. He quickly looked around and saw that Ares and Waddlesworth had both vanished. "Stop!" he continued to yell through the glass. He did not know if his twin could hear him or not, but he watched as it raised its wand, claspings the fang handle tightly. He struck it through the air.

"No!" Albus shouted once more as the flash of green light broke through the darkness, for a single second showing Mirra topple over-

"Wake up mate!"

Albus shot up, tangled in his blankets. His eyes were stinging badly, and his pillow was drenched with sweat. He looked all around the room and saw that it was Morrison shaking him.

"Huh? Wha'?"

"We got to go pal" Morrison said. "Get dressed."

"What...what's today?" Albus asked stupidly, trying to re-gather his thoughts. That had been a very strange dream. What had it been about?

"Today is the day that we *leave for home* Al. Winter break? You feeling alright? You're all red."

"Fine" Albus said, panting heavily and trying to get his breath back. "Let me- let me get dressed."

Morrison left, and Albus noticed that he was the only one remaining in his dormitory. It took him several minutes to lazily pull on his clothes, and twice he collapsed back on his bed, almost as if to fall asleep again. His dream was still front and center in his head, but once again, the scene itself was beyond his reach. There had been voices... a few different ones. And Mirra had been in it too.

By the time that he had made it downstairs for breakfast the plates were all but cleared, and Neville was ushering them towards the train, wishing them a happy holidays as they went.

"Happy Holidays Professor Longbottom!" students, mostly from Gryffindor hollered to him.

"Happy Holidays Judy!" he yelled back. "And you too, Carl!"

Albus boarded the train rubbing at his eyes furiously.

"Happy Holidays Al!" Neville said to him, grinning wildly.

"Huh?" Albus responded, looking up. "Oh right, you too" he said.

Neville held out a hand and stopped him, holding up the line. He didn't seem to care though. "Are you okay Al?" he asked quietly. "You look a bit pale."

"Fine" Albus lied. "Just a stomach ache."

Neville frowned before removing his arm, and Albus boarded the train slowly, Morrison and Scorpius following after him. He picked a random compartment- he just wanted to sit down. He suddenly was not feeling well.

He collapsed in a seat and closed his eyes, the sounds of shuffling feet the only thing telling him that his friends had joined him.

"So what are the odds of Rose and Mirra joining us?" Scorpius asked as soon as they had slid the compartment door shut.

"About the same as Morrison passing Divination" Albus said, his eyes still closed.

"Just the three of us then?" Morrison said, and both he and Scorpius laughed. They continued chuckling for some time, but Albus remained firmly as he was, unwilling to move, his eyes closed as he sorted through his thoughts.

"Not enough sleep?" Scorpius asked him once the train had started moving.

"Plenty" Albus said, opening his eyes. "I'm just still tired. It's weird."

"Want to take a nap?" Morrison asked. "We'll be quiet..."

Albus shook his head. "Can't sleep" he said.

He knew that he sounded ridiculous, but it was all the truth. It was like his body was shut down completely; he felt exhausted and fatigued in every way. But his mind was still alert, still grasping at stray images or noises. He felt sick though- and his eyes were still stinging.

"Too much stress" Scorpius said. "With all this stuff going on, a nice week off from school should do it" he added reassuringly.

"Mhm" Albus agreed, barely listening. He knew however, that his fatigue had little to do with stress or schoolwork. There was something far more unique-maybe even sinister- going on. What it was however, he had no idea.

He stayed like this almost the entire ride. Morrison and Scorpius chatted quietly as though unwilling to disturb him, while he leaned back in his seat, eyes half open and head feeling like it was going to explode. The dream eventually slipped from him entirely however, and soon enough he was just focused on his numbing arms and his stomach, which was churning.



It came as great relief when the train finally started to slow down. Albus rose from his seat and wobbled slightly, his hand still resting on his uncomfortable stomach. He was one of the first people to depart from the train, and he could hear Morrison and Scorpius muttering behind him as he staggered onto the platform. He had the sudden urge to vomit, but he managed to hold it in.

"Any idea who's picking you up?" Morrison asked him.

Albus shook his head no, trying to keep his mouth closed as much as possible. He did wonder who it would be however. Last year it had been Uncle Ron, and he had provided a very eventful ride home. Who would be picking him up now?

He stood still in the center of the platform, Scorpius and Morrison at his left and right, looking very much like bodyguards as they too kept an eye out for their families. Albus watched as Mirra walked right by him, her eyes straight, not even bothering to acknowledge their fight the night before or the idea that they wouldn't see each other again for a week. He kept an eye out for Rose or his sister, or any sign of family that could indicate who would be picking him up. He had just turned around completely when someone called to him.

"Al! Over here!"

Albus spun around and widened his already stressed eyes in surprise. Standing a few yards away, in between two groups of chattering girls, was his father. But he looked- there was no other word for it- dead.

For the last few years now his father had slowly transformed from his normal, healthy looking self. Since the stress involved with Ares and his gathering of minions, all the way to the hunt to find him, he had begun to look less and less alive each time that Albus had seen him. The gray skin, the bags under his eyes; Albus had adjusted to it by now. This was by far his worst appearance yet however. He looked unkempt to an absurd degree. His hair had grown, and though it was not sweeping over his shoulders like Warren Waddlesworth's, it was certainly noticeable in its length, more down his neck than before. And though it once looked merely untidy, it was now disheveled to say the least. His skin still had that grayish tinge to it, so much so that his lightning bolt scar was even more visible, but the bags under his eyes were gone- instead his eyes were completely bloodshot. He looked like he was as restless as his son. And like his son months ago, one of his eyes was bruised like he had been punched in the face.

And yet he looked intimidating. Albus had always heard stories of how fierce and determined his father was- tales of his heroics were muttered throughout the Wizarding World after all. But Albus had always seen him as a powerful wizard with a reputation to back it up, and nothing more. Now however he looked dangerous, not frail at all. Though Albus knew that it was not true, he thought that his father looked like a man who had nothing left to lose.

"Whoa" Morrison said when he saw him.

"Dad?" Albus muttered, almost to himself, still recuperating from his appearance.

"Over here!" his father said, waving over to him.

Albus turned to both of his friends, who both looked equally shocked. They said nothing of it however.

"Guess this is you mate" Scorpius said, and Albus slapped both of their hands lazily before beginning to walk.

"Have a good holiday!" Morrison called to him.

"Feel better..." Scorpius added, and Albus nodded his head and waved to them as he approached his father.

"Have a good term?" his father asked.

"Kind of" Albus said, with a bit of reservation in his voice. Had his father completely forgotten the animosity that they had left with? Albus supposed that it wasn't going to show itself here on the platform however. He was much too exhausted anyway. He stayed polite.

"You're driving?" Albus asked.

"Yeah" his father replied, dangling the keys. "I'm taking you and Lily and James. Uncle Ron will be here for his kids and so on."

Albus nodded as James and Lily came strolling over to them. Lily looked downright frightened by her father's visage, but James seemed unconcerned.

"All ready to go?" he asked them, and they all nodded.

They followed him back through the barrier and over to the car that Albus had exited months ago. Lily took the front seat, and leaving Albus and James in the back.

"Alright Al?" his father asked him, readjusting his rearview mirror. "You look a little ill."

"Fine" he answered quickly as his father backed up into the street. "Just tired" he said.

"Ah."

"What happened to your eye dad?" Lily asked.

"Punching telescope caught me off guard" he said, and Albus thought from his tone that he was grinning. "I stopped by your Uncle George's shop the other day and it cost me."

"Looks like a pretty real punch to me" James said incredulously, smiling himself.

"Oh it was!" their dad laughed. "Those things don't exactly feel like sponges when they clobber you."

James and Lily both laughed, but Albus stayed silent for the remainder of the car ride. Like the train ride to King's Cross, he was much too fatigued and too irritable to contribute to the conversation. He instead allowed his head to loll to the side as his father asked questions to two of his three children about how Hogwarts was going.

They pulled up outside of the Potter mansion- named so more for its amount of rooms rather than grandeur- a few hours later. Albus was the first through the door. He saw that all of their trunks had been magicked to his home, but before he could do anything his mother had called out from the kitchen.

"Harry!"

"It's me, mum" Albus mumbled, entering the kitchen and taking a seat at the kitchen table. His mother had her back to him, she was cooking something. She turned and smiled at him when he answered.

"You look peaky dear, eat something" she said at once, before asking him anything about Hogwarts. She began rifling through the cabinets for silverware.

"Not feeling good mum" Albus said, and he could feel sweat dripping off of his forehead.

She turned her head to him just as the door opened once more, indicating the entrance of his father and siblings.

"Gin! Home!" Albus heard his father yell before entering the kitchen.

But she ignored him. She had instead put her hand to Albus' forehead. "No fever" she said. "Hi dear" she added to her husband, giving him a swift kiss on the cheek before turning back to her son. "Well hopefully you'll feel better for Christmas" she said, concerned. "Maybe you should try going to the bathroom?"

Albus nodded and rose from the table at once. As he exited the kitchen James and Lily both entered, giving him privacy in the sitting room. He looked behind him to check that the coast was clear, and then dove into his trunk. Within seconds he had pulled out the tiny glass vial and pocketed it. For some reason he did not want his parents knowing about this memory- not if whatever it was involved Fairhart and WAR.

He began walking up the stairs slowly, still exhausted for seemingly no reason, reaching the top almost out of breath. He had no intention of going to the bathroom however, or going to his own room. How long would his parents badger their children over Hogwarts? His mother would give them something to eat as well. He looked right down the hall, at his parent's bedroom, where the pensieve was. He may not get another chance.

He strode forward; walking passed the bathroom door and inches from his parent's bedroom-  
"Al?"

Albus stopped just as he was reaching for the doorknob. "Huh?" he said while turning around, and he saw his father standing at the top of the stairs.

"Where are you going?" his father asked him, and his voice sounded more inquisitive than demanding.

"Bathroom" he said.

His father cocked an eyebrow.

Albus smacked at his forehead. "Right" he said. "Already passed it. Not feeling good and- and I'm used to Hogwarts. Kind of forget the house layout."

And he took a step in the direction of the bathroom.

"Oh" his father said. "Well when you're done your mother wants to see you and ask you about your year so far" he said.

"Kay" Albus said, nodding his head.

His father nodded. There was a moment of extremely awkward silence between them; one where Albus was completely unsure as to what he was supposed to say, or if he was to continue at all. His father seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He nodded himself before descending down the stairs.

Knowing that his plan was futile- that the viewing of the memory would have to wait for a more opportune moment- he went into the bathroom as he had said he would. He turned on the sink at once and immediately began splashing his face with water to wake himself up. What was wrong with him? He was not sick- he was just lethargic. He felt strange, though how he could not identify. It had been that way since he'd woken up. Whatever his dream had been of, it had shaken him.

He splashed another handful of water in his face before turning the sink off and bringing a towel to his face. He looked in the mirror in front of him, which was sprinkled with flecks of water now. His green eyes were staring back at him. They still stung, but they didn't appear to be any different. He blinked. Nothing happened. He blinked again. Still nothing. Over and over again he blinked, until he grew furious with himself. What was he expecting? He gave one more ferocious blink, all the while keeping his eyes ahead of him at his reflection, and then gave a gasp.

For a single second, he had seen a flash of gold.

### Chapter 13: The Resignation of Sancticus Fairhart

Albus woke up rather later than usual on Christmas morning, but his sleep had done him some good. His illness had passed over night, and the rest that he had gotten had ended his fatigue. He stayed cautious however. Jumping out of his bed, he bolted to the bathroom and blinked his eyes in front of the mirror.

Just green. There was no indication of any other color, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief, though he still continued to bat his eyelashes up and down even as he calmed himself.

"What are you doing?"

Albus jumped and spun around, nearly tripping over a roll of toilet paper on the floor. Hugo was standing in the door way, eyeing him curiously.

"I- what?"

"You were just blinking over and over again" Hugo said, interested.

"Oh, yeah" Albus said, his heart beat returning to normal. "I had something in my eye. It woke me up, that's why I came in here. I got it out. What are you doing here?"

"It's Christmas!" Hugo said excitedly.

"Yeah" Albus said dryly. "I mean like, what time did you get here?"

"A few hours ago" Hugo replied. "There might still be some breakfast left."

Albus nodded and exited the bathroom. Hugo began following him down the stairs. Albus turned half way down. "Erm- don't you have to use the bathroom?" he asked.

"No" Hugo said calmly.

"Oh" Albus said. "Well then what were you doing there?"

Hugo shrugged. "Just looking for you."

"Ah" Albus said, feeling a tad bit uncomfortable as he continued down the stairs and strode into the kitchen, walking right passed the mountain of presents in front of a stellar looking tree. Albus didn't care much for presents- his family had always been rich enough to get him anything anyway, though he rarely asked. Still, he had gotten a few good ones in recent years, including his state of the art broom and highly useful Invisibility Cloak.

Once he entered the kitchen it became very apparent how late he had woken up. In addition to his mother, James and Lily, a few other family members had appeared as well. Uncle Ron and

Aunt Hermione were there, both of them looking tired, and Rose was just finishing up her breakfast. Uncle Charlie had shown up as well.

"Good, you're up" his mother said. "Feeling better?" she asked, placing a plate of French toast down in front of him with one hand and feeling his cheek with her other. "Still no fever" she added.

"I'm alright" he said, but when she cast him a steely gaze, he was forced to add "Loads better, really."

"The kid's alright Gin" Uncle Ron said, throwing him a grin. "Every kid's not feeling well during school. Come the Holidays though..."

Some of them laughed, but Albus' mother didn't seem as entertained. "You should have seen him yesterday Ron" she said. "He looked like a mess."

"He always looks a mess" James said, and they all laughed. Only Albus and his mother didn't.

Uncle Ron tilted his chair back. "When do-"

"Feet" his sister cut him off before he could even raise his legs up and place them on the table.

He narrowed his eyes and shifted his weight back down. "When do we open presents?" he asked his wife.

"When the rest of the family's here" she answered.

"Who's coming?" Lily asked.

"More like who isn't coming" Uncle Ron answered. "We've got Uncle Bill and Fleur and their kids. Teddy's dropping by. Uncle George'll be here with Angie too."

"Any news on Percy?" his sister asked him.

"Sent me a letter this morning" he answered. "They're all spending Christmas with Audrey's family. My parents went with them; they so rarely get to see them."

Albus was about to comment when his mother pushed his still untouched plate further in front of him. "Eat" she said strictly.

"Where's the fire?" Albus asked.

Only Hugo chortled.

"Tone" his mother warned him crisply. "And you have to hurry up; I need the kids upstairs for a few hours."

"Ah, sucks for you guys" James said pompously, taking a swig of milk.

"That includes you" his mother said icily.

"*What?*"

"Why do we have to go upstairs?" Albus asked, before his older brother could throw a temper tantrum.

His mother gave a small frown and exchanged a look with Uncle Charlie. "Because when you're father gets back he'll be bringing a few people. They're going to have a small meeting-"

She never got to finish her sentence. All three of the Potter children, so used to that final word, had given cries of outrage that blocked her voice out, ending in Lily moaning "*But it's Christmas!*"

"We won't be long" Uncle Ron said reassuringly. "Just a small adult only get together. You'll get around to your presents" he added with a grin.

"Any idea if Viktor's coming, Gin?" Aunt Hermione asked, taking a sip of tea.

Uncle Ron sneered. "Doubt it" he said. "Busy shaving his eyebrows, I suspect..."

Aunt Hermione reprimanded him, but even as she did so they heard the door open.

"Upstairs, upstairs" Albus' mother said, ushering them with her hands and pulling his plate away from him right as he was about to take a bite.

"Oh come on..."

"Up you get, I'll call you down!"

Albus and the rest of them filed out of the kitchen, and as they did so Albus caught a glimpse of his father, looking as worn as ever, escorting a short, balding man that Albus recognized. He was sweating and gasping as if from the intense heat of December.

"Merry Christmas kids!" his father said when he saw them walking up the stairs.

"*Dad,*" Lily whined, without even acknowledging his greeting. "Mum says we have to stay upstairs-"

"Just for a little" he said calmly, smiling, as the sweaty man next to him waved to them all jovially.

Albus reached the top of the stairs, and James butted ahead of him to get to his room. "Where are you off to?" Albus asked him.

"Writing a letter" he said simply.

"Girlfriend?" Albus asked.

"One of them" he replied, before entering his room and closing his door behind him.

Albus turned and saw Lily and Hugo entering his own room- it seem that they would once again be badgering him with questions. Rose however, proceeded right down the hall silently, entering one of the guest rooms without a word. Albus realized that she had been silent all throughout breakfast. He frowned when he saw the door close shut. A few minutes later he found himself in his room, staring up at the ceiling while Lily and Hugo, as he'd predicted, bothered him.

"Why do you think they're having a meeting now Al?" Hugo asked. "Think something big happened?"

"I haven't the slightest idea" he said dryly.

"It must be important," Lily said, "If everyone's here during Christmas, and away from their own families."

"Maybe" Albus said, once again his tone flat.

"Hey Al" Hugo started.

"What?"

"Do you know why Rose is so upset?"

Albus sat up straight on his bed. Hugo looked truly inquisitive, and Lily had gone quiet. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"She's been really... I don't know" Hugo said shrugging. "Quiet, I guess" he finished.

"People are allowed to be quiet, Hugo" Lily said defensively.

"Not her! That means that something is wrong!"

Albus held up his hand to stop them both, he didn't want an argument breaking out. "Hugo," he started, turning to him. "Has Rose said anything to you? Or- or Mirra, maybe?" he added cautiously.

"No" he said plainly. "That's why I was asking you. Do you know why?"

"No" Albus lied quickly. He looked over at his closed door however, deliberating going over to it or not. He had approached Mirra yesterday. Should he perhaps approach Rose next? Should he...tell her the truth?



"I'll be back" he said. "You two stay here."

Albus left the room and heard a door open from down the stairs. A heavy Irish accent followed it, indicating that the man from the Irish Ministry of Magic had arrived. He ignored this and went to the guest room where Rose was, and knocked once.

"Come in" she said.

Albus entered and was surprised at what he saw. She was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed, and what looked like an old crumpled note was in front of her. Albus felt his stomach lurch. It was probably an old note from Lance.

She hastily pushed it under a pillow before addressing him. "Are we allowed back down already?" she asked politely.

Albus blinked. It took him a moment to realize that she'd said something; he was used to a much bossier tone.

"Erm- no" he said, taking another step in and closing the door behind him. "I actually just wanted to check up on you" he said stupidly.

She stared at him.

"Cause I mean," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "You just look a little down. I didn't get a chance to ask you at Hogwarts."

For a moment she looked like she was going to play it off; tell him that she had no idea what he was talking about. But then her face twisted itself into a putrid look of utter depression. Her mouth broke and her eyes winced, and she looked on the verge of tears. When she spoke it sounded like she was coughing.

"I just don't know what went *wrong*" she said emphatically, and Albus automatically sat down next to her on the bed, as if to offer his shoulder for support, though secretly he didn't want her to do that. He didn't want her crying into the person who helped do this to her in the first place.

"You- you mean with Lance?" he said stupidly.

She nodded. "I mean, I know what I was doing wrong" she squealed. "You told me. I thought that when I left the Three Broomsticks I'd saved it. But things just got worse. We barely talked and he seemed so uninterested, nothing like before..."

Albus could only sit there and watch her breakdown. This is why he didn't belong in Slytherin, because any Slytherin could have seen this fiasco from a mile away. Why, oh why did he have to offer her comfort?

"Have- have you talked to him since?" he asked.

She gave a pitiful shrug. "Not really" she said. "Like he still waves to me or says hello. But that's it. It's *nothing* like before."

He wrapped his arm around her, his insides squirming. He had always considered Rose the biggest prat in the world. But this was too much. He wouldn't wish this on anyone. And yet, that was exactly what he'd done. Her next words however, were the words that crushed him.

"It's so horrible Al" she said, sounding closer to crying than ever before. "It's so horrible having to be only friends with someone that you like so much. I hope it never happens to you."

Albus winced. That's exactly where he was with Mirra now, where he'd been last year. Only for Rose it was ten times worse. Rose had had a chance, and it had slipped through her fingertips, through no fault of her own. Albus felt his stomach give a powerful lurch as he thought about how he'd feel if someone had done to him what he and Scorpius had done to Rose. If someone had ruined a perfectly good chance with Mirra... if it had been Rose- his own cousin.

"Rose," he started. "If you could know what went wrong. Would you- would you really want to?" he asked, trying to make the answer obvious in his tone.

*Please say no, please say no.*

"Of course I would!" she practically shrieked. "Why wouldn't I?"

Albus put his own head in his hands. "I'm sorry Rose" he said.

Rose wiped at her eyes and patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks Al" she said. "But you don't have to be sorry. You tried helping me. You did the best you could."

Albus looked at her, his expression as miserable as her own. He couldn't tell her. And he hated himself for that...

Christmas morning passed by in an interminable fashion; Albus had returned to his room to be alone with his thoughts. This didn't work of course, as Hugo and Lily were still there, but it was still better than being around Rose, who was just too polite in her sulkiness for him to deal with. He never thought he'd say it, but he much preferred the agitated know-it-all version of her.

By the time that the meeting was over and the children allowed downstairs the party was in full swing, with the rest of the guests arriving and the table in the dining room having been magically expanded to fit them all for a scrumptious feast. Albus caught sight of very few people who had accompanied his father; only Mr. Krum stayed for a bit before departing, a scowling Uncle Ron waving to him half heartedly before slamming the door after him.

Most of them tore into their presents at once, all but Rose, who quietly took her mountain up to the guest room without unwrapping them or saying a word.

"A- a broom?" Hugo asked his father, while unwrapping a long thin package and watching a beautiful broom roll out of it.

"Surprise!" Uncle Ron said excitedly, looking happier than his son as he snapped a photograph of his son's bewildered face with a magical camera.

"I can't fly," he said sadly.

Albus suddenly remembered saying the very same thing when his brother had gotten him a broom. "You'll learn quickly enough" he told his younger cousin. "It's easy, I promise."

He looked slightly more comfortable as he unwrapped the rest of his presents. Albus' assortment consisted predominantly of candy and clothes, with a few joke shop items thrown in. This was all that he had expected however, and all that he wanted as well. At the age of fourteen, the days of toys were behind him. He did, however, receive a very nice Broomstick Servicing Kit, which he examined in awe before looking around.

"That's from your Uncle Ron and me," Aunt Hermione said, smiling at him from an armchair. "I got your father one for his birthday years and years ago- this one's much better though."

Albus smiled at her. "Thanks" he said.

They sat down for dinner shortly afterwards, and naturally the conversations divided themselves up all the way until the last platter of food was served. Albus immediately put a baked potato on his plate, and then reached for the turkey. Down the table conversation had resumed, with Uncle Bill telling his wife not to cut Louis' ham for him.

"He's much too old Fleur" he said.

"It's not his fault zat it's cooked too tough-"

Albus watched as his mother threw a cold glance towards her.

"Though still delicious" Aunt Fleur added when she caught her eye.

Further down the table Teddy Lupin was doing what he usually did- morphing his appearance for entertainment. He looked quite plain today, his hair short and brown and his eyes beady, but at their request he seemed unable to help himself.

"Give yourself rat whiskers again!" Hugo demanded.

"Now do the dog nose!" Lily asked.

"Give yourself the wolf ears!" Roxanne asked next.

At the very edge of the table, the topic of Quidditch had been brought up. Uncle Ron was telling anyone who would listen how amazing the broom that he'd gotten Hugo was, leading to an argument as to whether the quality of a broomstick should matter to a skilled player, culminating in James listing the best players at the table.

"Okay, okay" he said, holding up his hands to end the argument. "In order: Me,"- there were cries of disbelief mixed with laughs- "Then Uncle Charlie. Then my mum, 'cause she played professionally and all, then Uncle Ron, then my dad. Then that bowl of gravy," he said, pointing at it, "Then Albus..."

There were a few more scattered laughs.

"That's not what I heard" his father said, chewing his turkey slowly. "Who's zero and two in their last two again?"

James smirked but fell silent. Albus watched as his father gave him a wink. He returned a small smile.

Dinner ended only when the plates were entirely cleared, with his mother refusing to throw anything away. Uncle Ron leaned backwards and gave a belch so loud that a glass nearly shattered, and even James looked too stuffed to make a witty comment.

"Some music, I think?" Albus' mother said, flicking her wand towards a radio in the living room, "And some eggnog?"

They all filed into the largest room of the house; though the talk was now more about how delicious dinner had been than anything else. The ending of their feast only signaled the beginning of their party, and it was soon in full swing again. Lily, Hugo, Dominique, and Louis had started a game of Gobstones right in the center of the room. Rose was curled up on the sofa, reading one of the many books she'd received today to herself.

Albus turned away from her, not wanting to see the sad sight. Looking for a conversation opening with anyone, even his father at this point, he saw Teddy sitting by himself back in the dining room, sipping a smoky glass that may have been Firewhiskey.

"Had a good Christmas Allison?" Teddy asked him when Albus entered and took a seat across from him.

Albus smirked at what he'd been called. "Not bad" he said. "Are you allowed to drink?" he asked, nodding his head towards the glass in his hand.

"I'm certainly old enough" he said. "Even if my grandma goes bonkers over it."

"Where's she at?" Albus asked.

Teddy yawned, morphing himself as he did so. His hair turned slightly lighter, and a bit longer too. His nose also turned more snout like. This was his most common appearance- Albus thought that it may have been the closest he'd looked to usual, with his abilities as a Metamorphmagus.

"Having a quiet Christmas, all her lonesome" he said. "I'll head over to see her later probably. She said I should come here for dinner though, and I really wanted to see your dad."

"Why?" Albus asked.

"I barely come around anymore" he admitted. "I'm living with my girlfriend now; we've got a nice flat. Don't uh- don't tell Victoire though" he added hastily, leaning forward slightly and looking into the living room.

Albus nodded. He wasn't entirely sure if Teddy and Victoire were ever together, but he knew that they had at one point been more than friends.

"What's up with you though?" Teddy asked. "Still giving your old man the cold shoulder?"

"Huh?" Albus said, surprised.

Teddy smirked. "Don't play dumb, I know you two are rocky."

"Yeah" Albus said, looking down. "It's not like I'm mad at him" he said honestly. "I just...I dunno," he finished with a shrug.

Teddy nodded as if he understood, strange considering how little Albus had said. He took another small sip of Firewhiskey, but he seemed to be able to contain it more than Uncle Ron, because his next words were spoken with a great deal of clarity.

"But of a shame really" he said. "Considering how things are. Time's kind of against you, isn't it?"

Albus looked at him curiously. "You make it sound like he's going to die" he said.

"Everyone's going to die" Teddy said, "Someday. But I just mean here and now- the way the world is. I hear things are only going to get worse. Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it? Do we even have time to be angry at each other? Or to ignore each other?"

Albus stared aimlessly into space, not knowing what to say. "Do you know what happened to my dad?" he finally asked. "He said he got his eye from a punching telescope."

Teddy laughed. "Nah," he said. "Some idiot sucker punched him a few days ago."

"What?"

"That's what happens when you save the world Al. You're a hero forever. And when you're not heroic anymore, you're an outcast. And believe me; your dad is glad it's this way."

"Why?" Albus asked. "Why would he want to be hated?"

"Because someone needs to be" Teddy said. "There are all of these rumors that Ares wants a war, and with Waddlesworth and his mates spewing crap about the Ministry, the public doesn't know who to turn to. That's why your dad's not fighting back. Without him to blame, they're lost. Without Harry Potter, they'll all split up. They need a common enemy, because you can be sure that if they divide themselves up, when the *real* threat comes, they won't be ready for it at all. And your dad understands that."

"So- so the guy that punched him? My dad just walked away from him?"

Teddy gave another laugh. "Oh no, he's still in St. Mungo's. Just because your dad needs to be hated doesn't mean he wants to be hit. No, there are some guys you don't mess with, and whatever you hear about him Al, Harry Potter is one of them."

Albus smiled slightly at this. There was a moment of silence between them following this, but Teddy eventually broke it.

"So how's Hogwarts?" he asked.

"Lame" Albus answered, realizing that he sounded a bit like Morrison.

"How so?" Teddy asked him.

"Girl trouble" Albus said with a small frown.

"Ahh" Teddy said with an identical frown. "Is she cute?" he asked.

Albus looked up at him. What an odd first question to ask. "Yeah" he said a little defiantly.

"What house is she in?"

"Gryffindor" Albus said dryly.

"Yikes" Teddy answered him. "Is she even your friend or what?"

"Kind of" he admitted. "Things have been a bit... stale between us lately. I messed up. I did something horrible to one of her best friends."

Teddy gave a frown. "Maybe you just need to be a smoother with your words. May I suggest a Patented Potter Pi-

"Oh not you too!" Albus yelled, trying his hardest to suppress a grin, and Teddy laughed.

"I see you already know that one" he said. "Well Al, I can tell you this much- don't over think it. If you take your time, things will work out."

"How so?" Albus asked grimly. "I screwed up really bad."

"Well of course you did you git!" Teddy said. "You're a guy, that's what we guys do! We screw up, almost irrevocably, and then crawl our way back to common ground just to inevitably screw up again and repeat the process! That's our job- that's what makes relationships work. Hasn't James taught you anything?"

"He may have mentioned something along those lines" Albus said thoughtfully, thinking back to some of the advice that his brother had given him the previous year. "So...so what do I do?"

"You take your time" Teddy said, shrugging. "Think things out. If you need a place to be alone, I always found the lake is cleared around midnight."

"The lake?" Albus asked. "That's out of bounds."

"Albus, who patrols the lake at midnight? I just used to skip rocks and think things over. Not too far though- don't want to disturb the squid."

Albus nodded. "I'll keep that in mind" he said. "I kind of wish I could have a few moments to think here though" he said, jerking his head towards the party in the living room.

Teddy gave him a toothy grin. "Just head upstairs" he said. "I'll cover for you. No one will be up there for hours anyway."

"Thanks" Albus said; glad that he wouldn't have to spend another moment in Rose's depressing company.

He exited the dining room and made his way through the crowd of family members in the living room. He made a sharp turn at the stairs and began walking up, and only his father seemed to notice.

"Where's he going?" he asked Teddy, who had joined the party.

"Probably going to have a lie down" he said. "He told me he wasn't feeling good, said he felt sick yesterday. Probably didn't help that I gave him a few sips of Firewhiskey too..."

"You did *what*?"

"Oh come off it Harry" Teddy said cheekily. "It's Christmas..."

This was the last bit that Albus heard before the only sound of the party was the music. Albus heaved a sigh of relief at being away from the scene, intent on going to bed and maybe getting to

sleep early. He stopped mid-way through the hall however, staring straight ahead of him at his father's door. How long had Teddy said it would be before anyone came upstairs?

He teetered on the spot, wondering what he should do. Would he have another chance to view Fairhart's memory? The memory so important that it should be kept secret, which would tell him everything he needed to know about WAR- including why he should stay away from them.

Albus made the decision quickly, considering the possible repercussions of being caught. He went into his room and got the glass vial containing the memory, than slowly and silently crept towards his father's room. He tipped the door open and closed it behind him without a sound.

He decided not to flick on the lights. In case anyone did come up to go to the bathroom, he didn't want them to see that the room was being used through the crack under the door. He walked around the king size bed and crouched down in front of the magically expanded cabinet where he knew that a pensieve was kept. He opened it and saw a jumble of strange looking items, including what looked like an old pack of Exploding Snap cards and a broken Snitch. He dug through it mercilessly, removing items as he did so, though he kept a close eye on where everything belonged. Like Blackwood's desk drawer, he did not want anything to be suspiciously out of place.

For what felt like several long minutes he pulled strange and simple items out, until he finally found what he was looking for. With an almighty heave, he pulled the stone basin out from under what may have been a boulder. He saw the engraved "P" on the side and smiled with triumph.

He cast a sideways glance at the door, as if looking at it one more time would prevent someone from interrupting him. He wished that there was a Marauder's Map of his home. Instead he would just have to hope that the memory was short.

He uncorked the glass vial and dumped it into the old stone basin. At once the contents began swirling around, and Albus felt goose bumps. He had to admit, he was slightly excited. Whether it was at the risk of getting caught or the idea of what he would learn he did not know, though he supposed that both were bad. Soon enough the swirling silver substance seemed to create an image of a dark room. Albus put his head down close to it to get a good look, and immediately felt the curious sensation of having his head spin.

His feet hit solid ground, as he was now used to. He had been to three places in the memories that he had experienced thus far, the halls of Hogwarts, the Ministry of Magic, and Azkaban. The place that he was now looked, if such a thing were possible, even more foreboding than the last of the three.

It was a dark, square chamber, and it was filthy. The stone floor was covered in dust and debris, and the dingy and slimy walls had a red substance on them that may have been blood. The only light in the room was coming from a bright orange flame that magically hung overhead, a ball of



fire that seem to swirl dangerously, as if it was contained and trying to break free, though it didn't appear to be attached to anything. At a glance, the room looked like a torture chamber of some sort, or an interrogation room.

Albus thought that he was alone; it certainly seemed so anyway, before the fire hanging over him grew in size shedding more and more light until the filthy room was revealed in full. It was much bigger of a room than he thought, and he certainly wasn't alone. There was a circle of people surrounding him, all of them wearing black robes with small emblems on them. There were about twenty five or thirty of them in all, and from the way they were standing; in an organized manner, they seemed to all be in their official places.

Albus knew from the robes that these men were Renegades- probably the most prominent or well respected of Wands and Redemption. Many of them had their hoods up, though a few didn't. One of these was Fairhart.

He looked slightly younger, though his face was still mangled, still grotesque. Unlike the other hooded figures, who were turning and looking at each other, he was standing quite still; almost dignified. His untidy jet black hair was hanging over his face as though to conceal it, however his expression was unfathomable. Right next to him was another person who's hood was down, a far more attractive one. Albus gasped. It was Professor Blackwood.

Though it was the Blackwood from the picture he had seen. She was beaming. Her beautiful blonde hair was straight and down her shoulders, and her perfect white teeth were shining in the light of the fire above. Judging from her youthful, happy appearance, Albus could only assume that this memory took place ten, maybe fifteen years prior. She kept looking at Fairhart, who was a bit taller than her, expectantly, as if she was hoping that he would take notice. When he didn't her wide smile faltered slightly, but then returned moments later.

"Bring him in!" barked a familiar voice.

Albus jumped in surprise. He turned and saw that the circle was gathered around more than just him. The Hammer was right behind him, looking exactly the same as he did in the present day. Some of the other unhooded Renegades were looking at him enviously; he was clearly the highest ranking of everyone there. Albus wondered where Waddlesworth was.

He heard a door open and again jumped- he had not even known that a door was there, though now that he looked around, he saw two at opposite ends. From the one which opened a man walked through, his hood up. He was dragging another man by the ankles, a man who was squirming and shouting. His clothes looked ragged and he looked bloody, not that he could see himself however. He was blindfolded.

"No! No!" the man yelled at the top of his lungs, though he could not bang his fists, as his hands were bound. He was pale and thin, with short brown hair and a wrinkled face. "I know nothing! Nothing! I've done nothing!"

The man was drug right in front of The Hammer before having his ankles dropped. The hooded figure went into the circle in an empty spot reserved for him.

"Please...please..."

The Hammer raised his wand. "*Crucio!*"

The man gave a wail of utter agony. Albus cringed and closed his eyes as the man screamed. The Hammer didn't let up the spell however, he instead held it for quite some time. When Albus reopened his eyes the man was still shouting and squirming.

Albus looked at The Hammer's face and saw that his teeth were bared, though he seemed to be enjoying it. The other Renegades were too, apparently, as some of them were laughing. Only Fairhart kept his unreadable expression.

The Hammer lowered his wand and the spell stopped. The man continued to cry in pain however, though now his pleas were incomprehensible.

"Ethan Lowe according to your file in the Ministry of Magic you were accused of following the Dark Lord Voldemort during the second Wizarding war-"

"No! I was imperiused! I was imperiused! Those charges were dropped!"

"- and were convicted of the torture of no less than eleven wizards and witches, present at the murder of three-

"I had no choice!" he whelped, still squirming on his back.

"- and was released from custody three months later after being found innocent due to supposedly being under the influence of the Imperius Curse during said actions."

"Yes! Yes!" he whined. "Please-"

"Check him" The Hammer barked, jerking his head towards another hooded man. This one strode forward and whipped out a small silver knife. For a moment Albus thought he was going to cut the ropes binding him, but he instead slashed the pitiful man's sleeve. At once he knew why. There, on his forearm, was a faded mark- the mark of a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth.

"Imperius Curse indeed" The Hammer snarled, and many of the hooded figures hissed, "Another taste, then. *Crucio!*"

More yells of anguish. This time Albus didn't look at the man at all, but rather over at Fairhart. He did not know what he wanted to see, but he was disappointed. Fairhart was still staring down at the man blankly.

The torture ended much quicker this time. No sooner did it stop did the Hammer speak. "Why were you really let go? How many names did you give up?"

"None" the man said, his voice cracking. "I was bewitched when given the Dark Mark- I swear- they gave me Veritaserum-"

"Like we haven't heard that one before" a different hooded figure, this one close to Fairhart, wheezed.

"Silence" The Hammer said, turning to him for a moment before looking back at his prisoner. "I will take no more lies" he said. "*Crucio!*"

*Again* was all that Albus could think. He once more closed his eyes as the man yelled in pain, his screeches echoing around the room. He opened them when the screaming stopped, and saw that The Hammer's position had changed. He was no longer standing, but was crouched down in front of the ragged, defeated victim.

"You gave up names," he said, "Because you're a murderer, and a liar, and a coward. And you're about to give up more. You've received but a taste. I want ten names. Ten Death Eaters. If they're in Azkaban, dead, or, we have them, they don't count. Ten fresh names. You paid your debt to the Ministry. Now you owe WAR. Now you owe *me*."

"I don't- I don't- please- I don't know anyone! I was bewitched!"

"One more time then?" The Hammer barked, and he raised his wand once more. The man cowered on the ground, but the Hammer did nothing. He instead lowered his wand. "No," he said, "No, not like this."

The man continued to stammer in the wrong direction- he could not tell where his predator was.

"Bring her in" The Hammer said.

"What?" the blindfolded and battered man gasped. "Who? Bring who?"

The Renegade who had brought in Ethan left through the same door, returning moments later- with a little girl. Albus felt his insides go cold.

"Daddy!" the girl said, and she tried running towards him, but the Renegade kicked her as she did so. She fell over, smacking her head against the floor. The other Renegades were not laughing now, though no one was objecting.

"Lily!" Ethan yelled, and Albus felt his heart skip several beats. This little girl, though sharing no resemblance to his younger sister, what with her brown hair and chalk white, gaunt skin, still shared her name. For a single moment Albus pictured his sister on the ground, lip bleeding from being previously hit, head bloody and dusty now from the impact of the fall.

The Hammer ripped off the man's blindfold, and as soon as he could see he tried crawling over to who was obviously his daughter. Taking a random guess, Albus thought that she was eight, maybe nine years old at the most.

"Daddy!" she squealed as he tried squirming over to her like a worm. Albus saw that she was trying to squirm over to him as well; her hands too were bound.

The Hammer raised his wand once more and pointed it at Ethan. "*Crucio!*"

Albus didn't know who screamed louder- the man or his daughter. He flailed around in pain like a turtle on its shell while his daughter cried and wailed, trying to cover him with her body. When the curse was finally lifted the man was still shaking uncontrollably.

The Hammer reached forward and grabbed the girl, then pushed her roughly aside, out of the way. The man however, Ethan, was not deterred. He continued to try and crawl towards his daughter, to be with her even now.

"Lily baby its okay" he cried, tears running down his eyes as he inched his way towards her. Albus saw the circle of people had backed up so as to allow more room. "It's okay baby daddy's here..."

The Hammer stepped forward and then, with his other foot, stomped on the man's head. His face bounced off of the stone ground, and blood squirted from his nose. His daughter gave another shriek. The Hammer kept his foot pinned down on the man's face.

"Why don't you tell her the truth Ethan!" he spat. "Why don't you tell her that everything won't be okay? That it won't be okay because she's going to die! Because you refuse to give us names!"

"Daddy *please*" his daughter wailed, her tears mixing with the blood and dirt on her face as she curled herself up, now with no more intent to crawl. "*Please* give them what they want!"

"I don't know anything!" he yelled up at bald man pressing down on him. "Just let her go! We both don't know anything!"

"Ten names" The Hammer growled.

"I DON'T KNOW ANY!" the man cried. "Don't you think I'd tell you! Just let her go! Please! Keep me if you will, but *please* don't hurt her."

The Hammer lifted his foot from the man's face and turned to the girl. "I'm sorry that your father hates you" he said, "And that he wants this to happen. *Crucio!*"

And then they were both screaming again. Now it was the little girl Lily writhing around on the dusty floor in agony, shouting and crying inarticulately, and it was her father yelling, screaming far louder than he had when he himself had been tortured.

Albus ran right to Fairhart, who's expression had changed slightly. He was still standing motionless, but his mouth had thinned and he was looking over at the Hammer. Albus placed his hands on his shoulders and tried shaking him, though they obviously slid right through.

"Do something!" he yelled, though his own yells were nothing to Lily's or her father's. "Don't just stand there!" he said. "Do something! HELP HER!"

But Fairhart was just a memory, oblivious to the teenage boy who could not be seen or heard. Albus spun around, surely someone would intervene?

But no one did, and both the father and daughter were still screaming. Albus noticed that no one was laughing now, and many had put their hoods up so as to conceal their view. Only Blackwood and Fairhart still had their hoods down, but Blackwood looked different now too. Her smile was gone.

The curse was lifted, but the girl, like her father, continued to shake afterwards. Her head had continued to ricochet off of the floor in her flurry of movement, bloodying her more. Her limbs looked awkward as well- one of her arms was bent backwards.

"PLEASE!" the man yelled, crawling still over to his sobbing daughter and throwing himself on top of her, to shield her from farther harm. "*Please stop, please!*" he moaned.

"Names," The Hammer said simply.

The man gave a wail of despair, and Albus, who could have hardly blamed him before, certainly couldn't blame him now. He clearly knew nothing.

The Hammer strode forward. For a moment he looked like he was going to untie the man, but when he kneeled he only threw him off. "Another taste for Death Eater Jr., I suppose" he said savagely, "Until you're ready to talk."

The girl gave a scream of terror at what she knew was to come, and her father gave a wail that matched.

Albus looked back at Fairhart, hating him with every fiber in body for not interfering. The Hammer raised his wand. "*Cru-*"

Finally, there was movement. In a flash of speed, Fairhart had stepped forward into the circle and grabbed The Hammer's arm. With surprising strength, he forced it down, stopping the incantation.

"That's enough, Zydrunas" he said hoarsely.

There was murmuring amongst the other Renegades, and Albus saw that Blackwood looked fearful. The Hammer pulled his arm away from Fairhart's grip.

"I don't take orders from you, Sancticus!" he snapped. He stepped forward, and Albus saw that he had about a foot of height on Fairhart. Fairhart didn't look frightened at all however. He merely continued to stand straight.

"That's not an order," Fairhart said. "That's a warning."

If the other Renegades were murmuring before, they were actually conversing now.

"Is he challenging Zydrunas?" one of them asked.

"Warren will have him kicked for this," another said.

The Hammer smirked. "A warning huh? Or you'll do what?"

Fairhart removed his own wand from his robes in an instant, and in another moment, it was aimed at the Hammer's face. His cheeks flushed as the other Renegades gasped.

"Know this Zydrunas," he said quietly. "This ends here. Whatever you do to her will be done to you one hundred fold."

"How dare you threaten me!" he barked. "I am second in command! I am in charge here! I listen to Warren only! You'll be killed for your insubordination, mark my words!"

Albus turned and looked at the man and his daughter. She was still crawling. He was trying to inch himself closer to her once more.

"This stops here" Fairhart repeated, his teeth gritted.

"Get your wand out of my face" The Hammer roared.

Fairhart stayed where he was, not looking intimidated in the slightest. "She is a child Zydrunas! What has she done!"

"Death Eater's don't have children! Only spawn! Now get your wand out of my face!"

"Don't you think he would have told you anything he knew by now!" Fairhart yelled with malice, his wand firmly in place, squared between the Hammer's eyes. "What does he have to gain from not cooperating! He knows nothing! You think he's still concealing secrets! That's his daughter

you're torturing, he'd have told you anything you wanted the second you brought her in if he knew anything!"

The Hammer ignored him. "GET YOUR WAND OUT OF MY FACE!" he growled, his loudest yet, and this time he actually pushed Fairhart's arm out of the way and aimed his own wand at the weeping girl.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Several things happened at once. First Albus shouted no, though it obviously counted for nothing. Then Fairhart spun around and aimed his wand back in The Hammer's face, gripping it tightly. The jet of green light soared downwards, but the man gave a yell of panic and somehow, with surprising strength and even though bound, flung himself on top of his daughter, taking the blast himself. She screamed as her dead father toppled on top of her.

A blast of white light emerged from the tip of Fairhart's wand, a blast so massive and blinding that it put the flame hovering above them to shame. For a single moment Albus could see nothing but white light. There was a scream and a loud thumping noise, and when his sight had returned he saw The Hammer flying backwards with extreme speed. Renegades jumped out of way as he crashed into a stone wall, which cracked behind him. When the beam of light subsided Albus saw that his head was bloody, and that blood was also trickling from his mouth as he body began to shake uncontrollably; it was as though his insides had been destroyed. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he choked on his blood.

The other Renegades all plunged their hands into their robes and raised their hands at Fairhart, and Albus suddenly, though he knew that Fairhart would not die, grew fearful.

Fairhart raised his wand and maintained his position in the center of the circle. "Who will be next?" he barked. "I will not go so easy on my next challenger! Whose life ends tonight!"

The other wizards all continued to grip their wands, though they did nothing. Fairhart took turns revolving on the spot, aiming his wand at each of them in turn, and Albus thought that they looked more terrified than he did. Only one Renegade didn't have their wand raised. Blackwood had run to the circle and had stood in front of Fairhart, her arms outstretched as though he needed protection.

"Stop!" she barked. "Stop! Lower your wands! Everyone!"

No one listened to her; she was not ranked as high as The Hammer, who had stopped shaking now and appeared to be hovering between life and death.

Fairhart spoke next. "You!" he barked, towards the same hooded figure that brought the girl in. "Untie her. Let her go!"

"I don't take orders from you!" he spat, his wand shaking up and down in fear.

Fairhart tried to take aim from under Blackwood's outstretched arm.

"Sancticus stop!" she yelled. "Do it!" she barked at the hooded man. "Do it or we're all going to get killed!"

The man stepped forward cautiously, his wand still raised. He kneeled down and pulled out his silver knife. The girl was crying over her father's dead body, apparently oblivious to her own mangled state or the scene going on around her. He cut the ropes around her arms, though the only thing that changed was that she was now able to wrap her arms around her lifeless father as she sobbed onto his chest.

Fairhart took one look at her and strode passed Blackwood, right by The Hammer and out the door on the other end of the room. The other Renegades kept their arms raised, but the scene was beginning to go blurry. Albus understood why. Fairhart was not here, and thus had no memory of it. Albus quickly ran to the door and slid right through it. He found himself in a brilliant, clean looking hallway, completely white and with red doors on the sides. Albus' heart missed yet another beat. He had just been here a month ago. This was WAR's headquarters. He had just walked passed Waddlesworth's office, though whether it was currently occupied or not he did not know. And now that Albus looked back, he saw that the door that he had just walked through was the boarded up and battered door that he had seen- only it was neither now. He had the strange suspicion that he would soon learn what happened to it.

The door flung open, and sure enough, Fairhart turned on the spot. His wand was not flourished however, it seemed as though he had tucked it back into his robes. Instead it was, strangely, his hand that had conjured a small blast of blue light, which destroyed the wall near the door completely, and did damage to the door itself, though it stayed on its hinges.

"It's me! It's me!" someone coughed through the dust, and when it had settled Albus saw Blackwood, her hair ruffled and her hands up. She leaned back against the now semi-destroyed door. "It's just me" she repeated.

"I'm sorry Ida" Fairhart said, and now he did remove his wand. He waved it, and the dust was cleared completely. "I thought you were Zydrunas."

"Zydrunas is in no condition to follow you" Blackwood said darkly. "What did you do to him?"

"It's unimportant" Fairhart answered. "He'll live- if you get him in treatment in time."

There was a moment of silence following this, before Blackwood inexplicably started to cry.

"What were you *thinking* San!" she said. "You're more than banished! You attacked the second in command! You disobeyed the code! They'll have you killed!"

"Warren lacks the courage and the talent" Fairhart said. "You needn't worry about me."



"But I do!" she gasped. "You need to set this straight. You cannot flee, otherwise, even I cannot help you. To stay-"

"I'm not staying" Fairhart said. "I'm not banished, I'm leaving. This isn't my place."

"What?"

"I joined Wands and Redemption to stop people from hurting others. To prevent it from happening again. Not to torture men and their innocent children," he said.

"But you didn't!" she cried.

"That's right!" Fairhart shouted, and she fell silent. "I did worse! I stood there and watched! For too long I've seen us turn into the Death Eaters that we aim to destroy! This was the last straw! I am a Renegade. But I am no longer a member of Wands and Redemption."

And he turned to leave. Blackwood reached out however, and grabbed him by his wrist. When he turned she sounded miserable.

"Don't *leave me*" she pouted. "Don't leave *this*. This is what you're supposed to do, this is all you know! You're a fighter! San, please."

"I'm sorry Ida" he said quietly. "I can't stay here."

"Then let me go with you!"

"I don't even know where I'm going!"

"Yes you do!" she spat, and Albus saw that she was not crying anymore, her face was red with anger. "You're off to join Potter's little band of Aurors! Shackbolt's new Ministry! You want us behind bars!"

Fairhart tugged his arm away from her. "I don't know what I'm going to do" he said plainly, brushing his dark hair off of the disgusting side of his face. "But I can't stay here."

"You can't leave me!" she snapped. "You brought me here! You found me, alone! Told me there was a place for those who'd been hurt! For those seeking redemption! Brought me here! What was I San!" she screeched, and she slapped him across the face- his normal looking side.

She raised her hand to slap him again, but he caught it. Still, he said nothing.

"What was I? Some replacement! I'm all that you have! Me and WAR, that's all that's here for you! She *left* Sancticus-"

He let go of her hand and raised his own to silence her here.

"There's something that I have to give you" he said. She backed up slightly, in confusion. Albus watched as he dug his hand into his robes, and he saw that he was wearing his silver ring. Both his ring and his face, it seemed, he had acquired before his time in WAR.

"I wanted to give this to you when the time was right" he said. "When I thought you could handle it. But I'm leaving now. This may be my only chance."

And he pulled out a photograph. For a second, Albus thought that it was the same one that he had seen in her drawer, but he saw that this one was even more beat up. He caught a glimpse of a blonde man.

"I found the man who killed your parents" Fairhart said quietly, handing the picture over to her. "His name was Lucius Malfoy."

Albus felt his skin crawl. No way...

Blackwood took the photograph and stared at it, "I- what?"

"You asked me to find him for you," he said, "A while ago. Look familiar?"

She continued to stare at the photograph. "I- I- no" she said. "I was young. They were wearing masks. How did you find him?"

"I have my ways" he said darkly. "I can be persuasive."

"Do you have proof?" she said, sidetracked completely from his imminent departure. She looked hungry- like she had been searching a long time for this information. "What do you know?"

"From what I've gathered he was high in Voldemort's ranks. Inner circle. Follower during the first year, possibly a general. Specialized in the torture and murder of Muggles and Muggle born wizards, making your parents prime targets. But my real proof is his confession."

"*Confession?*"

"Following the war" Fairhart said. "He confessed to all of his crimes, listing names and dates."

"So- so he's in Azkaban?" she asked.

"No."

"Is he- is he dead? Did you..."

"No" Fairhart said coldly. "His confession was part of a deal with the Ministry. Apparently his wife helped Potter during the war. So long as they all confessed to their crimes and are not caught doing anything else, they have been granted immunity."

"*Immunity?*" she shrieked.

"Yes. Whatever she did, it got them and their son out of Azkaban. They are now under Ministry surveillance, they are untouchable. His entire family is. I'm sorry Ida."

"I don't care!" she barked. "That's not going to stop me! This man killed my parents! He ruined my life! Immune! I'm not going to arrest him, I'm going to kill!"

"I'm sorry" Fairhart said. "But you cannot act rashly. Warren will have you killed. Harming Ministry protected people gets them investigating us. Potter and Warren have a shaky alliance- they stay out of each other's business. If you attack someone that Potter has protected, he will storm headquarters, and Warren will blame you. "

"Potter will do nothing" she said, her teeth gnashed.

"Perhaps. But what about this Red War fellow that everyone seems to be on about? Potter's apprentice. Apparently he's not so lenient, and he's twice as dangerous. Rumor has it he caught twenty Death Eaters himself last week, including Dolohov. You don't want that kind of attention. You can not provoke battles that you cannot win," Fairhart told her.

She stared at him with malice, and then turned her eyes back to the picture. "Then why are you giving me this?" she snapped.

"To show you that I'm done" he said, and he turned to leave. "Consider that my last act as a member of Wands and Redemption. A letter of resignation of sorts. Good bye, Ida."

And he walked down the hall and out the door without another word. Blackwood was still transfixed by the photograph of Lucius Malfoy. She looked up and down the hallway, then back down at the picture. The memory started to grow unclear. It ended here, but still Albus saw as she crumbled the photograph and gave a yell of rage, a scream of ire at the knowledge that she now knew of the man who'd ruined her life, though she could not touch him, or his son, or his son's son...

The scene dissolved completely and he found himself back in his father's bedroom, his knees aching from how he'd been sitting. He stared down into the darkness of the basin, his mind rushing. So many thoughts were coming into his head; it was like a race to see which would be the first thing that he would think of. But the first to come, even out of everything that he'd learned, was the worst.

Fairhart. Fairhart was a Renegade. Had indeed been a member of Wands and Redemption. How many had he killed? How many had he tortured, before finally giving it up? Was there no one in this world that he could look up to?

## Chapter 14: The Lost Ring

Winter vacation seemed to drag on much worse than Albus could have possibly expected. The memory that Fairhart had given him seemed to stretch the hours, each one of them feeling like a day in itself as he replayed the atrocities that he had witnessed over and over again in his head. His sleep was no longer interrupted by dreams- instead he was merely always awake.

He had taken to wandering around the house in his own private rut, knowing that he appeared more and more like Rose with each passing second. His father, prone to leaving for long stretches of time again, didn't seem to notice, and had not noticed anything out of place in his cabinets either. His mother seemed to be under the impression that he was still feeling rather ill. No one seemed to notice, however, that every time he heard his sister's name he cringed.

Fairhart had ultimately succeeded, he realized. He had tried to show Albus the true terror of Wands and Redemption, and Albus knew, even as he was watching the memory, that he did not support them, let alone want anything to do with them. He would not be returning to their headquarters, not for anything, ever. But that did not help him escape the incontrovertible truth of the memory. What Fairhart was- what he had been.

So what if he had stepped in? So what if he had interfered? That was the first time, was it not? How many others had Fairhart stood by and watched be slaughtered, and how many children did he turn his head away from as they were tortured? And so what if it was in the past? Did that make it anymore excusable?

He tried justifying the scene, tried finding away to pull something benevolent out of it, possibly even inspirational, but he just couldn't. And what truly frightened him- though he tried not to think of, was what Fairhart was doing now. When Albus had last seen him he was clothed in the same robes. He had been a Renegade then, and he was a Renegade now. Was he watching a murder commence at this very moment?

And as Albus tried pushing these sickening thoughts from his head, the more meticulous details of the memory took top priority. Almost immediately after forcing the screams of that poor little girl out of his head did another feminine face appear. Blackwood.

This solidified both she and Fairhart as not only members of WAR, but of two very close members. The way that they acted however was most peculiar. The way she looked at him; the way he turned away. He spoke to her as though a father to a daughter. She spoke to him as if a lover. She even smacked him like one. What was the meaning behind this? And this relationship lasted after all of these years. If Fairhart *was* a spy for WAR, who's side was Blackwood on? The organization that she stayed with, or the man that she begged to leave with?

And perhaps the iciest, most unexpected twist had been the mention of Lucius Malfoy. The final piece to the puzzle that Albus wished had not been solved. Scorpius' grandfather was a murderer.

Blackwood hated Scorpius because torturing him was the closest that she would get to her revenge. And though he knew it was wrong to think so, he kind of understood her. In fact...he felt sorry for her.

"Up for two on two Al?" someone breathed excitedly.

Albus looked up. He was sitting out on the field that they called a backyard, forced outside by his mother, who insisted that he get fresh air on at least one day during break. The enthusiastic voice came from, predictably, Hugo.

"Ah I don't know," Albus said, measuring him up. Uncle Ron had decked him out in pads far exceeding the normal amount of a standard player; possibly to make things less dangerous. He was also holding his brand new broomstick up proudly.

"Oh come on, we need one more!" he said, looking behind him at his father and James. He leaned forward slightly and grinned. "You can be on *my* team" he added.

Albus glanced over at their opponents. Uncle Ron was hanging in mid-air, doing pull up's on his broom. James was rolling a Quaffle off of his arms and around his neck, occasionally spinning it and doing things with it that Albus could never hope to. Not liking their odds, he shook his head.

"Maybe later," he lied, and he clutched his stomach in preparation for another lie. "I'm still not feeling all that well. Shouldn't risk it."

Being ill on the trip home had been a blessing in disguise, for he now found it to be an invaluable excuse. Indeed, he wondered why he didn't use it more. It was pretty much infallible, as far as he could tell.

The smile slid from Hugo's face. "Okay" he said, clearly disappointed. "Maybe later then..."

Albus watched as he trudged back to where his father and cousin were, visibly defeated. He mounted his broom incorrectly and then began the difficult fly up his father, who would no doubt be giving him another tutorial.

"You really shouldn't have done that," a much less exciting voice said in his ear.

It was Rose. When she had arrived Albus could not be sure, though he supposed it could have been some time ago. She was almost like a shadow these days, creeping around and even her breathing shallow. Albus supposed that in a way she was tantamount to him in this regard. Even Teddy had called them "Mopey Mandy and Mopey Mark" during his last visit, with the genders obviously being switched for them.

"Done what?" Albus asked.

Rose sighed. "Went and turned him away like that. He's always trying to hang out with you. You see that don't you?"

"He's like that with everyone" Albus said, surprised by her statement.

"Everyone named Albus" she said, her mouth for a single moment almost curling into a smile—the closest that Albus had seen to one in weeks.

"Come off it. What's so special about me?"

"You stand up to me," Rose admitted, and Albus knew that it was her dull and depressed persona speaking, meaning everything she said was going to be blunt and honest. "And you're different from the rest of the family and all that. Slytherin and everything."

"What? Did he tell you that?" Albus asked, looking back over at Hugo, who was high up, trying to stay in the air.

"He doesn't have to," she said. "It's obvious that he looks up to you."

Albus turned back to her, at the sad look on her face, the look that she still wore, even now. The one that he had helped create.

He turned away from her. "He shouldn't," he said.

Though his father frequently popped in and out of the house with information (all of which was reserved for whatever adults were present), very few words of the outside world reached Albus. One notable instance however came just a few days before break was to end.

"Albus!" his mother called to him as he once again roamed their massive yard, walking in circles in an attempt to get his dosage of fresh air.

"Yes, " he hollered back darkly, slightly agitated at this interruption. He had been having a very good pace.

"Tone!" she hollered out. "And you have a letter from one of your friends!"

Albus entered his home and took the letter from her, the immaculate writing on the front letting him know that it was Scorpius before he even had the chance to comprehend it. He went to his room and tore it open at once.

*Al,*

*How's your vacation been? I'm not entirely sure when this message will get to you due to the weather and all, and even then we'll probably be back at Hogwarts by the time I get one back, but I still figured I'd write and see how things were. I got a letter from Morrison and he said his break has been terrible.*

*Mine was okay, mostly quiet really. You know how things are around her during the holidays. I put our handy little device back by the way, I figure it's safer at home. It's strange though, my granddad's been a lot nicer recently. He's asking me about my classes, and the dates of our Hogsmeade trips and all of that. Seems generally interested. First time I've been able to say that.*

*Anyway, the big reason I'm writing is to know if you have any information on our little operation? The one about our flower? Write back soon if you do-*

*- Scorpius*

Albus stared down at the ostensibly good willed letter and rolled his eyes. He did not know which was funnier, his secretive usage of the terms "handy" and "flower" as though he feared interception, or how he had blatantly asked if he had accumulated anything useful about Rose.

He heaved a sigh and folded it up, then threw the letter down on his surprisingly messy floor. Typical Scorpius. The last time his friend had seen him he had been close to vomiting, but Scorpius seemed to think that he was now well enough to continue his snooping. He thought of Rose, and their conversation on Christmas day. Should he even still try and help Scorpius? Could things get worse?

He collapsed backwards onto his bed and spread his arms out, resting his eyes as he did. He combed over the letter again in his mind. *My granddad's been a lot nicer recently.* Albus rolled over on his side and tried not to throw up. If only Scorpius knew exactly how nice his grandfather was...

He blinked a few times, a cold feeling settling in his stomach. Would he know? Would Albus tell him? Or was it better to conceal such a thing? Scorpius had so much on his mind already, did he really need a reminder of what his grandfather had once been? Of why his name was detestable? And yet, this information would certainly provide him with answers. He would know what purpose Blackwood had in mistreating him. Realize that he was probably in danger or something.

Albus shot up straight out of bed. His friend could be in danger! He almost knocked himself upside his head at having not immediately thought of this. He had been so preoccupied over the course of the week in what he had seen in the memory that he had forgotten what exactly it affected now. He would have to tell someone what he knew. He would have to ignore whatever personal battle was going on with his father.

As if on cue, there was a knock at his door.

"Come in," he said, and the door opened, revealing his mother.

"You okay up here?" she said, examining the dirty floor.

"I'm okay," Albus said. "Just got done reading my letter, that's all. Is dad home?"

She gave a small frown. "Something came up," she said. "He'll probably miss dinner. But he'll definitely be home later. Why?"

Albus laid back down on his bed. "I just wanted to talk to him," he said.

"Well I'll let you know when he's home," she said. "Is it something important?" she added, her eyebrows raised. "You can always talk to me."

Albus stretched out. "It's no big deal" Albus lied. The truth was that he wanted as few people to know what was on his mind at all. His father had to be told as a safety issue- he might be able to help Scorpius. But his mother had no such power.

"Are you sure?" she asked, sitting down beside him. "You seem like you have a lot on your mind."

"I'm fine, really" he said.

"You haven't been acting like it" she said sternly, narrowing her eyes towards him expectantly. "Walking around here like some kind of vampire."

Albus tried to muster a smile but couldn't. "I just still feel a little bit sick," he said.

She stared at him curtly. "You're perfectly healthy, Albus," she said, and he turned to her. "And we both know it. You can fool your brother and sister and your cousins with that, but I know when my children are sick, and when they are stressed. And you Al are the latter."

Albus heaved a sigh, wishing he had pretended to be asleep when he heard the knock. "I guess I have a little bit on my mind," he admitted, if only to placate her.

"And that would include?" she asked.

"School stuff," he said, though when she continued to stare at him, he added something else. "And outside stuff too, I guess" he mumbled.

"What kind of outside stuff?" she asked soothingly.

"Eh..."

There was a brief silence between them, where Albus averted her gaze. His mother had never been the inquisitive one, but rather the one who always seemed to know everything. As she sat here now however, her red hair hanging in front of her face, and her mouth thin, Albus realized why they were having this talk. It was because she knew how hard it was for him to talk to his father.

"Dad" he said. "And this whole...thing going on, with Ares and these Renegades-" he broke off there, before he revealed anything too important. She nodded her head though.



"I know" she said. "Things are bad right now" she added, patting his leg. "But Albus, do you know why Lily and James aren't as bent up over what's going on out there?"

He shook his head.

"It's because it doesn't involve them. Because they know that whatever's going on, it's not their fault and that they shouldn't be bothered with" she said calmly. "Try and do the same Al. None of this should affect you. So don't dwell on it."

Albus stared down. It did seem like he was the only one who seemed concerned with the outside world. He had entered Hogwarts this year expecting his father's decline in popularity to be immediately apparent. He had been the only one who had bothered to research the nasty nature of their new potions teacher. He had thought over everything meticulously, hungry for information that he did not need. Did viewing Fairhart's memory not show that?

And yet, that was it. That right there. It did concern him. It was not Lily or James who had been called to the headquarters of Wands and Redemption. It was not Lily or James who was waking up every morning sweating, grasping at flashes of his dreams. And when had Lily and James blinked until their eyes had changed colors? This did all affect him- if it didn't, these things wouldn't be happening to just him.

He wasn't going to say this to his mother however. He merely rolled back over.

"Okay, I won't," he said in what he hoped was a convincing tone.

She didn't say anything, but merely stood up. "Are you going to take a nap now?" she asked.

"Yeah" Albus said, closing his eyes as he did so, as if making a statement that what he needed now was more solitude.

"Okay," his mother said quietly. "I'll tell you when your father's home."

And he heard the door close. He didn't open his eyes again however; he instead stayed in the warm comfort of his bed, trying to press his thoughts from his mind, or possibly trying to go over them more. One minute he wanted to think about everything again, the next he wanted his mind blank. Back and forth, back and forth. He was so indecisive. But he was drifting now. Drifting further and further...and then suddenly running...

He was running through complete darkness, no end in sight visible. He looked behind him, panting as he did so from exhaustion, and so no beginning either. Where was he running to? What was he running from?

Even in the darkness he knew that he was on solid ground however. The only sounds apart from his heavy breathing were the echoes of his footsteps, each of which seemed to be louder than the

last. He continued his steady pace, though he now had pain in his side. Just as he started to slow down he felt the darkness beneath his feet rumble however.

He began running faster. It was as though the ground was splitting behind him; he could not fall through...

The ground in front of him, just a few meters away, split. What looked like a crack appeared in the darkness, visible only because of the eerie red light that it emitted. The crack seemed to split and open itself into a hole. Albus stopped dead in his tracks and stared at it- he thought that he heard a voice.

"What?" he asked the red hole in the darkness, and his voice echoed as well.

The voice was whispering something. He could not hear what it was saying. Should he get closer? Perhaps it was here to help him? Perhaps he could fall through it, and escape the darkness?

He inched closer to it. The voice sounded garbled, like whatever it was speaking had a mouth full of liquid. He got down on his knees so that the red light nearly blinded him. "What?" he asked it again.

It responded. From out of the circular crack in the ground the deep voice rasped.

*"Take off your mask"*

Albus looked down at it. What was it talking about?

*"Take off your mask"* it repeated, and it sounded like it was wheezing.

"I'm not wearing a mask!" Albus hollered at it.

*"That's your mask talking!"*

And then a hand shot out from the crack, a scabby, withered hand that may have just been bones, the flesh dangling from its fingers. He jumped back but was caught around the wrist, and before he could do anything else he heard a loud slam-

Albus nearly jumped out of his bed. The slam had come from downstairs. He could hear his mother yelling something, but he was too groggy to understand it. What had he been dreaming about? Why was he rubbing at his wrist?

He gazed out the window and saw the dark sky. Night time? How many hours had been asleep for? There was what sounded like another slam, and this time he heard his mum yell quite clearly.

"Harry stop! It isn't your fault!"

Albus crawled out of bed, still slightly disoriented. He maneuvered his way around his messy room and opened his door, where he saw Lily sitting at the top of the stairs. Her hair looked ruffled and she was in a night gown- she had been awoken as well.

"Where is everyone?" he asked her as he approached her. "What time is it?"

She turned to him while still sitting. "Almost midnight" she said. "James is still sleeping, somehow. Rose and Hugo left a little while ago. Uncle Ron might still be here."

"When did dad get back?"

"Just now," she said, and she seemed frightened. "He's really angry..."

Albus looked down the stairs, where the lights were all turned on. "Do you know why?"

She shook her head.

"Is he angry with mum?'Cause the last thing he needs right now is a Bat-boogey hex."

"He came home angry", she said. "He's really upset too. He's both."

Albus frowned. "Probably got punched in the face again," he muttered under his breath.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing" he said. "Never mind. Go back to bed; let me find out what's going on."

She didn't though, instead choosing to wait at the top of the stairs. He walked down them slowly, rubbing at his eyes with sweaty palms and yawning. For a single second he considered going to the bathroom; splashing his face with water and blinking rapidly to check that his eyes were still green. His curiosity of the situation got the better of him however, and as he entered the sitting room it became apparent just how angry his father was. A few trinkets had been knocked from the shelves, as well as crack in a picture on the wall. His father had thrown something around the room. He immediately froze. He had never known his father to be this mad. What had happened?

He entered the kitchen in silence, and no one saw him. Uncle Ron was indeed there, sitting at the table in silence, his back to him. Across from him Albus saw his father, though his father could not see him. His head was buried in his arms on the table, as if he was silently sobbing. His mother also had her back to him. She appeared to be making tea, though she spoke as she did so.

"I'm sorry Harry" she said. "But there's nothing that you could have done. You must see tha-"

She spun around as she was saying this last word, and broke off after seeing Albus. Uncle Ron spun around and his father lifted his head at the interruption.

Albus looked at the three of them, suddenly wishing he had stayed in bed." Erm- what's going on?" he asked.

"Sorry" his father said at once. "I must've woken you..."

"I wasn't sleeping" Albus lied. He turned to Uncle Ron- perhaps he'd get a more direct answer from him. "So what happened?"

Uncle Ron sighed. "Something bad Al. We can talk about it in the morning. Everyone needs some sleep now."

Albus looked back and forth between them. "So in other words, I can't know why the sitting room is destr-"

"Albus" his mother said calmly. "You wanted to talk to your father about something? Earlier?"

Albus stopped and scratched behind his ear. His father took a sip of the tea that he had just been handed to him, and with what looked like an enormous effort, gave an inquisitive look. Or perhaps any look other than a sad one.

"It's not a big deal," Albus said, slowly backing his way out of the kitchen.

"No" his father said, running his hands through his matted hair. "You can tell me. Don't worry about all of this," he added, shaking his head. "What's up?"

"It's- it's about school" Albus said, unsure of how he was going to segue into Blackwood wanting to murder one of his best friends.

There was a small pause.

"Okay, so spit it out kiddo" Uncle Ron urged him.

"Ron!" his sister hissed at him.

"Well not school" Albus said quickly. "Just a teacher."

There was more silence. Oh how he wished he'd went to the bathroom and checked the mirror. He could have rehearsed.

"We have a new Potions Professor" Albus said. "Professor Blackwood."

His father and Uncle Ron exchanged a strange glance- one that surpassed mere curiosity. "What about her?" Uncle Ron asked.

"She-" but he broke off there. Uncle Ron had said "her", despite him having made no mention of her gender.

"Well?" his father asked.

"I-erm. Right. Professor Blackwood. I- I saw her before the school year started. She was in the riot. She was helping that Waddlesworth guy. I- I think she's a- you know. A Renegade or whatever," he finished, shrugging as if it were no big deal. There was point in mentioning his break in of her office, or Fairhart's memory, both of which would get him in trouble. He had sufficient enough evidence already.

His father sighed loudly, while his mother stayed completely silent. Uncle Ron on the other hand ran his hands through his hair and made a noise that Albus interpreted as a laugh.

"Give the kid credit, Harry" he said, turning to his brother in law. "He picks up on a lot doesn't he? Just like his old man."

"*What?*" Albus said. Why were they not acting surprised?

"You figure that out all on your own Al? Pretty impressive. Yeah, Blackwood is a Renegade. A very high ranking one in Wands and Redemption, too."

"You knew?" Albus said, looking back and forth between them. "Then you know what she does! She hurts people and she's teaching at Hogwarts!"

"Professor McGonagall has assured me that no harm will befall any students" his father spoke up.

"Even if she really hates them?" Albus asked a little too quickly.

"Why?" his Uncle Ron said. "Who does she hate so much?"

"No- no one" Albus said a little defensively. "I just mean- working for WAR and all. I wouldn't put it passed her."

"Sadly, neither would I," his father said. "But we can't do anything about it. She didn't exactly ask for the job. She was placed there."

"Placed there?" Albus asked, repulsed by at the idea of such a poor decision. "By who?"

"Waddlesworth" his father answered. "Well technically Kingsley. Hard to explain really."

But Albus was looking at him with too much of an interested glare for him to stop there apparently.

"Over the summer Waddlesworth made a deal with Kingsley. They kind of work together."

"Work together?" Albus asked. "But doesn't WAR hate the Ministry?"

"Loathes them" Uncle Ron said. "But we're valuable allies to one another, as much as we hate it. It was like this the first time WAR started up too, in the aftermath of the war with Voldemort."

Albus remembered something from the memory. *Potter and Warren have a shaky alliance- they stay out of each other's business.*

"How do they work together?" he asked.

"I don't think that he needs to hear this," his mother spoke up, but Uncle Ron turned to her.

"He'll be fine Gin. The boy's just curious."

But his father was eyeing him intently now. When he finally spoke his voice was slightly low. "Wands and Redemption crosses boundaries that the Ministry doesn't. A lot of dark wizards now reside in other countries- out of bounds for us. They don't care. They find them and bring them back, and hand them over. In exchange, the Ministry turns a blind side to some of the slighter crimes of its members."

"What?" Albus nearly shouted. "You just let them murder and kill and-"

"Slow down Al" his uncle said. "Nothing like that. We let them slide on smaller things that most people would get a month in Azkaban for. If we keep them out of Azkaban, they continue to chip in. Like that man- The Hammer- the big idiot. We've let him out for handing over names before, despite a record of violence. No proof he's *killed* anyone though."

Albus stared darkly. He knew of proof.

"It sounds worse than it is" his father said. "I know how it seems, but you have to realize, it's not like it's every day. When certain things happen, we're forced to band together. We mostly stay out of each other's way."

"What kinds of things?" Albus asked.

"Terroristic threats" he said plainly. "Don't know if you read about it, but apparently Darvy issued a threat."

"Darvy?" Albus asked.

"Ares is mostly staying abroad- we still think he's looking for something. But remember when I told you about the Dark Alliance? Darvy's own little faction of servants? They've been on the move, and they've been making threats to the Ministry. Some even command that-"

"You turn yourself over" Albus finished.

His father frowned. "Something like that" he said. "The authenticity of them is in doubt though- I have the feeling that Ares is keeping a tighter leash on his brother than before. But even so, when

the people hear this they get worried. So WAR takes a few EP's that they have rounded up from before, and hands them over to the Ministry. People think that the Ministry is making progress, when all that they're doing is taking people that WAR's already caught and throwing them in Azkaban."

"That's terrible" Albus said, almost in disbelief. Was the Ministry really this corrupt?

"It seems that way" Uncle Ron said. "But it's pretty much the only way when things like that happen. Kingsley hates it too, but he understands its use. Me and your dad though, and a few others- we stay out of it all. Some Auror's still have their dignity. We'll catch our own little hooded maggots, thank you very much."

"But what does that have to do with Blackwood teaching at Hogwarts?"

"One of Warren's commands" his father spat. "Straight up told Kingsley he would offer no more support unless he was allowed to station someone at Hogwarts. His original demand was to have it be Zydrunas. The Hammer, as you know him. But I wasn't having that, and I made it quite clear to Kingsley."

"Same with me" Uncle Ron said. "I wasn't going to have some ugly brute try and teach my kids. Git probably can't even count or read, let alone teach magic."

"As it turns out though, Blackwood is apparently very adept at Potions. After some negotiations, she was given the position."

"But why?" Albus asked, looking back and forth between them. "Why does he want her there?"

"We don't know" Uncle Ron said. "He claims it's because he wants his own people there to protect the children, but Hogwarts is already well protected. We think he wants information on something, or someone. What or who we don't know."

"That's why we sent a spy in WAR," Albus heard his father say through gritted teeth.

Uncle Ron looked at him, as if surprised that he let this slip.

"A spy?" Albus asked, though he had a shrewd idea who they were talking about.

"Yes" his father said, and Albus saw that he now looked as distraught as he did when he'd first entered the kitchen. "Your old Professor. Professor Fairhart."

Albus nodded. "And they just let him in?"

"He had a bit of history with them. On good terms with them, really," Uncle Ron said.

"It was his job to find out why Waddlesworth wanted a spy at Hogwarts, and also, if he had a spy in Ares' group. Both were badly needed information."

Albus paused to soak this in, but something about the way that his father had worded these sentences struck him as odd.

"What do you mean he it 'was' his job?" he asked.

His father's face suddenly looked pathetic. He tried looking over at Uncle Ron, who turned away. Suddenly the kitchen seemed quieter, more uptight. His mother had turned away as well. He wore an abnormally large frown as he said his next words. "Professor Fairhart is dead Albus."

Albus felt his insides vanish. What had he just heard? Fairhart... dead?

"I- I don't- what?" he said, dazed.

"He's dead Albus. I'm sorry...I know you were fond of him."

Albus looked at his mother, who still had her head turned away as though she could not bear to see the dumbfounded look on his face. Uncle Ron was looking down at the kitchen floor. Only his father was willing to make eye contact, it seemed. But Albus could not look at anyone now. He could not understand what he was hearing. Fairhart was nearly invincible, was he not? Had the Renegades in his memory not all cowered at him? Had the men at the Ministry last year not fallen one by one, as he protected him and his brother?

"Wh-h- why? When? H-how?" he stammered out.

"I just found out tonight," his father said, closing his eyes now as he spoke. "He hadn't sent word for a few days. We saw the wreckage at his home."

"He was- he was attacked?"

"By WAR, most likely," Uncle Ron said, and his voice seemed more distant than that of his father's. "From the last few times that we were in contact, we knew that WAR had asked him do something. Not sure what, kill someone most likely. He said he couldn't do it. He must have tried to back out...and Warren couldn't let him get in so deep and then just stop."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Albus yelled, and he was his mother's eyes widen. "Who could beat him? What-"

"We're not sure how it all happened," his father cut him off. "There's no body. Not his anyway. But there were definitely members of WAR found at the scene..."

"Then he could be fine!" Albus breathed, feeling his stomach lurch with hope. "He fought his way out! He could just be hiding!"

His father shook his head sadly. "Sancticus was never the type to run Albus. The bodies we found suggested that quite a fight was put up, but it seems like there should have been more. Our



guess is that whoever he didn't manage to get got him. Even San couldn't take on twenty wizards Al."

"You're wrong!" he barked. "You haven't seen him fight! You haven't seen what he can do! What he knows! He could have-

"Albus, we found this" his father cut him off once more, reaching into his pocket and pulling something out. Albus watched in confusion before feeling his heart drop. He pulled out a silver ring. The one that Fairhart used to wear. "In all the years that I knew San he never took it off" his father continued. "I don't know what it is, but I know he would never leave it behind. It clearly came off during a struggle, from how we found it."

"But there's no body or anything!" Albus shouted, and he could feel tears start to form in his eyes from this last piece of evidence.

"WAR would have taken a body, or done something with it," Uncle Ron said. "San was an Auror, after all. They wouldn't have just left that lying around."

"You guys are just giving up!" he said, looking at the both of them angrily, fresh tears now officially falling as he still tried to comprehend the situation. Fairhart was not dead. His father and uncle were just idiots.

"We're accepting the truth Albus," his father said. "I'm sorry."

"Oh you're sorry!" he shouted. "Is that all?"

"Albus!" his mother shouted back. "You lower your voice!"

But Albus ignored his mother, and instead turned on his heel, now completely enraged. His father had as good as sentenced Fairhart to death- he had placed him back in WAR after all. And now he was refusing to even entertain the idea that Fairhart was alive? Did he not at least owe him that?

He marched out of the kitchen without looking back, his teeth gritted. It was strange. Days ago he could have sworn that he hated Fairhart, but now, he wanted nothing more than for his father to admit that he could still be alive- still out there.

"Albus wait!" his father yelled after him, and Albus heard him and his uncle slide their chairs out.

Albus ignored it all, marching up the stairs fiercely and trying to tune their calls out. Lily was still sitting atop the stairs.

"Al-" she started.

But he stepped over her and entered his room. He slammed his door shut and second later had it opened.

"Albus-" his father started to speak his uncle right behind him.

"Get out!" he roared.

"Not until I've had my say!" his father yelled back, and his new, dirty visage was much more commanding than his old clean one. "Ron, a word alone?"

Uncle Ron nodded his head and closed the door, leaving just Albus and his father in his room.

"Get out!" he spat.

"Why? What did I do?" his father asked loudly. "What do you think happened!"

"I think you killed him dad!" Albus yelled. "I think you threw him into a room full of dangerous people, all for a little bit of information, and expected him not to get torn up alive! You know how WAR is! You knew what he was getting in to-"

"So did he!" his father shouted. "You think I demanded that he do anything? Sancticus made a choice, Albus! He could have sat back at the Ministry and watched as other people risked their lives, but he didn't! He was in perfect position to perform a task and he did it willingly! That was his choice- he knew this could happen! Don't you get that! He knew that some things were worth dying for!"

"Like what!" Albus roared, now crying more than he had been. "What was worth throwing everything away! He had a family, and he-"

"A family?" his father said. "What are you talking about Albus? I've known Sancticus for years he doesn't-"

"He had a life! A life! And you took that away!"

"I took away nothing! He made his own choices!" his father shouted, and this last word was the loudest in the argument yet.

"So he chose to die then?" Albus said lowly, his voice cracking.

"Of course not," his father said, breathing heavily. "Albus listen to me- please."

Albus continued to breathe loudly as well. His father kneeled down so that they were at eye level.

"Albus you need to listen to me carefully" he said, his voice calm and quivering. "Life isn't a series of events that occur by themselves, following their own rules and culminating in its end. Life is a series of choices, each one irrevocable and more important than the last. We don't

follow a path; we take a step and then build the next one when we come to it. That makes it unpredictable. And that makes us cherish it more."

Albus stared at him in anger. What was he rambling about?

His father continued in his calm voice however. "In our lives we are always making decisions. But there are certain moments- moments that change the courses of our lives forever. It is the choices that we make. The choices that *we* make Albus, during *these* moments, which tell us who we are, and who we want to be. Fairhart could have backed out at anytime. But he chose to continue. He chose to put himself at risk."

"Because he felt like he had to!" Albus said, his voice loud and angry again. "Because no one else would!"

"Sancticus was my friend Albus!" his father said. "And I would-"

"That was his problem!" Albus barked with malicious intent. "He was *your friend*. And you never keep an eye on your friends! You never know what's going on with them! Maybe if you bothered to learn what was going on with all of your friends, Ares wouldn't have ended up splitting James open!"

His father stared at him in shock. For a moment he looked as though he was going to speak, but then refrained from doing so. He stood up straight and shook his head in silence. He then turned to the door. As he opened it he threw the silver ring on the bed.

"Sancticus always spoke very highly of you" he croaked. "He would have wanted you to have that."

And with that, he left. Albus waited until he heard his father's footsteps stop completely before collapsing on his bed.

*Fairhart knew*. He had known that he was in danger, known how little time he might have had. And with what little he did, he had given Albus a memory- not a good one, so as to remember him by, but a bad one, so as to inform him. He had risked his life in helping in, in luring him away. WAR had found out. They knew, probably from Blackwood, that Albus had been in contact with Fairhart. They had obviously deemed him untrustworthy, probably by reputation alone- and went after him for it. And Fairhart had not given in. He had tried to fight back. And lost.

He tried convincing himself that he had been right moments ago, that his professor and friend was alive and well, but couldn't. With the initial shock gone, logic had set in. With a pang he realized the last words he had said to him. Had he not shouted in anger, banging at his door?

He clutched the small silver ring in his hand, realizing just now how truly small it was. Indeed, it looked like it belonged to a much more slender finger. Perhaps Fairhart had obtained it very early in his life?

He knew that he would not be able to return to sleep, but he shut his lights off anyway. He was just crawling under his covers when the room became filled with a faint blue light. Albus had to look around for a moment before realizing that the light was coming from his hand. He was still clutching the ring, which was glowing.

Albus held the ring up, surprised. The ring itself was not glowing blue, but rather letters engraved on it. The letters were much too small and unclear to be read when they were not glowing, but now they were perfectly legible. This ring had been bewitched to glow in the dark. Why?

He felt excitement rush through him. What secret message had Fairhart left? A clue perhaps? To his current whereabouts? He read the words of the ring with intrigue.

*To Sam, for showing me what true magic really is- San.*

Albus read it three times, more surprised with each read. His face fell. This was not even Fairhart's ring! It belonged to someone else! Someone had evidently been displeased with it and given it back to him.

He turned the ring over in his hands and saw that nothing else was written. Who in the world was Sam? Whoever he was, he must have been a powerful wizard to have taught Fairhart about magic. He felt tears begin to form again. He would never know. Never get to ask. Just as he would never learn the truth about Fairhart's disfigured face, and as he would never learn so much else. This ring was just one more mystery about Sancticus Fairhart that would go unsolved.

He clutched the ring tightly, though the blue light continued to squeeze through the cracks in his fingers. He closed his wet eyes and laid back, sure that even with all of his strange and horrible dreams, he had never wished for sleep more.

## Chapter 15: The Spy

Albus didn't speak to his father for the rest of the holidays. He hardly spoke to anyone actually, eating in silence and spending the vast majority of time in his room, squeezing Fairhart's ring in the palm of his hand and wondering if whoever he had once given it to knew that he was now gone forever.

He could not bring himself to write back to his friends, or to talk to his cousins or siblings (all of whom he was not sure if they even knew about Fairhart) or to do anything that didn't involve solitude. To his immense surprise, sleep had started to come easy to him now, and as far as he knew he was no longer having creepy muddled dreams- his worst thoughts seemed to be reserved for when he was awake. He was dreading the return to Hogwarts however, when he would be forced to be surrounded by chattering people. And naturally, as he came to expect with all things that he was dreading, it came much too soon.

"Lily don't, you'll strain yourself! James, help her would you?" Albus' mother barked as they removed their trunks from the back of the car.

Albus watched as his brother did all the strenuous work from afar. He was leaning up against a solid barrier- not the one that you can slide through- and trying to tune out the noise, which was obviously impossible on a crowded platform. He saw his father look over at him from next to their car. He turned away before they could make eye contact.

Within minutes they were all ready to enter the platform, and Albus slid through first so as to have a head start in getting away from his family. His father, last to enter, looked at his watch before glancing up at the scarlet engine.

"Uncle Ron should be here soon," he said. "But you lot have a bit before you need to get on. Why don't you go look around for your friends?"

Albus and James immediately bolted in different directions, though Albus cast a glance back at his father before he did so. At the beginning of the year his father had wanted to speak to him before boarding the train. Would the same prove true this time?

Albus wandered throughout the platform, catching the eye of a few familiar places, muttering "yes" when asked if he had a good break and searching only a for a few select people. He thought that he caught a glimpse of Mirra from a distance, but he didn't approach her- the last thing he needed right now was to get told how much of a bad person he was.

"Alright Al?"

He turned and saw both of his friends approaching him. Scorpius looked healthy and excited for some reason; possibly eager for news, as he had not been written back to. Morrison was as lazy looking as ever and may have just arrived, as he was still pushing his own trunk around.

"Been better," he said solemnly, slapping both of their hands half heartedly in greeting.

"You still look sick," Morrison said, twisting his face up into a disgusted look. "Been like that all break?"

"Tell you later" Albus said, not wanting to even touch what had happened over the past few days at all. He wasn't even sure if he should tell them about Fairhart. Yet at the same time, if he didn't, who would?

"How was your holidays?" he asked quickly, deciding he would mention it later.

They meandered around the platform casually, waving to people and keeping their eyes on the train, waiting to see when a considerable amount of people were boarding it. Morrison had, as usual, launched into a terrible tale of his promiscuous squib sister and yet another boyfriend that she had.

"Poor bloke wants to be a magician" he said, chuckling. "Like it's his actual career of choice. It's hilarious- muggles and their cards tricks and stuff. He thinks he's some big shot because he can take a bite out of a coin."

Albus nodded his head to show that he was listening, though in truth he was just biding his time until he could board the train. Not that he was in any particular hurry to return to the castle though- it was really just to have something to do.

"Well my vacation was excellent" Scorpius said happily, and Albus had seldom seen him so joyous. "Got to spend some quality time with my family- like I said in my letter, me and my granddad have been hanging out a bunch."

Albus' stomach lurched. He had not even told his father about Blackwood and her hatred of Scorpius. He almost sneered at the thought of the ramifications. Knowing the way he worked, he'd probably use Scorpius as bait or something...and foolishly risk his life as well.

And yet, there was still the matter of telling Scorpius. Did he have a right to know? Would he even want to, especially now, when he was so pleased with the amount of time he was spending with his grandfather?

Albus hesitated for a moment, seriously contemplating if he should cut off his friend or not.

"And he's getting along with my mom better too, it's actually quite surprising-"

Scorpius was cut off, but this time by a loud bell that signaled people should start boarding. His friends walked him back to his family, where James and the adults were loading trunks onto the train.

Morrison immediately went to help, giving Uncle George a hand as he hoisted up Fred's trunk.

"Thanks" he said. "Who's next? Lily?"

Albus watched as all of their trunks were pushed on, though he kept casting sideways glances over at his father, who was having a hushed conversation with his mother about something. The scarlet engine gave a whistle, and soon enough Uncle George, Uncle Ron, James and Morrison had become the official cargo lifters of the entire station.

"What do you have in here kid, a dinosaur?" Uncle George asked a timid looking boy who Albus thought may have been sorted this year. Some of his luggage required the strength of two or three of them.

"Don't these kids have parents?" James muttered to himself as he and Morrison lifted the trunk of a girl that recognized from Ravenclaw onto the train.

"That's not funny James," his father said darkly. "I still remember your Uncle George lifting *my* trunk onto the train, back in first year."

"Didn't give me any help though," Uncle Ron grinned.

"Albus, a word?"

Albus turned and saw that it was his mother. She was beckoning to him from a few steps away.

He approached her, casting a look over his shoulder and seeing that Mirra had miraculously appeared to have her trunk hoisted up by Morrison and James as well. He frowned and realized she'd probably waited for him to be out of the way before going to the train.

"Yeah?" he asked his mother.

"I wanted to talk to you about something, real quick," she said, and Albus saw that her eyes, for a fraction of a second, had darted to her husband.

"Is this a about me and dad?" he asked irritably.

"No, it's about just you," she said coolly, giving him a look that indicated she was not pleased with his tone. "Now you obviously won't listen to your father anymore," she added in an equally cold voice. "Because you're just as stubborn as him. But *I'm* telling you that this- this blaming him thing- it needs to stop-"

"Mum not now!"

"No, now-

"Gin the train!" his father called, and indeed, everyone was on it now, and steam was billowing at an alarming rate.

"You need to-"

"Mum I have to go-"

"Gin the train!"

Albus bolted away just as his mother was heaving a sigh. He ran over to the train, which was now actually dangerously close to moving, and hopped up just as he felt it rock.

"Your trunk is loaded and everything" his father said to him quickly. "Morrison and Scorpius have it."

"Okay" Albus said to him, though as the train started to pick up speed, his father started to job slightly to say something.

"Al- have- have a good term" he managed to stammer out.

Albus stared at him, down at his jogging feet, then back up at unkempt hair and bloodshot eyes. He looked at the scar on his forehead, twisted by the wrinkles of his skin. He could not muster a kind gesture or word; there was too much enmity, at this time anyway. But as the train started to go faster and faster, he managed a nod, and then, just like that, his father was out of sight.

Albus closed the door to the train and began walking down the corridor, dodging the witch who pushed the lunch trolley and looking through the windows of the compartments to find his. He saw James in one, surrounded by his friends and with his girlfriend on his lap; already he had cauldron cakes in his hands. He saw Lily and Hugo and all of his other family members in another, chatting casually, and then saw Mirra and Rose in one with Eckley and Hornsbrook. He narrowed his eyes and proceeded all the way down the train, where he finally found the compartment that housed his two friends.

"What took you so long?" Morrison asked him, munching on a licorice wand and removing his feet so that Albus could sit down.

"Had to talk to my mom about something," he admitted with an exasperated sigh.

"About what?" Scorpius asked, digging through his trunk for something.

"Balderdash," he said dismissively, hoping that the topic changed soon.

It did. For most of the train ride Scorpius and Morrison traded stories of their vacation, and then Melonie Grue, who Albus knew was friendlier with Morrison than he or Scorpius, had stopped in to chat with him. Only after she left was Albus asked the thing that he had been dreading.

"So," Morrison said, checking the compartment door to make sure that it was sealed shut. His voice dropped to merely more than a whisper. "Did you watch it?" he asked Albus hesitantly.



Albus stared. "What?" he said, and he could feel a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek.

Scorpius frowned at him. "Oh come on," he said. "Don't play dumb!"

"Fairhart's memory you git!" Morrison added. "Manage to sneak a peek or what?"

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but found the words caught in his throat. "I- no" he finally lied, and both of their faces fell. "I didn't. And Fairhart- Fairhart's dead."

"What?" Morrison shouted, and Scorpius, though he made no noise, widened his eyes in shock.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"No, I'm joking!" Albus said with bitter sarcasm etched into every word. What a stupid question.

"No way," Morrison said. "How? What? What are you talking about?"

Albus explained to them what he knew- or most of it anyway. He ignored the memory entirely, it was better that they did not know its contents, better that their memories of Fairhart were not tainted as his had been. He described the scene at the kitchen table however- and everything that his father had told him. For fifteen minutes straight he spoke, and when silence finally arose, he reached into his trunk and pulled out Fairhart's ring.

"This is it," he said, holding the small silver circle up. "This is their proof. This is all that was left."

Morrison snatched it from his hands and examined it for a moment, before Scorpius took it from him and did the same.

"There's words on it," Scorpius said, squinting. "Can't read them though. Any idea what they say?" he asked, passing the ring back to Albus.

"Yeah" Albus said. "The ring glows in the dark for some reason. It's not even Fairhart's. Belonged to some guy named Sam, who gave it back."

They all stared around the compartment in silence after he said this, as though the knowledge that his ring bared no secret message only corroborated the idea that he was really gone. Morrison ran his hands through his hair.

"I can't believe that" Morrison said, and he truly sounded dumbfounded. "And you said it was WAR?"

"According to my dad," Albus said.

"Think Blackwood was in on it?" Scorpius asked, his tone light, though Albus knew the purpose of the question- to give him another reason to hate her.

"Doubtful," Albus said. "They were really close" he added, though he wished he hadn't. They both looked at him curiously.

"What makes you say that?" Scorpius asked.

"Oh-erm- the picture I saw, remember? It had them standing all close by. And they were all writing to each other too."

"Yeah, true," Morrison said. "Blimey, I wonder if she even knows though. Must be hard to keep with the going-on in her little band of Renegades when she spends so much time at Hog-"

The door slid open, and Morrison ceased speaking at once. Albus looked up, not sure who he was expecting, but pleasantly surprised all the same. It was Lance.

He looked no different than he had when Albus had last hung out with him, though his face wasn't quite as full of coolness and calmness, and it too wore a surprised expression.

"Hey," he said to all three of them.

"Hey," Albus and Morrison responded. Scorpius said nothing.

"My bad," Lance said quickly. "You looked like James through the window."

"Oh," Albus said, wondering if they all were feeling extremely awkward. Scorpius wasn't even looking at Lance. He had turned his head away defiantly, as if it were still just the three of them. "Well he's a bit further down the train, actually. Second compartment on the left, I think."

"Ah, thanks" Lance said, and he glanced at all three of them in turn. "Well...see you later then."

Albus nodded as Lance slid the compartment door closed. No sooner had he done so did Scorpius speak.

"Prat," he muttered maliciously.

Albus threw him a nasty stare. "No he's not," he said. "Which reminds me, I wanted to talk to you about that whole thing."

Scorpius looked up excitedly, but his face fell when Albus kept his gaze. So caught up with Fairhart and his father and everything in between, Albus had forgotten his conversation with Rose- the one where she had nearly cried on his shoulder. He made a mental note to talk to Scorpius about it, and to establish that they both shared blame and that it was both of their jobs to fix it, but first he had something to do.

"And I'll talk to you about it later," he said, standing up and marching over to the compartment door.

"Where are you going?" Scorpius demanded.

"To talk to Lance," Albus said defiantly.

"You better not tell him anyt-"

But Albus closed the door behind him, shutting out Scorpius' voice completely. He was not going to tell Lance what had happened at Hogsmeade, not when he had already said he wouldn't. But that didn't mean that he couldn't try and help things now. It was partly his responsibility after all. Gone were the days when he didn't take the initiative- he had a job to do, and he was going to do it.

He saw Lance walking down through the corridor, coming close to the compartment that Albus had pointed him towards.

"Hey! Hey-Lance!"

Lance spun around, his perfect blonde hair whipping backwards. "What's up?"

Albus approached him and tried not to look down at the ground. "I was just thinking," he said. "It's been a while since we hung out, you know? And that Hogsmeade trip got cut short and all, for me anyway. Maybe next Hogsmeade trip we could do it again?"

Lance looked behind him as if for reinforcements. He clearly thought that he was cornered. "Erm...sure" he said. "Who- who would all be coming though?" he added, ostensibly as an afterthought.

"Oh I don't know yet" Albus said, trying to keep Rose out of the conversation. "Just me and my friends for now probably. Feel free to invite anyone though and I'll see what I can do to..."

"Okay" Lance said, his brilliant blue eyes darting back and forth. "Erm, I'll have to make sure I'm not doing anything though. It's a maybe for now."

Albus nodded. "Okay" he said. "Cool" he added, before turning around. For now, a maybe would have to do.

"I can't believe that you would betray me like that!" Scorpius yelled an hour later, after Professor McGonagall had welcomed them back. The Great Hall was as noisy as ever- even more so now, with students chattering about their holidays, and Scorpius had to speak quite loudly to get his words heard.

"Betray you?" Albus hollered back, taking a massive bite out of a turkey leg. "Whadahellrutagginabout?" he said as he chewed.

"Setting Lance up with the perfect opportunity!"

Albus swallowed and looked over at Morrison, who seemed to be neutral on the entire thing. He hadn't said a word since Albus told Scorpius what had happened, anyway.

"Look," Albus said clearly, holding his hands up as if to reaffirm his innocence. "Lance had a shot with Rose, and we messed it up for him. You might have had one, and messed it up for yourself. I'm setting up a get together in Hogsmeade, where you'll both have an equal chance."

"It's not equal at all!" Scorpius argued.

"How so?"

"Because Lance is better than Scorpius, duh," Morrison finally chimed in. "He didn't resort to cheap tactics last time for fun did he? It was to even the playing field."

Scorpius narrowed his eyes towards. "He's not better than me" he said. "Rose just liked him more."

"Well now you'll get a shot to change that" Albus said, before ripping off another chunk.

Scorpius stayed quiet for a moment before muttering mutinously under his breath. "I don't see why you had to and interfere anyway."

"*Interfere,*" Albus repeated scathingly. "You didn't see her mate, she's torn up. This fixes things, and gives you a legitimate shot."

"But it's not your job to fix it," Scorpius said. "You barely even did anything."

"That's right," Albus said coolly. "I just sat there and watched."

It took him a moment to realize where he'd heard these words before, but once he figured it out, he glanced up at the staff table.

There was Neville, chatting casually with Professor Bellinger. Next to her was Hagrid, who was shoveling food into his mouth rapidly. Albus felt a sudden surge of guilt- he did not think that he had even visited Hagrid once this year, having seen him so frequently in classes. He made a mental note to do so, and then looked next to Hagrid to see...

An empty chair. Blackwood was nowhere to be seen at the high table. Albus stared at it blankly, unsure of what this meant. Perhaps she had heard. Was she at home? Mourning the loss of her good friend? Could she not bear to face people, just as it was hard for Albus too as well? He suddenly felt a rush of sympathy for her not unlike what he'd felt after watching her clutch the photograph of Lucius in the memory. And she had known Fairhart for much longer too...

"Al, you going to eat that or not?" Morrison said, pointing at the bowl of pudding he had pulled over to himself moments prior.

"Huh? Oh right sorry. Yeah I am," he added a little defensively, pulling the bowl closer to him.

"What were you looking at?" Scorpius asked him, and though his tone was still cold from their previous conversation, he did seem interested.

"Blackwood's not here," Albus said, still eyeing the empty chair. None of the other teachers seemed to notice it.

Scorpius chewed some turkey slowly and eyed the chair as well, not commenting at all.

"Maybe she went back to the underworld for Christmas," Morrison suggested. "And there's no calendar down there. She has no way of knowing break's over," he chortled, and Scorpius chuckled as well.

"Yeah maybe," Albus said, barely paying attention. He was now wondering not where she was, but when she would be back. Professor McGonagall had not made any mention of a replacement Potions professor, nor a reason for Blackwood's absence. Maybe he was over thinking things however. Maybe she had just skipped the welcome home feast and was in her office- or had taken that passageway that Albus was almost positive led to Hogsmeade.

They were dismissed from dinner ten minutes later, Albus holding his full stomach and wanting nothing more than to fall into his four poster bed. Classes would resume tomorrow. The last time he had had classes, Fairhart had been alive...

He tried pushing the thought from his mind as he descended into the dungeons and navigated his way through them with the rest of the Slytherins. Within another ten minutes he was nestled away inside of his comfortable bed, staring up at the ceiling in the darkness. Back at Hogwarts. Just like that. Life goes on.

He rolled over onto his side and began to hear a faint snoring coming from Morrison's bed. He had already fallen asleep.

"Night Al," Scorpius said through the darkness.

"Night," he replied, closing his eyes and trying to let sleep come to him.

Fifteen minutes later however, it seemed that Scorpius was unable to sleep too. He whispered something so that only Albus, who's bed was closest to his, could hear it.

"Hey Al?"

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry...about Fairhart."

Albus couldn't even reply. The most that he could was hope that Scorpius would think that had fallen during the two seconds after he had whispered. All night his thoughts were flooded however, all of them about the same thing.

Fairhart was gone. *Gone*. He did not know why it had taken so long to sink in. After the initial shock he had moped at home, true, but the vast majority of his negative feelings had been directed towards his father- his father and his blunder, his father, who though he knew deep down was not entirely responsible, he still wanted to put all of the blame on. Just like everyone else.

It was as though seeing Blackwood's empty chair had reminded him that he was not the only one who would never see Fairhart again. Someone else was missing him. But was there anyone else? Morrison and Scorpius seemed shocked and saddened, but they'd get over it quick enough. Would anyone else really care?

He thought of how it had all ended. A spy. Was that not Fairhart's task? Was that not WAR's reason for getting rid of him? And his father claimed that Fairhart had volunteered. That he had been the perfect man for the job and known it. But who could do such a thing? Live a double life like that. Put themselves at such a terrible risk. He stayed up the entire night thinking the same thing over and over again. Who could be so foolish- or have so little to lose- that they would be a spy?

Reginald Ares sneered as he slammed the thick black book shut, a ghastly figure slowly but surely disappearing as he did so, a ghoulish and knowing smile on its face.

He was in a large stone chamber, a dirty and dingy one on an island in the middle of nowhere. This was not the same circular chamber that he had once kept the Foulest Book in however- no, he had moved it so that his foolish brother couldn't get his hands on it. He was not alone in the dirty, dimly lit chamber however. A man stood at the other end of the room, leaning up against the wall casually, rolling a galleon back and forth between his knuckles, and finally making it vanish with a complicated flick of his fingers.

"You wished to see me, Fango?" Ares said, turning to the man.

Fango Wilde removed himself from the wall and straightened up. His short brown hair was dusty from having waited so long, as his normally bored face looked it had been eager to speak for a considerable amount of time.

"Vesnovitch seems quite sure of his suspicions," Wilde said. "What's changed?"

"We have systematically eliminated every other possibility" Ares replied gruffly. "It would appear that dual ownership of the Wand is...the only idea left."

He said this last part as though he wished nothing more than for it to be false.

"Has the Wand malfunctioned again?" Wilde asked.

"Not recently, no" Ares replied. "Not since it started randomly trying to repair things, but that was quite some time ago."

"And the Wand's other owner?" Wilde asked. "You're quite sure that-"

"I'd rather not discuss it now," Ares cut him off. "I will deal with it when the time comes. You requested an audience with me. Have your questions been answered?"

Wilde heaved a sigh. "No," he said plainly. "It was not. But it is something, I think, of equal importance."

Ares snorted in disbelief. "I highly doubt that," he said. "But continue."

"It's about your brother" Wilde said loudly.

Whatever little color was in Ares' face- and there truly was only a little- drained from it immediately. He turned away and back towards the thick black book, which was still nestled on its pedestal. Now with his back turned to avoid eye contact, he spoke.

"What about him?" he asked casually.

"Don't pretend," Wilde said forcefully, and quite suddenly, it seemed like he was the one in control of the conversation. "He's dangerous. Everything he does puts us in jeopardy."

"Sebastian can be a bit *forward*, I admit-"

"He's unpredictable," Wilde cut him off, and he strode forward. "And far too capricious for his own good. And what's worse is that it gets him support. He seems to think that he's the one calling the shots."

"Sebastian knows his place" Ares said placatingly.

"Does he really?" Wilde asked, mock curiosity in his voice. "What about when he sent those terroristic threats to the Ministry, demanding they hand over Potter? We are *very* fortunate that they thought he was referring to the man, rather than the boy. Had word got out that we sought a teenager, the public would have united against us in an ins-"

"You don't need to tell me the possible repercussions!" Ares barked, spinning around so quickly that his dark cloak kicked up dust. "I understand well enough, thank you!"

Wilde took a step back, and now Ares was back in control. When he spoke again however, it was with a much lighter tone.

"Besides, Sebastian did what he thought was best. At the time we were still searching for answers. It was imperative that we have the boy. Now we already know what we needed to know."

"What he thought was *best*?" Wilde asked sarcastically. "You can't continue to make excuses for him. What about this 'Dark Alliance' nonsense he's been going on about? They're actually starting to think that's their name! What happened to the Disciples of Change?"

"Who cares!" Ares roared, rounding on him once more. "It's just a name! You think I care what this riff raff and scum call themselves" he spat, beckoning towards the ground, indicating that supporters were just below him. "They can call themselves the Chocolate Covered Cavalry, it makes no difference! I used the name 'Disciples of Change' to send a message to the Ministry. That I was not alone, and would not be fought as such!"

"But the men follow Sebastian!" Wilde argued. "They use *his name for them*. And they grow restless. Sebastian wants to act now; you should hear the way that they talk. They're starting to think of him as their leader. Half of them are just bitter Death Eaters who want to torture muggles again, and Sebastian has no problem supplying them with victims."

Ares did not make any comment on this. He turned around once more and began walking away, as if he could leave Wilde's words behind in the dirt. When he finally spoke again his voice carried a most unusual note of desperation in it.

"What would you have me do, Fango?"

"Get rid of him," Wilde replied through gritted teeth. "You want to sit back and watch the public destroy itself. Sebastian wants to enter the fold and cause havoc. You can't have both. He continues to undermine you at every turn. The men below us grow weary of hiding- they want action. They flex their fingers to cause ruin. They seem to think your promise of a war was an empty one."

"They will get their war," Ares said dismissively. "Whether it's kind that they want is a different matter."

"These people are filth!" Wilde shouted. "You said it yourself! They have no interest in your revolution, they want to fire a skull up into the sky and bathe in the glory of fear! And Sebastian is leading them towards that! I understand he is an exceptionally talented potioneer, but certainly his talents are all but obsolete now? Just get rid of him. You needn't even dispose of him; just get him out of the way."

Ares turned slowly. "He's the only family I have, Fango," he said calmly.

"I know," Wilde said. "But you must look passed that."



Ares stared at him for a moment before turning back to the Foulest Book and caressing it gently. "I will not abandon Sebastian. I am not our mother. He stays, and that's final. The men will get to cause their destruction, but they will do it on my terms. I've established a timeline. By the beginning of summer, the Ministry will be gone. By autumn...it will have returned."

"You plan on having your army of those-the-those things controlled in just a few months?" Wilde asked incredulously.

"I do not have to control them to make them destroy. For now, unleashing them will merely have to do. And eventually- if Vesnovitch is correct and there is no other way- I will take care of the boy as well. I already have the opportune moment planned. Lucius has provided me with the dates for future Hogsmeade visits."

"I don't trust Lucius," Wilde said, and this was done rather quietly, as if he was unsure if Ares would like his words. "He's been in Potter's pocket for far too long. I have a strange feeling about him."

"And rightfully so," Ares said. "He is a spy."

Wilde opened his eyes in surprise. "What? How do- how do you?" he stammered out. "Legilimancy?"

"Common sense" Ares said icily. "Lucius rejected Augustus' offer two years ago, he'd have no reason to suddenly feel the urge to join. And I can see it from Potter's point of view as well. Lucius is the perfect man for the job after all, and as Potter himself is now out of the Ministry, Lucius would remain his only link to us and any acquired information."

"So then you'll kill him?" Wilde asked.

"In time," Ares said simply, and he seemed rather pleased that the conversation about his brother was finished; quite happy to have moved on to a new one. "But first he has his benefits. In addition to Hogsmeade dates he provides moral support for the slime downstairs. He was once very well respected among them. Having him back boosts their spirits; gives them confidence. I can also feed him false information to mislead Potter. Indeed, sometimes I wonder if Potter is still right in the head- giving me Lucius was more a gift than a curse."

Wilde nodded. "But then surely he will have told Potter that you now know the Hogsmeade dates?"

"Precisely," Ares said with a small smile. "Lucius was under the impression I wanted the dates to know when the castle would be empty of children- he fears for his own grandson. He has no idea I want the village full. Potter will have protection around the castle. We will be in the perfect position to ambush Hogsmeade."

Wilde nodded once more, taking the finality in his tone as a sign that he was to leave. He turned around and began walking towards a blank stretch of wall, which slid open to reveal a descending set of stone cut stairs when he was close enough. Before he could walk them however, Ares spoke again.

"Why are you here, Fango?"

Wilde stopped dead in his tracks and turned. "I had wanted to talk to you about Sebastian."

Ares spun around and shook his head. "No. Why are you *here*? Blending in with the garbage downstairs and taking an interest in my goals."

"Because I agree with you," Wilde said simply. "This world needs to be governed. Controlled. I want to help you accomplish-"

"Don't lie to me, Fango," Ares cut him off briskly. "You betrayed your friend out of concupiscence and turned your back on your government out of avarice. You have nowhere else to be but here- who will take you? But the fact remains you are putting in a great deal of effort. More so than the animals below. And I confess that I...appreciate that."

Wilde said nothing. He stared silently for a moment, before once more turning to leave. And once again, Ares stopped him.

"And speaking of your friend," he started. "Have you heard the news?"

Wilde stepped off of the stairs, his face wearing a look of curiosity. "What about him?"

"He's dead" Ares said dully.

Wilde's face turned chalk white. For a moment he looked as though a wave of ice cold water had overtaken him, and when he spoke his voice had a slight shake to it.

"Sa- Fairhart is dead?" he asked, the words falling from his lips as though he could not see how they belonged together. "Who? How? How do you know?"

"I have enough pairs of ears in the streets," Ares answered. "From what I've gathered it was Warren. Not directly of course, as he's a mediocre wizard and a coward, but on his orders at least. Apparently your scarred friend refused an order. They deduced he was playing a part not unlike our dear Lucius and disposed of him."

Wilde stared down at the ground.

"You look saddened, Fango," Ares said after turning around yet again and eyeing him. "How strange."

"No," Wilde said quickly. "Merely surprised. He was a very capable wizard."

"Indeed," Ares said. "Which makes the second part of the rumor all the more plausible. Apparently he put up quite a fight. In the end, they had the Potions Professor deliver the finishing blow. For some reason he refused to fight back against her."

Once more, Wilde only stood still, staring at the ground.

"And as usual," Ares continued. "Fate has worked itself to our advantage. Fairhart was Potter's connection to WAR. That connection is now severed. It will not be long until the Ministry takes a stand against them and eliminates them- providing us with an opportunity to clear the field afterwards. Warren's idiocy, though certainly expected, has proven to be a timely blessing. So you see Fango...you needn't worry about the men below us getting a chance to stretch their legs. We simply must have patience."

Fango nodded, but he didn't appear to have been listening to the second part of what Ares had said- he seemed too preoccupied with the first. After a few more moments of silence he walked away casually, descending down the stairs and leaving Ares alone in the chamber.

Ares turned back to the book and continued to caress it gently. Soon. Soon, he would complete the task that fate had assigned him...

## Chapter 16: Shapeshifting in the Streets

Albus awoke rather early the next morning, strange considering how little sleep he'd gotten. Unlike his usual early mornings however, he didn't go down to breakfast to get a start to the day. He stayed in bed until long after everyone else had gotten up.

"All rested sleepy head?" Morrison said as Albus sat down at the Slytherin table, once more filled with chattering students.

"Something like that," Albus said dryly, pulling a bowl of porridge over to him.

"Mail already came," Scorpius said. "You didn't get anything."

Albus nodded- not like he had been expecting anything though. He stared down at his bowl in disgust. He didn't feel hungry at all. He had really only pulled the bowl over to him to have something to do with his hands.

"Hey Potter!" someone yelled from down the table.

Albus looked and saw that it was Damian Peesley. "Yeah?"

"When's Quidditch practice?" he asked.

"Oh right," Albus said, completely forgetting where he even knew Damian from. He had almost forgotten about Quidditch too. "I haven't decided yet," he said with a sloppy shrug. "I'll get back to you."

Damian nodded and turned back to one of his friends. Scorpius took a sip of orange juice before addressing him. "Next game isn't until February," he said. "We can take a break."

Once again Albus nodded. Was this all that they were going to do? Have small talk? He supposed he might as well contribute.

"What do we have Monday's again?" Albus asked them both.

Morrison stopped shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth. "Care for Magical Creatures" he said. "Then Bellinger later. And then-"

"Blackwood," Scorpius finished for him.

All three of them instinctively looked up at the high table, where once more, a seat was vacant. How very interesting...

"Are you going to finish that bacon?"

Albus turned and saw that the question had not been asked to him, but rather Morrison. Melonie Grue was asking.

Morrison eyed his full plate of bacon intensely. "Why?" he said seriously.

"Because I want to read it a book" she said briskly, her tone definitely meant to show her sarcasm. "Because I'm hungry! And that's the last of it!"

Morrison continued to eye her, almost suspiciously, before pushing the plate towards her. They both stared at each other ferociously, before simultaneously smiling. She giggled and took the plate, then turned to her friend Denise.

The bell rang a few minutes later, and within seconds they were trudging their way down the slopes of the grounds towards Hagrid's cabin. It had rained overnight; making it quite a slippery trek, but Albus was more surprised by the area around the cabin. It looked as though the earth had been dug and then sealed back up numerous times.

Albus waited with his friends while the Gryffindors arrived as well. There was Eckley, leading the pack, looking as pompous as he had before winter break. Naturally Hornsbrook, Mirra and Rose followed him. Albus thought that Rose looked a bit more cheerful than she had over break, and he saw, to his immense satisfaction, that Mirra had given him half a smile as they arrived.

"I'm so hungry..." Morrison said achingly, clinging to his belly.

"Maybe you shouldn't have handed over an entire plate of bacon then?" Scorpius said firmly, examining the dirt by kicking at it.

"Well I wasn't going to say no and deny her sustenance," Morrison said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, what kind of man doesn't give a woman food?"

"You could have shared it," Scorpius said simply, next crouching down and scooping at the earth with his fingers.

"Bleh" Morrison said. "You don't share food. That's like sharing your toothbrush or toilet paper..."

"I didn't mean chew it and transfer it into her mouth you idiot," Scorpius cut him off, though the arrival of their largest professor ended their discussion immediately.

"Lo kids!" Hagrid said, beaming at all of them. He was looking very excited- something that usually indicated that they were all in a great deal of danger.

"Hello Professor Hagrid," the class chorused back, not nearly as enthusiastically.

"Everyone 'ave a good break?" he asked them all.

There was a typical smatter of "yes" and "uh-huh" amongst them all. Hagrid clapped his enormous hands together. "Well me meself was pretty busy, yeh see. 'Cause I spent a lot of time digging around this place. Anyone have a good idea as to why?"

Scorpius' hand shot up, and then, to Albus' surprise, so did Rose's. It had been a very long time since Rose had raised her hand to ask a question, or spoken at all in a class for that matter.

Hagrid smiled at her. "Rose?" he said.

"Nifflers?" she asked uncertainly.

"Tha's right" hagrid said. "Nifflers! Some of my favorites! Since I started teachin' this class four' years have always gotten a Niffler lesson! So I'll be righ' back then..."

And so he departed back to behind his cabin, returning every few minutes with a giant closed crate, the likes of which, unlike usual, were not rattling.

"Now the firs' thing you got to know about Nifflers is that they're all about the treasure- the gold. They love shin' things, and they'll snatch a watch or a ring right off of yeh. I sugges' you put it all away now."

The class did as they were told, stuffing their valuables away in their pockets as they did so. Eckley complained loudly that he had to put away the brand new watch he'd received for Christmas, but apart from a few girls pocketing their ear rings, nothing major was hidden. Albus wondered if he even owned anything shiny enough to be taken by a Niffler. He suddenly remember Fairhart's ring. *His* ring now.

"An' the second thing you got to know abou' Nifflers is that they don't like to be disturbed burrowin'. You'll each come up and take a Niffler, and then put it ter work. They can dig three times as fast as a muggle with a shovel, and that's what they like to do. Once you put your Niffler to work, it's good to go. I've buried gold- fake gold tha' is- all over. Whoever's Niffler finds the most gets a nice sized prize at the end! So come on up an' pick!"

The class once more did as they were told, reaching into the crates and pulling out the Nifflers. They had extremely thick black hair, but looked almost reptilian in nature. Once they put them down on the ground their Nifflers waddled around on their four legs, their bodies elongated like that of a crocodile, sniffing at the ground with their long snouts. Bartleby Bing's Niffler was the first to detect something. Its ears perked up like a dog's, and within seconds it had dove through the dirt like a dolphin in water, disappearing into a wide hole completely.

The students roared with laughter as the Niffler's dug through the ground, returning every few minutes and transferring mounds of Leprechaun gold onto the laps of their owners. Albus' Niffler was moderately effective- it didn't get a little or a lot gold. Morrison, perhaps in an attempt to show his devotion to his new pet, tried crawling through a hole after his Niffler and eventually got stuck in the wet dirt. Albus watched as Scorpius tried pulling him out while Melonie laughed from a distance.

Hagrid watched them all, smiling at the reception of his lesson and occasionally shouting out random Niffler facts, like "Niffler's can have anywhere from six ter eight babies in a single litter," and "The male Niffler saves up whatever treasure it finds fer weeks 'fore showing it to the female it's tryin' ter mate with".

Though Albus enjoyed the lesson and the information, he thought that the competition itself was rather unfair. The students didn't actually do anything. Really, whoever picked the best Niffler was going to get the prize, and by the looks of it, that would be, of course, Eckley, whose Niffler had gathered nearly twice as much as his own.

Deciding that simply waiting for his Niffler was no fun, Albus looked over and saw Rose waiting for her Niffler to return near the edge of the forest, where a particularly clumpy mound of wet dirt was. Mirra was more to herself as well, her Niffler having just returned from an excavation near Dante Haug, pouring gold onto her lap.

Albus took his eyes off of the rumbling dirt where his Niffler was and approached her. "Having fun?" he asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

She stood up straight- she had been sitting on her knees petting her Niffler- and turned to him. "Not really doing much," she admitted. "These things are cute though. I've only ever read about them before."

"Mmm," Albus mumbled with a nod, not sure what answer he was supposed to give. "So," he started, scratching at the back of his head nervously. "How was your bre-"

"I heard you talked to Rose," she cut him off, dusting the gravel off of her robes and eyeing him intently. Albus allowed an extremely small smile to play on his lips. That Rose had already talked to her, after only one night, indicated that it had been a major topic. He wondered about the nature of it however. The way that she had cut through his small talk seemed to push things more towards the negative side.

"Yeah, I did," he said, and he wildly looked around to check that Rose couldn't hear him, despite already knowing how far away she was. "Why?"

"She said you did a really good job of comforting her," Mirra said, her expression stony. He waited for her to continue, but then realized that was where her story ended. Now it was his job to explain himself.

"I've got an idea," he practically muttered. "To- to fix things."

She raised her eyebrows inquisitively. "Oh really?"

"Yeah, really," Albus said, his expression hardening a bit at her disbelief. "I asked Lance to hang with us next Hogsmeade trip. I can't erase what- what happened- but I think I can give the two of them another shot."

She leered at him, as if she didn't dare believe his words. "And your motive?" she asked.

Albus' eyes nearly rolled out of their sockets. His motive? What kind of person did she think he was? Had this entire scenario really made her think so low of him?

"I- my motive is to help" he said.

She continued to stare. "What about Scorpius?" she asked, so suddenly that Albus almost jumped back. How much did she know?

Albus gave a shaky laugh. "What about him?" he said, his voice practically cracking.

She put her hands on her hips, and for a single moment Albus was reminded of his mother. When she spoke her voice was quiet however. "I'm not stupid, Al," she said. "Rose can't see it because she's so caught up with Lance. But *me*...I can tell when a guy likes a girl."

Albus seemed to shrink. He suddenly wondered if she knew who *he* liked.

"You can't tell her," he said, once more looking over to Rose.

"Oh I won't," Mirra said. "But I'm going to do whatever it is to help my friend, just like you with yours."

"Okay, that's fine," Albus said innocently, holding his hands up and suddenly realizing the debacle here. Mirra wanted Rose with Lance, because she thought he was the best choice. And Albus wanted her with Scorpius because...well, Scorpius had asked him for help. He suddenly realized that he and Scorpius didn't share the "bad guy" role here. It was pretty much all him.

"But we're cool, right?" Albus said quickly.

She gave him a weak smile. "Yeah Al," she said. "We're cool."

He nodded and stared at her for a moment- taking her all in; her dark hair, her misty gray eyes, her thin mouth. For some reason, looking at her felt wrong. It was as if with so much else going on, he wasn't allowed to like someone as much as he did.

"You okay?" she asked, after he'd been staring a second too long.

"Huh? Oh yeah" he said quickly, realizing how sad he must've looked, with a frown slowly curling on his face as he ogled her.

She eyes him suspiciously. "You look really down," she said. "Did something happen over break?"



Albus took a deep breath. Where should he begin? With Fairhart's death? With the memory he'd seen? Or maybe his fight with his father, and his realization of how all these things were somehow his fault? With looking in the mirror and seeing an uncharacteristic flash of gold?

But then he exhaled. What would telling Mirra accomplish? Was complaining supposed to make him feel better? To change something? To just make it all magically go away?

He shook his head. "Not really," he lied. "I just got a lot of sleep."

And with that he turned and went back to his Niffler. About twenty minutes later, Hagrid told them to put their Nifflers back in the crates and count up their gold.

"These things are amazing Hagrid!" Morrison said, his face unbelievably dirty from having dug through the ground.

Hagrid chuckled. "Yeah, mos' seem to get a good kick out of 'em. Get a good haul?"

"Not bad," Morrison said, holding up a pile of coins.

Albus looked at his own pile and saw, as he'd expected, a relatively moderate amount. As it turned out, Eckley had indeed picked the best Niffler. For his reward, Hagrid gave him a truly gargantuan slab of Honeyduke's chocolate, so delicious looking that Albus saw Morrison, who he remembered had been hungry, stare at it while salivating.

"Your winner!" Hagrid boomed, raising Eckley's hand up triumphantly as if he'd actually done anything other than watch. Morrison, at least, had tried to help his Niffler out.

"No surprise there!" Eckley said, holding the slab of chocolate high. "A born winner," he announced, slapping Hornsbrook's hand.

"Oh yeah!" Morrison said loudly and angrily. "So that's this and the game against Slytherin. You're two and zero. Oh wait..." he added, and a few Slytherins sniggered.

Eckley eyed him with malice, but just then the bell rang and they were forced off into their next class. They made a quick stop to gather their things for Transfiguration, then hurried down to the classroom and took their seats. Professor Bellinger gave them no welcome back, nor did she acknowledge that any time had elapsed since their last lesson. She instead had them read aloud and take notes, then had them practice an immensely complex vanishing charm.

Albus almost laughed at how pitifully bad he was at it. Winter break had done nothing to help him get better at Transfiguration, and he left the classroom forty five minutes later, shaking his head.

"That class will be the death of me," he said.

"If the next one doesn't do it," Morrison said as they entered the Great Hall in anticipation for lunch. After they ate, it was back to business with Blackwood.

Albus savored his food slightly, and then realized he was a bit nervous. The last time he'd seen Blackwood she had been holding a picture of Lucius Malfoy, nearly crying as her world crumbled around her. He was very curious to see if she would even acknowledge Fairhart's death. Or if she would even be there. He once more looked up at the high table and saw an empty seat.

After lunch they lined up down in the dungeons, all of the students apparently curious as to if she'd be there. They too, it seemed, had noticed her absence from meals, or from telling them off in the halls during the course of the day. But unlike Albus, they probably didn't have the slightest idea as to why. Oh what he would give to be one of them...

"Enter," someone said from inside the Potions room. It was an exasperated, rough and hoarse voice. Albus supposed that someone, an old man from the sound of it, would be filling in. And then he entered and saw that he was wrong. It was Blackwood. Kind of.

She looked *terrible*. She was sitting behind her desk, and any vestige of beauty that she had once had was gone completely. Her hair was tangled and ruffled, much darker from dirt (it looked as if she hadn't cleaned herself in days) and seemed to be falling out from stress. She had large bags under her eyes, and Albus knew that she hadn't slept in at least two days. Her skin was grayish and her teeth yellow- she had completely let herself go. She looked even worse than his father, and that was saying something.

The class stared at her in amazement, some of them squinting their eyes as if to see if it was really her. They all looked at one another to comment on her bizarre and disgusting appearance, but she still seemed to command some shred of respect from them, as no one said a word.

"Good afternoon," she croaked, and Albus thought that she sounded close to tears. The sense of pity- or perhaps empathy- that he had felt for her upon his return was acting up again.

"Good afternoon" the entire class muttered back, some of them still distracted by her horrifying appearance.

"Today we will be working on the Draught of Peace. I don't expect a perfect potion, obviously-", the class collectively gasped, "- but if you follow the directions carefully you should be able to concoct something adequate. If you have any questions," she continued, and as she said this her mouth inexplicably broke into a terrible frown, and her eyes started to shine with tears, "raise your hand and I will assist you."

The class stared at her in amazement, and Albus did not know what they were more curious about, her disheveled and unkempt state, or her innocent and kind nature. Albus, not content with merely staring at someone who looked miserable, was the first to rise and gather ingredients

from the cupboard. The rest of the class soon followed him, and by the time he had sat down again, Blackwood had her head down on her desk. As he walked by, he could have sworn he heard her giving faint sobs.

The class worked silently, just as they always did, and Albus knew that they were itching to leave and discuss Blackwood's condition. Albus looked over at Scorpius, wondering if he would be happy at how the tables had turned, but he wasn't. He was merely concentrating fiercely on his potion. Perhaps he thought it wrong to be happy about Blackwood's misfortune, considering what it consisted of.

The class seemed to be struggling with the Draught for the most part. Albus looked behind him and saw Mirra scratching at her chin from a few rows back, nudging Rose and asking her for help with her smoking potion. Based on the way the steam was rising in almost a straight line, Albus thought that perhaps she had added too much hellebore syrup. He supposed it was the book's fault, as whoever had written the textbook had said to use a "dollop", when in fact, it required even less. He was seriously considering crossing the term out and revising it, so that whoever next used the book wouldn't be so confused, but he was stopped when Morrison, who was on his other side, had nudged him and indicated Blackwood.

She had risen from her desk, and there were definitely visible tears streaking down her cheeks. She hastily wiped them away and looked at her watch. "Stop," she croaked. "Let me come around and examine your work."

The class did as they were told. Everyone stopped and leaned back, though no one looked more fearful of their work than Scorpius, whose potion, though light silver in color, looked a bit too thick. Blackwood walked by each of them in the front row wordlessly, not looking nearly as imposing or intimidating as she usually did. She once more gave an approving nod at Albus' immaculate potion, and then came to Scorpius'. She stared down into it-

She gave an approving nod and continued on to the next person, Dante Haug. Scorpius stared at her in utter bewilderment. Once she reached the third row she called for the rest of the students to mark and fill up their flasks, and then dismissed them. Conversation broke out at once.

"Blimey, she's not nearly as pretty now is she?" chuckled a boy from Gryffindor whose name Albus did not know.

"What do you think happened?" Mirra asked the group as a whole.

Albus, who was walking with the Slytherins a little behind the Gryffindors, but still in earshot, heard Eckley answer.

"No idea," he said. "But whatever happened, the hag deserved it. Here's to hoping someone close to her kicked it!"

Hornsbrook laughed, but Albus felt his blood boil.

"Shut the hell up Eckley!" he spat.

The entire group of Gryffindors stopped dead in their tracks, meaning that the Slytherins were forced to as well. Eckley spun around on the spot.

"Excuse me?" he said, moving towards him.

Albus stood his ground. For years now he'd let Eckley irk him from the sidelines. Calling him a coward, then beating up Scorpius and consequently getting him banned from the Quidditch Final in his second year, then dating Mirra last year. And now this. He knew that Eckley had no idea why what he had said had set him off, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was that he had.

"You heard me!" Albus retorted. "How can you even say that?" he barked. "You have no idea what happened, for all you know, someone *could* have died!"

Eckley sneered and tilted his head back. "Does little Aly have a crush on the teacher?" he said, and the Gryffindor behind him chuckled. They were so loud that when Eckley leaned forward and whispered his next sentence into his face, only Albus could hear it.

"All because he couldn't get the girl he wanted *last year*?"

Albus felt his cheeks flush red. Morrison, sensing that things were going to get out of hand, stepped forward like a bodyguard. He had an inch or two on Eckley, and was burlier as well. Obviously, just like in second year, Hornsbrook jumped in to and approached Morrison. Size wise, he was more of a match. The four of them stood there, eyeing each other in anticipation for a brawl.

The Gryffindors and Slytherins had cleared away the only way that they could, by backing up against the sides of the wall. The dungeon corridor was very narrow. Albus glanced behind him and saw Scorpius near the front of his respective side, eager to be the first to jump in if it went passed a two on two. It didn't look like it was going to happen however. Mirra and Rose had both ran in between them, and started pushing their Gryffindor classmates back.

"Donny stop," Rose said, trying to pull him away.

"Charlie, let's just go!" Mirra said a little more forcefully, trying to pull him as well.

But Albus didn't want their help. Something strange was happening to him. There was something about what Eckley had said, the fact that it was both in a way both an insult to Blackwood and Fairhart, that had enraged him like few times before. He felt electricity surge through his fingertips as he eyed Eckley.

*Don't hold him back* said an eerie voice in his head. *Let him fight me. When I get my wand...I'm going to obliterate him...*

What was he saying to himself? He blinked radically. His wand? His wand was in his pocket!

*Once I get my REAL wand* the voice continued, *I will destroy him. All of them. And everything that they hold dear...*

Mirra pulled Eckley far enough away that Albus snapped back into focus. Eventually the Gryffindors resumed walking down the corridor, and the Slytherins followed after them, all but Albus, Scorpius, and Morrison that is.

"He's a chump" Morrison said. "He wasn't going to do anything. He just likes to put on a show, then get drug away like he's someone tough. Had Mirra not grabbed on to him, he would have ran-"

"What?" Albus said, still slightly dazed. He had a headache. Everything that he had just said in his head was now gone, and he had very little memory of it. Something about a wand?

"Just don't worry about him mate" Scorpius said.

"I kind of have to" Albus said when he'd gathered his thoughts. "I'm pretty sure he's going to Hogsmeade with us."

Albus had thought that things would never return to normal at Hogwarts. He was sure that thoughts of Fairhart would plague him well into the night, that any sleep he managed to steal would come at the cost of terrible dreams, and that he would never grow accustomed to Blackwood's new polite, if not truly disturbing, demeanor. He was quite wrong of course.

Classes brought back a pattern of doing homework the class before it was due, and each lesson was getting harder than its predecessor. Albus still hadn't found time to visit Hagrid at his cabin too, as he had the extra duties of a Quidditch Captain to deal with. It had been a very bizarre feeling indeed to get back on his broom and bark around orders, though he readjusted to it fine.

Scorpius and Morrison were now sharing the Keeper spot during training. Since he had no idea when or if Blackwood would revert back to her old self and give Scorpius a random detention, it was good to keep Morrison in shape. Likewise, Scorpius had proven himself a superior Keeper in terms of technical skill, so if he was available, Albus didn't want him rusty either.

The only noticeable difference to his life at Howarts now was, apart from how he and Mirra were back on friendly terms, the amount of mail he was receiving. In his second day back he had received a letter. He had stared at the envelope with excitement, clinging to the idea for a wild moment that Fairhart was contacting him from the dead, before seeing his name written in his mother's handwriting. He had chucked the letter into the fire the second that they'd returned to the common room.

"Why'd you go and do that!" Morrison said as he tossed the letter- which was unusually thick- into the flames.

"I don't want to talk to them" Albus said stiffly.

"Mate they're your parents-" Scorpius said.

"I know who they are" Albus had cut him off. "And I don't want to hear from them."

Two days later he had received another letter, and then three days after that, yet another one. They joined their brothers in the fire.

"It's probably just them checking up on me" Albus said one morning at breakfast, when he'd stowed the letter- this time his name written in his father's handwriting- away into his robes. "Hugo keeps coming up to me and trying to talk to me, I reckon they want to spy on me or something."

"Well then maybe you should just write back once" Scorpius suggested as he cut up his sausages. "It'll get them to stop writing."

"I'll consider it" Albus truth was however, that he thought that he'd fare way better with virtually no contact with his parents. Any hint of news that he could receive could send him spiraling back downwards in his sulky state, and he couldn't risk that now with things starting to look slightly up. Classwork and tiring Quidditch practices had their benefits, as it turned out. It distracted him from reality.

And more good news came his way eventually. In the last week of January, he heard back from Lance.

"And so you see students," Professor Verage was saying, her old and velvety voice lulling them all to sleep even in the final moments of Muggle Studies. "Muggles have found ways to transport themselves, not for the sake of convenience, but out of necessity. It's very easy to misconstrue things like automobiles as signs of laziness, but Muggle resiliency is far from a vice. It has helped them to adapt to situations and-"

The bell rang, cutting her off and ending the torment. Albus was so taken aback that he jumped and banged his knees on the underside of his desk, for his hands had been supporting his face. He nearly slipped on a puddle of drool that had worked its way from Bartleby Bing's desk down to the floor, and stumbled out of the classroom wiping at his eyes.

"Those are getting more and more agonizing" Scorpius said as he stifled a yawn.

Albus nodded, but couldn't say anything before his name had been called.

"Hey Al!"

Lance had approached them from behind. He was carrying his bag as he always did, with it slung over one shoulder to help him epitomize coolness. A few of his older, mature Hufflepuff friends were waiting for him at the end of the hall.

"What's up?" Albus asked him.

"Oh nothing really" Lance said casually, inclining his head towards Scorpius in greeting. Scorpius ignored him. "I was just thinking of your invitation. Still up for Hogsmeade?" he asked.

"Yeah of course" Albus said in what he hoped wasn't too hasty of an answer.

"Nice" Lance replied. "I probably won't be there from the start, but we could all meet up later at The Three Broomsticks or something maybe?"

"Yeah, that's fine" Albus said. "Listen I was thinking of inviting-"

"Invite whoever you want" Lance said quickly, turning to leave as his friends called for him, annoyed that he'd left their presence for more than five minutes. "I got to go. See you at Hogsmeade!"

He and Albus exchanged waves, Scorpius once again ignoring him. He gave Albus a fiesty look however.

Albus turned to him and shrugged. "Prepare for battle" he suggested.

He spoke to Mirra later that very day, telling her to pass the message along to Rose. She had almost squealed with delight as he'd said it, but her face had fallen slightly.

"Listen," she started, her voice a little quiet, though Albus knew that it had nothing to do with them being in the library. "If it's alright with you, I was thinking maybe Cha-"

"They can come" Albus said quickly. "Both of them, it's fine, whatever."

She stared at him. Albus looked down. He remembered Fairhart having told him, last year, how important it was that he show what a good friend he could be. Even now, he held his words in high regard. "Yeah, it's fine" he insisted. "I don't know what happened in the dungeons that one day. Let's just...forget about it. And move on" he added.

She smiled at him, which he returned. After she had left he looked around the library uneasily. He had a good feeling about Hogsmeade. He could only hope that it wasn't interrupted again.

The Hogsmeade trip was scheduled for the first of February, and Albus awoke for it especially early. Unlike last time however, he didn't spend too much too much time focusing on how he dressed. He knew that this day was more important for Rose than it was him and Mirra, and there was no point in trying to impress anyone. Scorpius however, had predictably combed his hair

back and dressed himself up nicely. It seemed as though he still thought that this day was not rectify his mistakes, but to give himself another chance.

They all went downstairs for an early breakfast, with Morrison asking questions as they did so.

"So I'm allowed to talk this time, right?" he asked them both as he drenched his french toast in syrup.

"No" Scorpius said flatly.

Albus narrowed his eyes towards him before turning to Morrison. "Yes you can" he said. "This day isn't about us. It's about just having a good time, and getting Rose comfortable again. And whoever she ends up having feelings for-"

But he was cut off by the sight a letter dropping onto his plate.

"Oh not *again!*" he snapped, picking the letter up and stowing it inside of his robes. "They just won't quit, will they?"

." Scorpius said through gritted teeth. "And write back. It's either that or stop complaining."

Albus sighed. "I guess I'll just have to stop complaining then, huh?"

And with that, he marched back downstairs into the common room and tossed the letter into the fire. When he'd returned, the plates had been cleared and the students were lining up to go. Neville was once more checking names and permission slips, every once and a while calling out to a younger student to stop dead in their tracks. Albus even saw Fred getting caught.

"Oh come one Neville!" he was saying. "Second year's as good as third!"

"*Professor Longbottom*" Neville corrected him. "And I'm afraid that it doesn't work like that. Just a few more months and you'll be able to visit the village!"

Albus walked right by him and flashed Neville his permission form. Just ahead of him were the four Gryffindors they'd be travelling into the village with. He sneered at the sight of two of them, then quickly tossed his expression away when Mirra turned around and waved.

"All ready to go?" Mirra said when the two groups had joined together. Just about all of them made unenthusiastic noises, and just like that, they were off.

There was no snow on the ground despite it being early in February, but once again, it was certainly cold. There wasn't much wind but the air seemed thin and frigid in itself, and after a while Albus was forced to walk with his numb hands in his pockets. Conversation comprised mostly of small talk. Morrison and Mirra traded stories of their vacations, and Scorpius and Rose, Albus noticed, were having a rather solid conversation. Scorpius had lied and said he was



thinking of dropping Muggle Studies for Arithmancy, and Rose had launched into a explanation of the classwork and how difficult it was.

Albus was forced to walk side by side with Eckley, listening to both conversations and biting his lip to refrain from commenting and making himself easy prey. No one mentioned Blackwood or what had happened in the dungeons.

Once they entered the village, they hit a small snag.

Mirra turned around as soon as they'd begun walking. "Al, do you mind if we all just meet up later?" she asked.

"Huh?" he said.

"You said Lance would meet us at The Three Broomsticks. I figured we could go our separate ways until then? Me and Rose want to check out this new dress robe place that just opened- Sylvia's Shop for Special Occasions. And I know that Charlie and Donny wanted to go to Devish & Bangs..."

Albus looked around and saw that Scorpius was wearing an annoyed expression. He had been making a considerable amount of progress with Rose. But still, Albus thought that a break was good for them all, and so he agreed to it. She and Rose went one way while Eckley and Hornsbrook went the other. Albus and his crew started meandering through the streets with no where to go.

"You're doing all right" Morrison said to Scorpius, giving him a clap on the back. "Just keep it up when we're all sipping Butterber."

Scorpius nodded but turned to Albus, looking flustered. "What's with this whole 'meet up later' thing?" he asked, sounding very agitated. "I thought the plan was to get me quality time with her without Lance there?"

Albus gawked at him. "When did I say anything like that?" he asked. "I told you that you'd both have an equal opportunity" he added, shaking his head in amazement. Sometimes he still found it hard to believe that *two* people were interested in *Rose*. "You guys had your chat. I can't control where they shop. So later, you'll just have to keep up the momentum."

Scorpius gave him a steely gaze, but then seemed to realize that he was right. He gave a shrug. "Alright then," he said. "We've got some time to kill. Where are we off to?"

"How about somewhere that we're not getting evil stares?" Morrison piped up.

"What?" Albus asked. "What are you talkin-"

But then he looked around and saw exactly what Morrison was talking about. As they slowly walked through the streets people were giving the three of them stares, but Albus knew that they were directed primarily at him. People who walked by in the streets stared at him nervously, then quickly darted their eyes away as if they hadn't seen him. The evil looks that Morrison had mentioned seemed to be coming from the shopkeepers out in the streets the most. They stopped talking to customers mid-sentence, throwing him looks of contempt as though having him near was bad for business.

"What is going on here?" Morrison muttered.

But Albus knew. "It's because of my dad" he said, glad that he could pin the blame on somebody. "It was like this when we went to Diagon Alley too" he said. "Everyone was giving us these malicious looks and bumping in to us. Whatever, just ignore it..."

Even as he said it, he knew that it wasn't exactly the same. The people in Diagon Alley so many months ago had seemed to generally dislike him- to not want him to be in their presence because they detested it. Most people now, he saw, were looking around frantically at one another when he approached, muttering and hurrying passed him.

"Gits" Morrison muttered as they scurried by after ten minutes of this treatment.

"Mate," Scorpius said suddenly, touching Albus on the shoulder and making him spin around.

"What's up?"

"You know how everyone looks at you, then quickly turns away?"

Albus narrowed his eyes, expected a stupid joke. "Yeah, why?"

"Well that guy didn't" Scorpius said quietly. He pointed. "He's been staring at you for a few minutes now."

Albus spun back around and looked at the man who Scorpius was indicating. He was leaning up against the wall of a dusty alleyway, a thick and warm looking travelling cloak draped over him. He had beady eyes and tangled black hair, but there was something a bit familiar about his less noticeable features. His nose, for instance, was almost snoutlike. Still, he looked shady and unpredictable.

"Let's pick the speed up" Albus said, quickening his pace. "I don't like the look of that guy."

"Same" both of his friends agreed, and they all immediately started walking faster, so that people they were running into were splitting to the sides and regrouping as they passed.

They went so fast that after two minutes Albus looked behind him and saw that they were rather far from the alleyway where the man had been. He had not followed them. Perhaps he was just being paranoid?

Albus walked right passed another alleyway. "I don't think we have anything to worry about" he started to tell his friends. "Probably just our imagin-"

A hand shot out of a shadow in the alleyway, grabbing him around the mouth and pulling him in. Scorpius and Morrison both gave yelps and dove for him, Scorpius even having the sense to pull out his wand.

Albus tried fighting back, gripping the hand that had grabbed him and squeezing it. As he did so however, something, peculiar happened. The hand started to shrink slightly, the fingers becoming more slender and less hairy. Albus looked up and saw that the man's face had started to morph as well...

"Beat it, sidekicks," Teddy said, jerking his head towards Morrison and Scorpius.

"Let him go!" Morrison demanded.

Albus wrestled Teddy's hand away from him, and before even taking a good look at him, turned to his friends. "It's alright, it's alright!" he bellowed. "I know him."

"Who is he? Scorpius demanded, his wand pointed, his grip firm.

"I'm a friend of the family" Teddy said cockily, whipping out his own wand. "So back off!"

"Everyone calm down" Albus said, now completely out of Teddy's grip due to his wand being outstretched. He wondered why no one on the street had stopped to interfere, before realizing that Teddy had pulled him rather far into the alley.

Scorpius lowered his wand, and Morrison his fists. Albus took in Teddy's appearance. He looked identical to how he had last time Albus had seen him, with his hair a light brown and his eyes matching. His facial expression was different now however. He looked very angry.

"Clear out guys" Albus said to his friends, burning with curiosity as to why Teddy was there.

"What, just *leave*?" Scorpius asked.

Albus looked around and saw Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop across the street.

"Just pop into Scrivenshaft's for a bit" Albus said. "I want to talk to him privately for a second."

Scorpius and Morrison continued to eye Teddy. "You sure?" Morrison asked.

Albus nodded. "I'll catch up with you guys in a few minutes" he said reassuringly.

They both made a big deal of leaving, turning around several times and eyeing Teddy warily, before, finally entering the shop. Once they were gone, Albus rounded on him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Teddy raised his hand up and smacked Albus upside the back of his head.

"Ouch!" he said, grabbing at a fistful of hair.

"What am *I* doing here?" Teddy asked. "What are *you* doing here, you prat!"

"What are you on about?"

"Can't you read!" Teddy shouted. "You're not supposed to be in Hogsmeade! At all!"

"Says who?" Albus asked incredulously.

"Says about fifty letters from your parents!" Teddy barked, finally stowing his wand back inside of his robes.

Albus felt his heart sink. So that had been the contents of those letters.

"They've been writing to you non-stop" Teddy continued. "And after all the times that they begged you to write back, you could have at least had the decency to do that much!"

"I didn't know" Albus admitted. "I didn't read them..."

Teddy gave a groan and muttered a string of curse words. His next discernible sentence was both quiet and serious.

"Al, listen to me" he said. "You are in danger."

"Danger?" Albus asked, and he almost rolled his eyes. He had heard that before.

"Yes, danger. Your parents had to send letters, it was the only way they could reach you. They couldn't risk telling any professors at Hogwarts in case your Potions Professor found out. They were *counting on you* reading those letters!"

"Well why am I in so much danger?" Albus said smartly.

Teddy heaved a sigh. "Maybe had you read them you'd know! There's a price on your head you idiot!"

Albus froze on the spot. What had he just said?

"A...price?"

"Yes" Teddy said. "On your head. As in, someone wants you dead."

Albus stared ahead blankly. "Huh?"

"Your parents sent me ahead to Hogsmeade to disguise myself and keep a lookout for you, just to make sure that you weren't here. And good thing too, if you're so hard headed that you're just going to ignore their advice and stroll in like a walking bullseye..."

"I told you I didn't know!" Albus shouted, feeling lightheaded. Someone wanted him dead. He supposed he shouldn't be too surprised. Did anything go right lately?

"Who- some- a price?" Albus managed to stammer out, and then he gave a shaky laugh. What a ridiculous idea. This was just his father jumping to some conclusion and making some random, inaccurate guess.

"If someone wants me dead" Albus said seriously, " Then why am I still standing? Who's got this price out anyway?"

Teddy frowned- he clearly had not been expecting to have to explain anything.

"The bounty isn't for normal people you nitwit" he said. "It's for Renegades."

Albus raised his eyebrows in surprise. "*What?*"

"Renegades" Teddy repeated loud and clear. "Waddlesworth has a hefty price on your head."

"*Waddlesworth!*" Albus practically shouted. No way...

"What did you expect?" Teddy said icily. "Waddlesworth, for some reason- couldn't tell you why- wants you dead. His reward is a pretty hefty sum and a promise. Whoever collects also gets a top spot in WAR."

Albus shook his head, not even daring to believe his ears. How could this be possible? Warren had been so nice...

When Teddy saw that he still looked confused, he went even further. "Look," he started, his voice still quiet. "Not every Renegade is a member of WAR. Because when you are, you have to start out small. Waddlesworth is promising Renegades around the world that whoever kills you secures a top spot in his organization. There's a lot of Renegades Albus, and that means there's a lot of people who want you dead. You're very lucky you haven't bumped into one thus far in Hogsmeade."

"But Renegades are just- just- they catch dark wizards!" Albus said.

"They're practically soliders for hire now" Teddy said bitterly. "Mercenaries. Hiding behind a veil of moral complexity. Waddlesworth says that you're bad news, some garbage about how since your Harry Potter's son, you need to die. Renegades put some thought into it, but never seriously consider anything. Then he says whoever does the job gets a fat bag of gold and to sit

next to him during big staff meetings. Suddenly killing you makes a whole lot of 'moral sense'. These aren't the same renegades as back in the day, these are tacky rip-offs who want glory. Obviously, Warren can't have somebody already in WAR do the deed unless he wants it getting traced back to him. But an outsider is perfect. So the first thing that you need to do, when you leave this dirty and dingy little alleyway, is go back to the castle and write to your parents. Promise them you'll stay inside the castle. It's where you're safest."

Albus nodded.

"I'll escort you back" Teddy started, reaching for him again, but Albus pulled away.

"No!" he announced. "I can walk back on my own!"

Teddy gave a hollow laugh. "That's cute, Al. Now come on, let's go."

But Albus didn't budge. He looked back at the shop. He came up with a quick story.

"Look," he said. "It's bad enough you're treating me like I'm ten. Walking me back makes me look five. Please, just let me walk back to the castle with my friends? There's three of us, and we got here okay..."

Teddy gave a crude stare.

Albus continued his plea. "I'll just go and get them, and we'll head back. People don't need to see me getting taken back by an adult like it's this big deal. I'll be fine. I'll head right back" he said earnestly.

Teddy frowned, then tilted his head back and forth and though trying to think.

"I want you to get your friends and head *straight* back" he said, and Albus let a small smile escape him. "Is that understood?"

"Absolutely" Albus said, holding up his hand. He turned to leave, but Teddy grabbed on to the back of his jacket.

"Al," he said, and Albus turned around. "I'm serious. No detours, nothing. Right back to the Castle, and stay there. We need to figure this all out."

"Okay" Albus said seriously. "I got it. Right back to the castle."

Teddy nodded and let go of him. Albus walked away without looking back and entered Scrivenshaft's, leaving minutes later with a fully informed Scorpius and Morrison.

"A bounty?" Morrison said. "Oh come on, that's ludicrous..."

"I know" Albus said. "So off to the Three Broomsticks then?"

Scorpius held out an arm to stop him. "You're not going back?" he asked, his expression serious.

Albus sneered, then looked around. He could not be sure if Teddy was still around- he supposed that being able to transform his appearance at will was very helpful in these kind of situations. He spoke quietly to avoid eavesdropping.

"Look this bounty crap is just my dad making another dumb move based off of no information. If Waddlesworth really did put out a hit on me, no one would do it right in the middle of Hogsmeade."

Scorpius continued to look at him however, his expression not changing in the slightest.

Albus stared back. This was a big day. This was the day that Scorpius could make progress with Rose, and that Albus could make progress with Mirra. This was the Hogsmeade trip that the previous one should have been. He wasn't going to call it off because Teddy had told him that his parents wanted him tucked away safely in the castle. He was surrounded by people. So long as he didn't go chasing after any criminals like Fango Wilde, he'd be fine.

"I know what I'm doing" Albus said briskly. "Now let's head to The Three Broomsticks. And let's maneuver a bit too, in case my tail is still here..."

They weaved in and out of streets, seeing a few familiar faces, but no familiar snout like noses. Albus was careful to enter big crowds so as to confuse any other spies that his parents had enlisted, and indeed, he seemed more concerned about this than he was any attack. The idea being assaulted in an area full of wizards, or in any shop or pub that he was in, was nonsensical.

Morrison and Scorpius still looked over their shoulders however, and the people around him still continued to glance at him and then quickly look away. Albus supposed that the supposed bounty on his head explained this at least. No one was afraid of him, but of anybody who could be after him, and being in that person's way. And the shopkeepers were probably right too. Having him around was bad for business.

They continued to walk aimlessly, occasionally turning around and heading to a new direction, but all the while keeping track of where they were going. Scorpius eventually commented that everyone had probably met up at The Three Broomsticks by now, and though being fashionably late was always cool, he didn't want to miss out on too much of his opportunity.

And so they trekked through the winding streets of Hogsmeade, jackets pulled up passed their ears and hands buried deep in their pockets as people moved by them.

"I have to admit" Morrison said. "This whole 'people being terrified to be near you' thing has its benefits" he said to Albus. "It clears paths and gets us places faster."

"Way to stay positive" Scorpius said.

Albus grinned at them both as The Three Broomsticks came into view. They weren't far from it when Albus felt a hand clasp his shoulder from behind him.

He let out a groan and spun around, fully expecting to see Teddy staring at him angrily, and prepared to come up with an excuse for why he hadn't returned to the castle. Instead he saw that it was The Hammer.

"Mr. Waddlesworth wants to see you" he said fiercely, in almost exactly the way that he had last time.

Albus felt his legs turn to jelly. Scorpius and Morrison had stopped walking and turned to see what was going on; both of them were looking fearful now. The people around them, upon seeing The Hammer, had started to mutter and point, and some of them even scream. Then they formed a large circle to see what would happen next.

"Erm" Albus started, his heart racing. "I was actually going to head inside-"

"Mr. Waddlesworth wants to see you" The Hammer repeated, his grip on his shoulder tightening and causing him a bit of pain. "You are not in trouble."

Albus' fight or flight response kicked in- too bad he could do neither. He ended up putting on an angry expression.

"I'm not going to see him" he said confidently.

The Hammer looked down, baring his teeth to show how sharp they were. At this very moment, Albus remembered just exactly who he was dealing with. This man, he now knew, had tortured a little girl and killed a man. And now that Albus thought about...had probably aided in killing Fairhart too. His heart started to race more at the thought, and suddenly, despite the intense cold, he felt feverish.

"Mr. Waddlesworth has requested your presence" The Hammer said, as if changing the words would do something. "He insists that you come."

"No" Albus said sharply, and with tremendous force he tried pulling himself away. It was to no avail. The Hammer's grip was far too good, and he was way too strong. "I'm not going back there-"

"He's not going anywhere with you pal!" Morrison spoke up, holding out a single fist like he was prepared to lunge. Scorpius, for the second time in half of an hour, had pulled out his wand and was aiming it at the person holding on to his friend.

The Hammer threw them both a nasty stare. "This doesn't concern you" he said, not even noticing Albus' continued attempts to pry at his fingers and pull himself away.



Albus looked around at the circle that had gathered, a circle of citizens, all of them wizards, some old men, some young women, some teenagers. Everyone was staring, transfixed, waiting with baited breath. Just watching, like those Renegades from the memory...

No one was going to help him. He'd have to help himself. He dug into his pockets for his wand-

Morrison had apparently realized the same thing. Without even reaching for his wand and with surprising courage, he leapt forward and tried tackling The Hammer.

The crowd of people gasped as he lunged. The Hammer caught him with a single hand though, and despite Morrison's size, threw him to the ground like a ragdoll.

"Morrison!" Albus and Scorpius both shouted. And once again, for the second time in a month, Albus felt electricity surge through his fingertips. He sank to his knees, not from The Hammer's grip or strength, but from his own lack of energy. Scorpius was shouting something and may have been threatening to jinx The Hammer if he didn't let go. It sounded distant however.

His skin was beginning to crawl, and a loud buzzing had filled his ears. Seeing Morrison drop to the ground had done something. He closed his eyes tightly and saw flashes of light underneath his eyelids. He didn't even know what he was thinking now. All he could hear was mangled words in his ears. But somehow, in the back of his head, he knew that The Hammer would let go of him soon. Yes, soon, he would have no hands with which to hold him...

But then another voice came, this one from someone in the crowd. The voice was so familiar that Albus was forced to focus all of his attention on it, and when he did so, the buzzing stopped. His eyes returned to normal.

"Whas' goin' on here?" a gruff voice barked.

Albus opened his eyes and stood back up. He had thought that no one could help, but was wrong. Someone bigger than even The Hammer had fought their way through the crowd. Hagrid was now standing in the circle, his enormous chest puffed up, his tangled hair wild, and his beetle black eyes looking murderous.

He took one look at Albus, who fingers were still desperately trying to grab at The Hammer's, then a quick glance at Morrison on the ground and Scorpius with his wand outstretched. He stepped forward, pulling his hands out of his moleskin overcoat and pointing at The Hammer.

"Let go of him" he roared.

Albus's breathing quickened. The Hammer showed no recognition of what Hagrid had said. Nor did he look frightened.

"Can you hear me!" Hagrid barked. "I said let go of 'em!"

The Hammer merely turned his head away as if Hagrid wasn't worth his time. He looked down at Albus, his hand still firmly clasped to his shoulder.

"Mr. Waddlesworth wants to-"

But before he could do anything, Hagrid had stepped forward again. And unlike Morrison, he was not easily thrown aside. He stretched out his hand, and Albus, who had been expected Hagrid to reach for him, was surprised to see that he had grabbed the hand that The Hammer was not using. He squeezed it tightly, and a cracking noise was heard. Albus saw The Hammer's face go pink as the crowd continued to gasp and mutter.

"I'm not lettin' go of you," Hagrid said quietly, "Until you let go of him. An' believe me, you don' want me to start squeezin' hard."

The Hammer said nothing. He merely stared at Hagrid angrily, refusing to acknowledge the terrible pain that he was in. Albus thought about his would-be captor's position. On one end, Waddlesworth had probably given him a direct order to collect Albus. On the other, someone twice his size and three times as strong was breaking his hand without working up a sweat. Albus saw him bare his teeth from pain, but his grip on Albus remained firm.

Hagrid sighed. "I guess we'll do this the hard way" he said. And Albus saw the muscles in his arm, even through his overcoat, tense up to show that he was squeezing. There was a sickening crunch as Albus heard every bone in The Hammer's hand break simultaneously. He gave a roar of pain and immediately let go of Albus. At the same time, Hagrid let go of his hand he was destroying.

The Hammer sank to his knees, his free hand now cradling whatever was left of his other. His fingers were now stacked on top of one another, his pinky bent backwards and his thumb dangling uselessly. Hagrid had squeezed so hard that somehow the skin had broken, leaving his hand a bloody mess. Albus stepped behind Hagrid and helped Morrison up. As he did so Hagrid bent down and got right into The Hammer's face. Even crouched, he still had a great deal of height on him.

"Now you listen to me, an' you listen good" Hagrid said quietly. "I know who yeh are, Saw, or Tool, or whatever yer name is. Your Waddlesworth's lil' lapdog. An' I don' like you. An' what yer going to do now is walk back ter yer lil' hangout, and tell yer boss that if he wants any of Harry Potter's children, he'll have to send someone alo' stronger than you, 'cause they have ter go through me. An' next time, I won't go so easy on 'em."

The Hammer continued to hold on to his bloody hand, his face irate. He looked up in fury, then back down on the ground.

"Nex' time you lay a single finger on him" Hagrid said, jerking his head towards Albus. "Yer goin' ter Azkaban. An' after what I do to you, I'll be in the cell right next to yeh. You hear me?"

The Hammer said nothing. Hagrid reached forward and gripped his bald head with one of his massive hands, pulling it up with a great amount of force. "Yeh hear me!" he repeated.

The Hammer shook his head violently. Hagrid let go and pushed him down, so that he was laying on his back on the cold ground. Then he reached out a hand and grabbed Albus, pulling him along through the crowd of people who were staring at The Hammer, still muttering.

"Thanks for the help Hag-" Albus started as they cleared their way through the crowd. Once it was just them however, Hagrid turned and roared at him, his face furious.

"What do yeh think yer doin' Al!" he barked. "Comin' ter Hogsmeade! You outta yer mind!"

"I'm sorry" Albus said. " I didn't know, honest..."

"Come on" Hagrid said, pulling at him, and Albus noticed that his grip was much harder to get rid of than the Hammer's. "I'm taking yeh back to the castle."

"Hagrid wait!" Albus said, looking behind him and seeing Scorpius and Morrison fight their way through the crowd to come after him. Then he looked in the window of The Three Broomsticks and saw Mirra and Eckley staring at him from inside. Eckley was laughing. Mirra looked confused.

"Hagrid just wait a second-" he repeated, trying to pull away.

But Hagrid said nothing, he just kept walking, leading him back to the castle, staring straight ahead as Albus looked behind them.

## Chapter 17: Cold Battles

It had taken only ten minutes after returning to the castle for Albus to learn what the ultimate consequences were of his refusal to leave at once. He had been banned from future Hogsmeade visits.

Headmistress McGonagall, whose office Albus had been frog-marched to by Hagrid immediately following their entrance, had worn a look of great pity as she had spoken to him, delivering the news with a frown that he didn't care for.

"I'm sorry, Potter" she had said after fifteen minutes of having already explained herself. "But the situation calls for it. You must understand that your safety is our top priority. This is by no means a punishment" she added fervently, eyeing him from her desk with her square spectacles pulled down slightly to aid in eye contact.

Albus felt his insides crumble up. He looked up at the portraits on the wall, who had all remained silent during the conversation. The most noticeable one- the portrait of the man with sweeping silver hair and a strangely crooked nose- was fast asleep. Albus turned away from all of the portraits and looked over at Hagrid, who was in the corner of the cramped office surveying the situation with a sour look on his face.

"What about Hagrid?" Albus asked quickly, pointing over at him. "The professors already chaperone. He could be like, I don't know, a personal-"

"Yer not allowed in Hogsmeade" Hagrid cut him off clearly, and Albus threw him a furious look. Hagrid shook his bushy head. "I'm sorry Al. It's not up to me."

Albus groaned and looked back at Professor McGonagall. Disobeying Teddy was one thing, but Albus thought that he'd have a much harder time working his way around the Headmistress. Still, he could give it one more try. He opened his mouth to speak-

"I'm sorry" Professor McGonagall said, still making eye contact with him and making her mouth so thin that it took Albus a moment to find it. "That's the final word Potter. It's for your own good."

The thought of no more Hogsmeade visits did little to comfort Albus as his world slowly began to return to what it had been just after the holidays. The news that there was a price on his head had not reached the student body as far as he could tell, but a week after the visit, it was still the main source of discussion between him and his friends.

"Don't you think your friend may have been exaggerating just a tiny bit though?" Scorpius asked. "I mean, killing a kid is pretty serious stuff. Even for WAR."

Albus stared ahead blankly, not even wanting to comment. "Teddy wasn't lying. He has no reason to."

"But like you said," Morrison butted in, looking around the Slytherin common room to make sure that he wasn't overheard, "Your dad has no idea what he's doing these days. He could just be paranoid."

Albus shook his head and gazed into the fire. "I don't know" he said. "The way that The Hammer grabbed me- it does seem like they really wanted me."

"Yeah, but they wanted you months ago too, remember?" Scorpius said. "And that turned out okay for the most part. Maybe Waddlesworth just wanted another chat."

"Things were different last time" Albus reminded him.

"How so?"

"Fairhart was alive."

They all looked down grimly at this thought. There was a moment of silence where they all seemed absolutely transfixed by their fingernails. Albus finally broke it.

"And what did Mirra say again?" he asked suddenly. "In The Three Broomsticks..."

So astounded was he by the information that Teddy had provided him with, Albus had nearly forgotten the purpose of the Hogsmeade trip. He had asked his friends how it had went already, and had been pleased with the answer. Both of his friends seemed to think that though Scorpius hadn't made much progress with Rose, he certainly hadn't taken any steps backwards. And what's more, according to Scorpius anyway, Lance had been something of a total drag. Apparently he had seemed disinterested in Rose even still- something that Albus refused to take any amount of blame for. He instead put all of his curiosity into the conversation that had occurred about him.

"She just said that she hoped you were okay" Morrison said. "And that she was glad Hagrid was there to help you."

"And Eckley?" Albus asked bitterly, despite having heard the answer numerous times already.

"Said that he thought it was more likely that you'd asked Hagrid to escort you back because you were too scared of being in Hogsmeade" Scorpius said with a frown.

"But only Hornsbrook laughed" Morrison quipped up. "No one thought that it was really that funny..."

Albus nodded and looked back into the fire for a moment, before deciding that it was in his best interest to get some schoolwork done. Morrison and Scorpius rolled their eyes, but Albus didn't even bother explaining himself to them. He merely spread parchment out on one of the stone cut tables and set himself to work.

He had buried himself in work lately, partly to keep himself occupied and partly to have something to feel good about. As February progressed, the exam talk increased exponentially, and thus, Albus found himself with a viable excuse as to why his head was buried in books. He gave himself the personal chore of improving his Transfiguration grade, and also forced himself to do a bit of extra reading regarding Muggle Studies, taking in more and more irrelevant information everytime that he decided to pick a book up. Defence Against The Dark Arts and Charms were also classes where he thought he needed to pick things up a bit, but everything else he was relatively pleased with. The only class that he continued to excel in however, was the one class that he now dreading going to more than ever before.

Blackwood had been a hassle when she had been nasty and cruel, but in her miserable, almost catatonic state, Albus found her all but unbearable. She continued to burst into silent tears during class, burying her head timely to try and hide it of course, and she passed by their potions with less comments than ever before. She didn't even seem to care about he rules and regulations that she had set at the beginning of the year either. During their last Potions lesson, Dante Haug and Bartleby Bing had teamed up to make a potion, and Blackwood hadn't even acknowledged it.

Albus wished that he could somehow reach out to her; assure her that she was not alone, but it was impossible. There were too many bitter feelings between her and Scorpius, and something of a mutual dislike between himself and her as well. No matter which way that he cut it, her unpleasant personality had left a powerful impact on him, and even now, he felt like he'd be betraying himself if he did make an attempt to comfort her.

So he instead did all that he knew how to do- that which he had gotten consistently better at with every year of Hogwarts- he simply learned to cope. He knew that Hogsmeade had been a very close call, and he was terrified that a random Renegade was stabbing outside of the castle grounds every morning, waiting to collect a fat bag of gold in exchange for his mangled cadaver, but he refused to let this affect his life too much at Hogwarts. He was, after all, safe here. There was no point in pretending otherwise, and he had no problem pushing it from his head as far more important things were addressed.

"You have a bat for a reason!" Albus hollered at Holden Rawn during a particularly cold practice lesson in early February. "Use it!"

Holden Rawn shivered and outstretched his arm, trying to grip the bat without shaking uncontrollably. His teeth chattered as he tried to answer, but Albus rolled his eyes and rounded on his entire team, of whom he had all called down to the ground.

"Look guys," he started, taking a look at each of them in turn. The only person who seemed able to cope with the cold was Scorpius, but Albus saw that even he had placed his hands inside of his robes. "Believe me, I'm hoping just as much as you are that the weather miraculously gets warmer before our match with Ravenclaw. But let's be realistic okay? We're going to be this cold even when it counts most."

"W-w-w-we've been practicing f-f-for an hour" Connie Orik stammered out, her lips blue from the wind smacking against her face.

"That's right" Albus said. "And unlike practice, I can't just call off a real game half way through because we're cold. What if we have an hour long game? Best to be prepared isn't it? To have successfully adapted?"

"We won't have to p-p-play for an hour if you c-c-catch the Snitch fast!" Alabastor Kurgish said darkly, and there was a muttering of agreement with his words.

Albus put his palm against his forehead and tried to gather his thoughts. When he found himself incapable, he pointed at the sky. "Get back up there!" he barked, and they all groaned and mounted their brooms.

As they returned to their positions, only two stayed with him.

"Maybe a break wouldn't be such a bad idea" Morrison said. "Just to warm up?"

Albus frowned at him.

"Look mate" Morrison said, holding up his hands in innocence. "I'm probably not even going to be playing-"

But Albus had thrown him such a fierce look that he had hopped on his broom and taken off.

"You okay mate?" Scorpius muttered to him once it was just the two of them standing there. His arms were still folded underneath his cloak. "You seem a bit edgy."

"I'm fine" Albus answered, staring up into the sky at his fumbling team mates. "I just want to win, that's all" he said.

Truer words had probably never been spoken, Albus thought to himself. Just a week ago Gryffindor had defeated Hufflepuff in a moderately sized victory, but doing so had put them in second place. However, as Ravenclaw had only played one game, this position was far from secure. If Slytherin won, a Gryffindor and Slytherin final would be all but guaranteed. A regular loss would have the same result, only with Slytherin in second. But a landslide defeat would knock them all the way back, and Slytherin wouldn't reach the final at all.

Albus refused to let this happen under his captainship. His determination to overcome his terrible and confusing thoughts of the outside world was never sharper than when he was provided with his one tried and true ultimate distraction- Quidditch. He was not, however, going to waste his distraction. He was going to make the most of it.

And thus, practice sessions became daily. In the week leading up to the match Albus aggressively marched his team across the pitch, forcing them into agonizing workouts that,

though they complained about, he knew would come in handy. Day by day they seemed to grow slightly more exhausted, but they had at least gotten used to the cold. By the morning of the match, Albus thought that his team was more than ready.

"Everyone all set?" Albus said, pacing back and forth in the locker room, nodding his head towards all of them.

"Yup" Scorpius said casually, giving him a half hearted thumbs up. As Blackwood did not even seem to notice him anymore, he was all cleared for the spot of Keeper.

Albus next looked over at Damian Peesley, who gave him a weak smile and blinked his eyes sleepily.

"I know it's been a long week" Albus told them all. "But now we're ready. Ravenclaw has barely been on the pitch this month. The wind scared them off. They'll be on the ground starting a fire to keep warm while we're up there winning!" he announced, giving his fist a violent shake that wasn't very characteristic of him. Perhaps his eagerness was getting the better of him.

The team mumbled as a whole, and Albus' face fell. They all seemed to *want* to be enthusiastic, but were too close to passing out to be able to muster the strength.

Suddenly, he wished he'd have given them a day or two off- or maybe even trimmed down a few practices.

The sounds of the pitch entered into the locker room just as these thoughts crossed his mind. The crowd was roaring in anticipation for the match, and the commentator ( whose name Albus still had not even bothered to learn) had already begun to speak. Albus walked towards the exit of the locker room, taking a look behind him at his tired and worn team. Perhaps he would have to hurry up and catch the Snitch after all.

"And here's Slytherin!" the commentator's voice rang out, but the amount of boo's from three quarters of the pitch was so overwhelming that Albus didn't even get to hear any of their names be called. The Ravenclaws had entered first and were already positioned for play. Albus thought that they did indeed look cold, with their teeth chattering and frozen snot running down their faces. But on the other end, they looked extremely well rested.

"Slytherin Keeper Malfoy is making his debut today!" the commentator announced to the crowd. "Malfoy wasn't permitted to play last game, but has received clearance for this one and is ready to go! He was previously substituted for by Morrison Vincent, who performed admirably in the first game of the season. Let's see if Potter has made the right choice in replacing him!"

More boos from the crowd. Albus looked behind him at Scorpius, who shrugged as if he didn't care about the negative attention. But still, Albus saw his eyes dart into the crowd for a second, not towards the Slytherin side, but the Gryffindor.



Albus approached the Ravenclaw captain, a seventh year, arrogant looking boy named Jayden Goldstein. Albus recalled him from last year, and then remembered that though they came into that game after a loss, they had made a staggering recovery and secured a victory. Albus gave a menacing grin at the thought before briskly shaking Jayden's hand. He released just as blew the whistle.

He kicked off from the ground hard, immediately soaring towards the top, ignoring the fierce cold in favor of concentrating on a glimmer of gold. Goldstein had changed his Seeker this year, as Albus did not recognize him, but he looked light and speedy. For a second Albus thought that gave him the advantage, before realizing that his opposition was probably frozen solid.

"Ravenclaw takes possession to start" the announcer said excitedly. "Doyle flies in deep- nice pass to Richardson- back to Doyle, nice move there, the Slytheirn Beater had no chance at making contact- and the first shot of the game...saved!"

Albus turned behind him and Scorpius throw the Quaffle to Damian Peesley, who immediately took off, though he seemed to be going rather slow.

Ignoring this as well, Albus resumed his search. He was glad that Scorpius had started out strong, but he could not afford to get sidetracked. He circled the pitch, keeping his eyes peeled both high and low. The Ravenclaw Seeker started to tail him.

"Stoudemire is keeping close to Potter!" the commentator shouted. "Always an effective tactic, but he'll have to rely on strong speed to beat Potter to the Snitch!"

Albus rolled his eyes, brimming with confidence. A feint, perhaps?

He steadily increased his speed, all the while faking a look of concentration, as if he'd seen the Snitch. He went higher and higher, then took in to a sharp dive.

"Potter is diving!"

His tail followed after him at once. Albus grinned to himself as he pulled out of the dive at the last second. Stoudemire was not nearly as slick on a broom however. He crashed into the ground as Albus effortlessly floated away.

"A spectacular feint by Potter!" the announcer shouted into the microphone, amidst tumultuous hissing and groaning from the majority of the stands. "We've seen him do it before, and here he does it again! Stoudemire looks in need of assistance however..."

Mr. Wood approached Stoudemire, whose straw blonde hair was blowing in front of his face, almost concealing a bloody nose. He looked dazed and disoriented. Play was stopped while they checked on him.

"And this may be even more fortuitous for Potter than we previously thought!" the commentator said, much to Albus' surprise. "His team looks like they could use a good rest!"

Albus instinctively turned around and eyed his team, who had indeed all landed, looking winded. Holden Rawn looked close to fainting, despite the Quaffle not going in for either team once. Albus saw that Scorpius was the only one, apart from himself, who looked ready to play. Scorpius, catching his gaze, casually walked over to him while the commentator continued to speak about how Stoudemire was looking ready to fly again.

"You've got to catch the Snitch fast" Scorpius muttered to him.

"Tell me something I don't know" Albus said shortly. "What's up with them?" he added, jerking his thumb towards the rest of the team, who were all supporting themselves on their broomsticks to stop from falling over.

"They're exhausted" Scorpius said, his tone intense.

"From practice?" Albus said doubtfully. "It can't be from this game, we're five minutes in..."

"Yeah, practice" Scorpius said, and he sounded almost patronizing. "You had us going until about ten last night. And the night before that, and all week."

"Well that's what practice is, isn't it? And now we're prepared aren't we?"

"Well they look pretty prepared too" Scorpius said, nodding his head towards the Ravenclaw team. Stoudemire had returned to them. "And rested."

"Stoudemire will be okay!" the commentator cried, amidst hearty cheers from everyone but the Slytherins. "And will be back in the air soon!"

Albus turned back to Scorpius. "Just get in between the goal posts" he said, agitated.

Scorpius gave him a mean look before going back to the rest of the team. Albus stared down at the ground. Scorpius wasn't the Captain. Albus had been given that privilege. Why? Because he *knew what he was doing*. He allowed this thought to comfort him as the whistle sounded. Play resumed.

And still, captian or not, Scorpius was the one that carried them throughout the match. Nor Albus or his rival Seeker was able to get a good look at the Snitch, and for the next twenty minutes, Albus heard the commentator give nothing but praise to his Keeper.

"And that's *twenty three* consecutive saves by the young Malfoy! He's going for a record! What a staggering opening performance! Goldstein is calling a time-out to change their offensive strategy!"

The whistle blew while Albus looked over at Scorpius. Even the derogatory noises from the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors could not all the way overcome the cheers that Scorpius was getting. He had held Ravenclaw scoreless thus far, and was getting a considerable amount of recognition for it. He seemed unfazed however. He was still circling the hoops with determination on his face; oblivious to the crowd until he knew his job was done.

Slytherin had failed to score as well, but Albus knew that had more to do with their offense than any superb keeping. Whenever he caught a glimpse of his Chasers they were fumbling the Quaffle on easy passes or taking weak shots that were batted away with little movement. The Beaters seemed off as well, swinging the Bat half heartedly and panting after they did so.

The whistle sounded once again, and the game continued. Right away Ravenclaw took possession of the Quaffle and tried a complicated triangle formation to confuse Scorpius. Alabaster Kurgish hit a laughable bludger to break it up, failing in his attempt as the Bludger soared right underneath them all. They passed back and forth quickly, with one of them finally taking a shot-

"*Another save!* What a move by Malfoy to get in front of the left hoop! Caught that one with the tips of his fingers!"

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. He then resumed his search, and saw that Stoudemire was still hovering just a bit behind him. He seriously contemplating diving again, seeing if he would fall for it once more, but then decided he couldn't afford to have play stopped again- the less time in this weather the better. He instead steadily lowered himself, keeping his eyes peeled near the grass for a fleck of light that he could lunge at.

"Another spect- Stoudemire is shooting upwards!" the commentator bellowed.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" Albus said under his breath as he pulled his broom straight and flew upwards, where Stoudemire was indeed spiraling further and further up into the air.

The crowd cheered as Stoudemire neared the Snitch. Albus bolted after him, the cold air feeling as though it was tearing the flesh off of his cheeks as he seemed to cut through the crisp wind. He began gaining speed so that he and Stoudemire were almost neck and neck-

He gave an almighty lunge forward- nearly falling off of his broom as he did so- and grabbed the Snitch in mid-air, his legs wrapped around the very top of his broom for support.

"A fantastic catch by Potter! And the game is over, with Slytherin taking the victory one hundred and fifty to nil!"

The Slytherin stands erupted into cries of joy at once while the Ravenclaws almost immediately filed out of the pitch in embarrassment. Albus shot back towards the ground, holding the Snitch

proudly and waiting for his team to come and hoist him up and congratulate him. He glanced over at them. They were doing no such thing.

All but Scorpius were dragging their heels back to the locker room, their broomsticks trailing along in the grass as they muttered to each other about how much sleep they planned on getting. Albus mustered a tremendous frown, and was hoping very much that they would turn and see it, but it changed to a stoic look when he saw Scorpius eyeing him.

He squeezed the Snitch tightly in his hand and tried to pay it no mind.

The celebration party was extremely small. Albus attributed this to two separate things. First, it had been such a long time since noise was allowed in the Common Room that his housemates seemed to have forgotten how to make it- and there was also that chance that a noisy party was just what Blackwood needed to go back to her original, intrusive self. And the second was the lack of actual players.

Almost his entire team had retired to their respective dormitories to both mull over their sad performance and get some rest. Without them there, the food was only half eaten and the conversation seemed light. Some of the sixth and seventh years, who were more accustomed to far greater parties, had even opted to lounge around the castle instead, not even wanting to take part in such a shoddy event.

Albus stayed in his own dormitory while the forgettable celebration went on below him. He lay on his bed for quite some time, staring up at the ceiling and wondering why things felt so flat. He knew that his team's poor performance was his fault- he should have been much more attentive to their stamina over the course of their week. And their win hardly even felt like one because of this. He seriously considered apologizing to them all during his next scheduled practice-which wouldn't be for quite some time obviously- then scrapped the idea when he realized that made him look like a weak leader. He sighed. What would Atticus do?

His thoughts were interrupted however, as the dormitory door opened sharply. Morrison stepped in and, after giving a quick glance around the room and seeing that it was empty except for them, closed the door behind him.

"Not joining in the festivities?" he asked.

"Is anyone?" Albus said, thinking of how utterly lame the party was.

Morrison grinned and gave a wide stretch, then collapsed on his own bed. "Fancy this, eh?" he said. "Me leaving a party to come up here and talk to you?"

"What are you talking about?" Albus asked, perhaps a bit more forcefully than he liked. He reminded himself that Morrison had done nothing wrong.

"Nothing" Morrison said with a smile.

There was a brief silence between them, while Albus wondered why Morrison had even bothered to join him.

"Look mate" Morrison started quietly, "You don't have to hide up here or anything. I mean yeah, your team's ticked at you and all that, but I mean-"

"I don't see why" Albus cut him off sharply. "We still won, didn't we?"

Morrison gave a shrug. "Yeah, but only because-" but he stopped there.

"Because why?" Albus said. "Go on, you can say it. Because of Scorpius."

"That's not what I was going to say" Morrison said quickly, but Albus knew that he was lying. "But look what I'm trying to say here is...you've been different lately."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "How so?"

"Well I mean- like- you've buried yourself in books and all, and- well- you pretty much starting whipping your team mates. And then-I guess- you know- you didn't listen to your friend and stayed in Hosmeade, pretty risky move really-"

Albus heaved a sigh. "Oh come one..."

"Hey I'm just saying!" Morrison said, throwing out his hands demonstratively as if he was laying his good intentions out on a platter.

Albus shook his head. "I have a lot on my mind" he said.

"No one's doubting that" Morrison said. "But maybe you shouldn't have overworked your players?"

Albus frowned at him. What, did his two friends share captainship now? But at the same time he knew that Morrison was right. It was strange, had he heard these things from Scorpius he undoubtedly would have been angered; they'd have been riddled with sarcasm and made to sound offensive. But Morrison seemed more suitable for the job. It made more sense when he stammered it out.

"I know" Albus admitted. "I just wanted to win, that's all."

Morrison gave another shrug, this time tilting his head to the side as if it was no big deal.

"Course you did" he said swiftly. "You're a Slytherin! We're all power hungry and all. Well, 'cept for me..."

Albus looked up at him, a curious look on his face. He had made a good point there. "That's true" he said. "Why are you in Slytherin?"

He had never given it much thought before, but Morrison embodied very few Slytherin qualities. He remembered his father telling him how unimportant houses were in his first year- that their sole purpose was to make us appreciate unity. But still, there was no denying that Morrison didn't really fit the Slytherin stereotype quite as well as someone like Scorpius.

"Honestly mate?" Morrison said. "I asked the Hat to be put here"

"What?" Albus asked, surprised. "Why? How'd you even know the Hat would put you where you wanted to go?"

"I don't know!" Morrison practically shouted. "I didn't know how Hogwarts worked really. It was a damn Hat! I knew it could talk, so I asked it to put me here. I picked Slytheirn because- well- I guess because that's where you got put."

Albus nodded. Morrison had been one of the last to be sorted. And he had no friends. From the second the Hat had bellowed "Slytherin" for Albus, that that was where he wanted to go. They had befriended each other on the train after all- and Morrison had not known much about Hogwarts.

This thought seemed to soothe him slightly. But then he felt a terrible guilt. "I guess you didn't know you'd end up in the most hated house then, huh?"

Morrison sat up and gave a chuckle. "No. I figured it out in a few days though."

Albus gave a wry smile. "Wish you could go back and get sorted again?"

Morrison shook his head. "No way" he said grinning. "You?"

Albus stared down at his fingers. This was a rather personal moment. Morrison had been honest. There was no reason why he couldn't be as well. But honestly, what did he think? If he was in Gryffindor maybe things would have been different. He and Rose would be closer...he and Mirra would be closer. Maybe it would have been him dating her last year, rather than that prat Eckley. But would he even be friends with Scorpius and Morrison? In Gryffindor he wouldn't know what it was like to be disliked by most of the school. But maybe that made him stronger...

He was cut off from his thoughts however, by the sound of the door opening again. Scorpius entered. He took one look at his two friends, before keeping his gaze fixed just on Albus.

"All done moping?" he said.

"What are you on about?" Albus shot out. "What moping?"

"Well I figured you'd be upset since you all but failed your team today-"

"Scorpius don't-" Morrison started, but Albus cut both of them off furiously.

"Failed my team!" he screeched. "We won the game because of my catch!"

"Guys calm down-" Morrison tried interjecting.

"Yeah, after a good half of an hour of freezing" Scorpius said. "My keeping kept us alive! You'd of caught the Snitch and lost if it weren't for me! Our Chasers were almost falling asleep, our Beater's were dead in the air-"

"*Our* Chasers?" Albus said, not believing his ears. "*Our* Beaters? Exactly what part of this team are you in charge of?"

Scorpius opened his mouth to speak, but Morrison stepped in between them.

"Look, you guys can both blame each other, but the important thing is it's all over now. Slytherin is in the final" he said.

"No, that's not the important thing!" Scorpius said, with a nefarious bite to his words. "What's important is that Al realizes that recently he's been rash and demanding!"

Albus nearly jumped in surprise at his words. Scorpius didn't stop there however.

"I don't know what's gotten into you- I dunno maybe this whole thing with Fairhart or-"

"You shut up!" Albus said, fuming, and actually stepping forward. This was why it was better to talk to Morrison about these kinds of things.

Scorpius did stop his sentence, but he came quite close to saying another before Morrison interfered once more.

"Look just- stop- Scorpius let's go back downstairs!" he said quickly. Scorpius continued to eye Albus, and Albus knew now that Scorpius' sole intention of coming up here had been to provoke him- to get him to admit, or show, his bad attitude. Albus watched both of them leave before laying back down on his bed and rolling over on his side.

What did Scorpius know? What did either of them now? Rash and demanding...ridiculous. They hadn't seen Fairhart's memory. They didn't have his death hanging over them. They weren't being hunted by Renegades, or being plagued by strange dreams, or anything like that. No, he knew that he was acting quite appropriate in wanting to distract himself.

He closed his eyes and tried to force sleep, but he just couldn't manage it.

The next morning he joined his friends for breakfast at the usual time. The Great Hall was once again filled with chattering and happy students, the ceiling bewitched to look clear as the sky outside. There was even the general air of calmness that was commonly associated with breakfast time.

But of the three of them, no one was talking. Albus had pretended to be asleep when his two friends had returned to their dormitory the previous night, and now they were all eating in silence. Albus sat across from Scorpius and did his best to avoid making any eye contact. Morrison sat on Scorpius' side, but still seemed impartial. He was looking back and forth between them, chewing slowly. Only when Melonie Gure tapped him on the shoulder did he cease doing this, and instead began conversing with her, leaving Albus and Scorpius quite alone at the table full of people.

The sound of innumerable owls fluttering entered the Hall just as Albus was helping himself to seconds of scrambled eggs. Parcels and letters fell into students outstretched hands, but nothing, not even a letter from his parents ( which had stopped by now) came to him. The *Morning Prophet* was dropped off right in front of Scorpius however. Rather than pick it up and dig into it as he usually did, he merely continued to eat in silence.

Albus narrowed his eyes and snatched the paper, thinking that if Scorpius objected to it, he would at least have to speak. He didn't make a noise though. In fact, he didn't acknowledge it at all.

Albus unfolded the *Prophet* and, more to have something to do than to actually inform himself, scanned the first page. The main headline intrigued him a great deal.

### **Tommelson Arrested For Aiding Potter**

*Jacob Tommelson, Head of the Department of Internatonal Magical Cooperation, was arrested yesterday after he was caught attempting to arrange a meeting between former Auror Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter and Ivona Mazur, the Polish Minister of Magic. According to well published reports, the subject of the meeting was supposed to include plans to find and incarcerate Reginald Ares.*

*"It is against the law to contact Ministry representitives of foreign countries and arrange meetings with them without informing the Wizengamot" says Anna D' Inuella, as senior member. "He is at perfect liberty, and is expected to, communicate with our fellow Wizards and Witches across the world, but using his occupation to help non-Ministry members is unacceptable. That Potter was the target of the meeting is irrelevant. Had this been done months ago, when Potter was still in office, this would be a different situation. But Harry Potter is a regular citizen now. Though highly respected by our Ministry, he can not be given special treatment."*

*D' Innuella's comments about Potter where primarily positive, but the public reception to the ordeal has been far less enthusiastic. Potter is well known for having refused to turn himself over to Reginald Ares' 'Dark Alliance', and many citizens feel that Potter has no right to try and contact other country leaders.*



*"Harry Potter isn't in charge anymore" says Patricia Smith, 36. "If he wanted to help, he should have turned himself over. He can't just take it upon himself to do things that only our Government is allowed to do, just because he thinks he knows what's best."*

*Tommelsson has received even more criticism however.*

*"Jacob Tommelsson is precisely the reason why our Ministry of Magic has yet to capture Ares and end this threat", says Patricia's husband, Zacharias. "Those who put their faith in Potter are doing so because of his past victories, not his current condition. Potter obviously tricked him into thinking that contacting another country was best for solving this problem, but Tommelsson is more at fault for believing him."*

*The possible repercussions of such a meeting, obviously, would have included Mazur attempting to catch Ares not with the help of our own Minsirty- but with Potter by himself, which current Head Auror Janine Fischer says could have been "disastrous".*

*Tommelsson himself has given few comments on the subject, but one report indicates that he has claimed no regrets for his actions.*

*"Harry Potter is the reason we're still here to fight" Tommelsson said before being placed into custody. "And he's the reason we still have things to fight for. I trust him, and I know that in trying to help him I was helping the Wizarding World. Throw me in Azkaban-bring back the Dementors just for me if you will- I'll not have my children think that I didn't do everything I could, and that I wasn't fully prepared to pay any consequences!"*

*Dementor's, of course, are not permitted to be within two hundred miles of any person, and the Ministry has long since abandoned their usage of them for Azkaban, but Tommelsson's comments have brought just as much criticism as his actions-*

Albus stopped reading there, letting his eyes wander to the bottom of the page, where there was a picture of Tommelsson. Albus knew that he had known the name- the giant french woman had said it. He was the chubby, sweaty, balding man that his father had brought by during Christmas. So he had been his father's connection to all of those other countries and their leaders. Viktor Krum, Josph Devlin, all of them.

He kept his eyes focused on the black and white moving picture. Tommelsson's hands were bound and he was sweating profously. The Auror's- none of whom, Albus was pleased to see, were his uncle, were gathered around him. Albus shook his head. This man had placed faith in his father, and now he'd probably end up in Azkaban. Why did people continue to trust his father? Even he knew by now not to do that...

He folded the paper back up and looked across from him, where Scorpius was still eating silently. His insides were burning with the will to talk to someone about what he had just read, but at least one of his greatest confidants was not interested, as Morrison was still talking to

Melonie. He stared at Scorpius and knew that he would not be able to talk to him about it either. His attitude had lost him that privilege.

He shook his head and slid the paper away, looking down at his scrambled eggs sadly. He then looked up at the high table to see if anyone up there was reading the *Morning Prophet*. Nearly all of them were, excluding, Albus saw, Blackwood. Her paper was rolled up as well. She had no one to talk to about it either. And based on the sad expression on her face, she too had a small plate of scrambled eggs in front of her.

## Chapter 18: By The Lake

Squabbling with Scorpius just wasn't quite like squabbling with anyone else. When Albus usually tossed away a perfectly good relationship over something trivial, it always had some sort of variable to it. He had fought with James last year because they had both truly believed the other to be in the wrong. He had always struggled with Mirra because of how much he liked her. But Scorpius, plain and simple, was simply hard to deal with.

It wasn't that they didn't talk anymore, or that they spent any less time together. It was that they both knew that the other had resentful feelings towards one another, and thus everything about their friendship seemed more strained. Their conversations ended flatly; they didn't laugh at one another's jokes. Scorpius still offered to let him copy homework, but Albus knew that it was no longer done out of munificence, and thus, he refused it. Besides, he didn't want some mutinous show off helping him anyway.

There was simply no getting around the fact that Scorpius was completely and absolutely in the wrong. He wasn't the team captain. He had no right call Albus out, to bark orders at him, or to openly criticize his practice sessions, especially as they'd won the game anyway. And he most certainly had no right to attack Albus' "bad attitude", especially when a great deal of his stress came from trying to help *his* romantic endeavors.

He tried telling this to Morrison, but as Morrison was completely impartial, and had straight up admitted that he thought both of them were being ridiculous, he received no help. And so, two weeks of silently eating meals with his friends later, Albus found himself in a familiar place on a cold Saturday afternoon.

"Ah, boys will be boys, won't they?" Hagrid said calmly, refilling both cups of tea.

It was warm in the Gamekeeper's cabin, the sweltering fire being a nice change from the icy wind outside. Albus had initially rejected the idea of visiting Hagrid- especially after what had happened in Hogsmeade- but he still felt comfortable enough around him to speak to him openly about most things, and that's what he was banking on here.

"Yeah I know" he said, taking a sip of tea and nearly choking from how hot it was. "But I mean really- everyone knows he's in the wrong here."

"Maybe he is" Hagrid said with a shrug. "But that's not what's important, is it?"

Albus gawked at him. "Of course that's what's most important!" Albus said. "He openly undermined by authority!"

Hagrid chuckled. "Yer startin' to sound a bit like a Prefect, aren't yeh Al? Maybe you'll be the second Potter to get the badge, eh?"

Albus fell silent at once, a frown curling on to his lips. "I didn't mean it like that..."

"Yeh know Al, I remember when your aunt and uncle got into a huge fight. And your dad too. All three of 'em takin' sides and sides. Third year, I think."

"Really?" Albus asked, looking up. "Over what?"

"A broomstick" Hagrid said, smiling. "An' a rat. That wasn't even a rat really..."

"Yeah but that stuff is unimportant" Albus said earnestly.

"It's all unimportant Al!" Hagrid said, shaking his furry head and taking a sip of his own tea-downing it in one gulp despite it looking just as hot as Albus'. "Authority, broomsticks, rats. Is any of it as important as your friendship?"

Albus heaved a sigh. "I guess not" he said darkly. "But it's not like it will be like this forever. I mean, me and Scorpius are both just dealing with a lot I guess. It seems like this always happens near the end of the year. Everything just starts to fall apart" he added, more to himself than to Hagrid.

"Then I guess yeh got a lil' bit of rebuildin' to look forward to, don' yeh?" Hagrid beamed. "An that reminds me, just to clear things up- about what happened in Hogsmeade-"

Albus waved his hand casually. "I'm not going back Hagrid, you don't have to tell me twice."

"I didn't think that you were" Hagrid said. He leaned forward a bit so that his voice was quieter, despite it being only the two of them. "But I didn't wan' any hard feelings either. Yeh got to understand Al, we're doing this for yer safety. Sometimes you need protection."

Albus felt his cheeks flush. He was getting pretty sick of people trying to protect him, like he didn't know how to take care of himself or something. Fairhart had given him that memory to protect him, and look what had happened to him...

"Somethin' else on your mind Al?" Hagrid asked, seeing the blank look on his face.

Albus snapped out of his thoughts and turned his attention back to Hagrid. "Huh? No. I'm fine..."

The weather was so cold outside, and the Quidditch Final so far away, that Albus had taken a break from being the aggressive captain and instead opted to give his team some well earned rest. They didn't really take it as charity however- they seemed to think that they were entitled to it, and no one asked him anything about practice.

And so, Albus fell into redundancy once more. Wake up, check the *Morning Prophet* for slander of his father, go to class, do homework, and sleep. Like most patterns, he adjusted to this one fairly well, and even without Scorpius he found himself enjoying the slipping by of time. He was, however, still plagued by strange dreams, each of which he couldn't quite remember, but all of which still seemed to end with varying shades of gold or green and screams of terror.

"Okay I did a bit of *digging*" Morrison said one day, as the two of them sat in the common room by the fire. Scorpius had went to the owlery to drop off a letter to his grandfather, who he was apparently communicating with quite frequently nowadays. "And according to my Divination book- and mind you, I'm almost positive it's all rubbish, but you asked- not remembering dreams is a good thing. Apparently your eyes dart back and forth a bit while you sleep, and some people are able see the future from it. Or something, I dunno. It's pretty lame. But anyway, not remembering your dreams is supposed to be a sign that they're just what you *think* will happen, not what actually will."

Albus slapped his palm to his face. "But I am remembering them! Kind of. I'm just bad with the details. So does that mean like they're half true, and the rest is just what's in my head?"

Morrison scratched at his chin. "I'll have to delve further into the realms of the unforeseen" he said mystically.

Albus heaved a sigh. With so much else on his mind he did not know why his dreams were so important to him- other than because they had been going on for months now, and were showing no signs of slowing down.

"How do you feel *after* the dreams?" Morrison asked.

"Why?"

"I dunno" Morrison said with a shrug. "It's just the old bat puts a bit of emphasis on like, how you feel when you wake up."

"I feel really sweaty" Albus said, agitated. He wished he had never asked for Morrison's help, all he was doing was growing more and more confused.

"How about angry?" Morrison asked him.

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel that a bit too" he replied coolly.

Morrison raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You don't have to snap at me mate."

"I'm not snapping at anyone!" Albus snapped. Once he saw a Slytheirn a year below him staring at him however, the same Slytheirn who Morrison had once tried to have do homework for him actually, he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down.

"Sorry" he said after a moment, his voice back to normal. "It's just- everything with WAR and Scorpius and-"

"Everything'll get better Al," Morrison said, giving him a clap on the shoulder. "Just give it time-"

But he stopped there, as Scorpius had just entered the common room. The three of them took turns looking at each other before silence fell. And indeed, the silence resumed for the better part of the night, and then for the next day as well.

In fact, as they slowly inched out of February and into March, Albus thought that the only thing getting remotely better was the weather. His conversations with Scorpius still consisted of only fragmented parts of speech, occasionally joined by a single, coherent sentence to make it seem like they weren't only speaking to appease Morrison, who frequently tried getting them to talk.

The sad thing was, as his hushed conversations with Morrison indicated, his other best friend was growing tired of the situation as well. Albus had little contact with Rose now too ( he still wasn't sure how things had went with Lance) and he thus had to cherish the few classes he had where he could speak to Mirra, who alone seemed to be able to deal with him.

"It'll fix itself" Mirra said during Herbology as she calmly petted the long, slick vines of the Indonesion Chameleon Shrub- a truly ugly plant capable of changing it's color to blend in with it's surroundings. "More crushed nettle leaves" she added, holding out her hand.

Albus, who was fortunate enough be working with her only ( they had been divided into pairs of two's) passed over a handful of crinkly green leaves that smelled putrid. Mirra scooped them out of his hands and tried sprinkling them into the Chameleon Shrub's mouth, but it was ignoring her altogether.

"Everyone seems to think that" Albus said quietly, for not too far away Morrison and Scorpius were working together. "You, Morrison, Hagrid..."

"Because that's what happens" Mirra said with a slight smile. "Eventually you'll both realize how stupid you're being. Fighting over Quidditch...honestly..."

Albus gave her a mock patronizing stare. "Excuse me?" he said, mustering his first real smile in quite some time.

"Oh sorry" she said dismissively. "I forgot about how boys can be over that kind of rubbish."

Albus chortled. "It's not *rubbish* that we're all bent up over. It's that he-"

"-Deliberately spoke out against you in an attempt to make your team recognize faults that aren't even there" Mirra finished dryly, her tone suggested that she was quoting him verbatim, which, now that he thought about it, she probably was.

"That's right" he said, crumbling up leaves and passing more over to her.

"But what are you doing?" Mirra asked him. "I mean, it must be awkward around the Common Room..."

Albus gave a slight shrug. "I don't hang out in there as much now" he said. "Really I just kind of spend time in the Ro- in the library. Homework and stuff."

He had come very close to telling her the truth, before realizing that Mirra did not even know about the Room of Requirement. He had indeed been spending a lot of time in there rather than the Common Room however. In addition to being extremely helpful when it came to all of the homework he had now resolved to do on his own, there was also no denying that he enjoyed the peace and quiet- it was a very good place to sit and think.

"I don't ever see you in there" Mirra said thoughtfully, but before he could answer the bell had rung.

"Remember class!" Neville called out. "Twelve inches of parchment on the different ways in which the Chameleon Shrub uses it's camouflage to it's advantage! I want offensive *and* defensive capabilities mentioned! And Bing, you still owe me an essay! Have it by next lesson or you're getting a zero, I mean it this time!"

"Yes Professor Longbottom" Bartleby Bing said, shaking his head and grinning. They filed out of the greenhouse, Albus splitting from Mirra once they reached the castle and went separate ways. Only Morrison caught up with him however.

"Where's Scorpius?" Albus asked him.

"Said he wanted to talk to Professor Longbottom about something" Morrison said.

Albus sneered. "More like he doesn't want to be anywhere near me" Albus said.

Morrison shrugged. "Who knows" he said with exasperation in his voice. "Let's drop our books off..."

Albus didn't see Scorpius for the rest of the day however, not even at dinner. He had no idea where he could be either, but he wasn't going to mention anything to Morrison, lest he be accused of wishing ill intent or something along those lines. Instead he proceeded tactfully. After dinner, while in his dormitory, he pulled out the Marauder's Map.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good" he said, giving the Map a quick tap with his wand and watching as lines began stretching themselves out. He scanned the Map extensively, keeping an eye out for the bubble that held his friend's name. He wasn't on there. How strange.

Almost immediately after seeing this however he thought of Blackwood, who tended to disappear off of the Map as well. He instinctively looked around her office to find her and saw that she wasn't there. He saw her moving however, heading towards an empty third floor corridor.

Albus heaved a sigh. He knew precisely where she was going. Back to her passageway. Back to WAR. Weeks ago he had seriously considered following her, finding out the secrets behind her seemingly impromptu meetings with her comrades. Now however, he could only wish that she didn't get herself hurt.

There was still the matter of Scorpius to attend to however. Albus thought of where he could be, and the answer came to him almost at once. There was only other place that he knew of that was off the limits of the Map.

*Unbelievable* he thought bitterly. Scorpius knew how much time he had been spending in the Room of Requirement, and he had went and entered it himself! He supposed on some level it was fair- they had both known about it since first year after all- but the audacity behind it is what shocked him. That Scorpius wouldn't even let him have a room to himself to think.

Albus wiped the Map clean and stuffed it in his pocket. He had been planning on going to the Room tonight as well. He contemplated standing outside the entrance on the seventh floor corridor, to catch Scorpius right as he was leaving, but then decided he was not going to spark such drama. He supposed he *could* always go to the library, as he had said he did. With any luck, he might stumble across Mirra there.

His mind made up on where he was going, he returned down to the Common Room. "Going to the library" he said to Morrison, who was playing Exploding Snap with Melonie Grue and Denise Toils.

"Have fun" Morrison said, not even paying attention as he delicately placed a card near the top of the castle. Albus exited just as he heard a small explosion go off.

He made it to the library in record time; for some reason his feet seemed more anxious to move than usual. He figured that while he was reading he could keep an eye out on the Map as well, so that he would at least know when Scorpius and Blackwood returned. The second that he entered the expansive room of knowledge, he saw a familiar mess of black hair at the table nearest him.

James had an open book in front of him, but it was kind of hard to tell. He was laying on it, the side of his face pressed down against the pages, apparently deep in sleep. Albus approached him and tapped him on the shoulder curiously.

James shot up straight. He had been laying on the book for so long that when he had removed his head a page had been ripped clean from it, stuck to his cheek from sweat.

"What's goin- oh, hey Al" he said, giving a tremendous yawn. He then realized the page stuck to the side of his face. "Ah dammit" he said, pulling it off and crumbling it up.

"Why don't you just repair it?" Albus asked.



"Because now that I've ripped it I'm kind of glad I did" James admitted, looking groggy as he sat in his seat, glancing around. "I'm weird like that. Even if I don't try to destroy something, I still don't like taking it back if I do. Especially books..."

"What are you doing here?" Albus asked, even more perturbed at the idea of James reading a book quietly in a library than him randomly destroying literature.

James pointed towards a row of books quite a few paces away. There his very pretty girlfriend- the one who Albus barely knew- stood, pulling out books, glancing at the first few pages of each, and then putting them back.

"Mary wants us to study extra hard for exams" he said dully. "So she's picking Charms material out while I read,"- he held the book up and peered at the front cover, " - *Dark Days for Goblins: A History of the Goblin Revolts of the Thirteenth Century*:"

He stared at the cover, a disgusted impression on his face. "On second thought, I may have actually subconsciously tried ripping this one..."

"I thought her name was Maya?" Albus said, taking a seat across from him and jerking his thumb towards her.

James pounded the table with one hand and pulled at his hair with the other. "Damn! You're right! Why do I keep doing that? I need to get that out of my system now. Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary" he repeated over and over, finally stopping and holding his silence for a second. "Maya" he said happily. "Got it. Let's hope it lasts..."

"It's not that hard" Albus said. He had remembered her name after all, and she wasn't even all over him.

"It is for me!" James battled. "But anyway, what are you doing here? You can't read."

Albus rolled his eyes and ignored the insult. "I just needed a place to hang out" he said. "Common Room is dull."

"Ahh, okay" James said, though he gave him a knowing look. "Well go hang out over there" he said, pointing through the shelves of the library towards a table so far away that Albus couldn't even see it. "I'm supposed to be reading, I can't have any distractions."

"Yeah right, sorry" Albus said sarcastically, rising up and heading towards the empty table. He made a few steps in between the columns of books, selecting a few that he thought he needed to work on- including the basic jinxes he had been neglecting to learn during Defence Against the Dark Arts this year.

He set himself up at the table, laid the books flat out, and then, after casting a look over his shoulder, pulled the Map out once more. He tapped it and muttered the incantation, and then resumed watching it.

He kept an eye on the third floor and an eye on the seventh, checking them both at different intervals to see when Blackwood or Scorpius would return. He barely turned back to his books however, and for fifteen minutes straight they sat open at the first page, his attention turning to them only to read a few sentences at a time. He found that his eyes were wandered towards other places as well however. Professor McGonagall was sitting in her office, barely moving. Neville and Hagrid were conversing in the vegetable patch. Lance was surrounded by people in the Hufflepuff Common Room. And Morrison hadn't budged from his spot at all.

He should have paid more attention to the library however. Just as he was about to look at the Gryffindor Common Room to see if Mirra and Rose were with those two gits, a hand shot out over his shoulder and snatched the Map up.

"What are you drawing schematics Potter?" an annoying voice rang in his ear.

Albus turned around and felt his heart beat increase. It was Eckley. What he was doing here Albus didn't know, but what he did know was that Eckley was holding the Map up to his face, an intrigued expression on it.

"What is this thing?" he said, dumbfounded.

"Give that back!" Albus spat, and he actually reached for it, but Eckley held it away from him, high above his head.

"Manners" he said curtly. "You have to say please."

Albus felt his skin crawl from the level of hatred that he was feeling. Eckley noticed the sour look on his face and grinned at it. Albus knew that he was intentionally trying to provoke him. He thought he knew why as well. They had still never settled their shouting match down in the dungeons, though this time, it was just the two of them. No friends to interfere.

"Give it back" Albus repeated, his teeth bared as he clenched his fist with ire.

Eckley moved in closer, so that Albus could smell his breath. "Or what?" he said, and Albus knew that he was cherishing these moments, just as all bullies did. These moments where the prey had no defense whatsoever. "What are you going to do?" he asked slowly.

"Charlie stop!" someone said, and they both turned. Mirra had arrived, and Albus now saw why Eckley was here. Mirra spent time in the library- they had probably planned to meet here together.

Eckley ignored her however. He placed the Map face down on the table- not as a kind gesture- but to have both hands ready. "What are you going to do?" he repeated quietly.

"Charlie I'm serious!" Mirra said, but when she saw how little pull she had by herself, she tried a new tactic. "I saw James when I came in, you'd better watch out-"

Albus felt his blood boil. He didn't want James here. He was glad he wasn't. He was glad there was no Morrison either, or Scorpius, or anyone that could help him. Everyone wanted to fight his battles for him, and he was sick of it. He was sick of people thinking that he needed protection; that he couldn't fight back.

"Charlie-" Mirra started again, but it was Albus who she should have been trying to calm down. He gave a roar of rage at the sight of Eckley still in his face, and with a powerful lunge, he pushed him as hard as he could.

Albus had not expected Eckley to move at all. He thought for sure that at the most his shoulders would swing back, but that he was way too sturdy for anything to actually happen. And yet Eckley had flown back several feet, giving an unexpected yell as he collided with a book shelf. The massive shelf didn't move, but books were falling on his head.

"Albus no!" Mirra shouted, but then a far screechier noise was made.

"Out! Out, out, out, out, out!" came the yells of the librarian, an elderly, sour looking woman who looked devastated, not at the idea that one of them was hurt, but that her books were out of place. "I'll have no fighting in my library! Out! Both of you!"

Albus stared down at Eckley, who was stirring and clinging to his head, feeling for a bump. Albus then examined his own hands, flexing his fingers. How strange. He did not think that he was that strong.

Mirra had crouched down to check that Eckley was alright, but the librarian was still seething, and a few people had now looked over to see the source of the noise that had disturbed their studying.

"OUT!" the librarian shouted again.

Albus turned on the spot, his surprise and anger now mixed to create an inexplicable feeling. His heart was still pumping fast, but he felt a rush of satisfaction at knowing that he had one upped Eckley.

He exited the library while people crowded around him asking him what had happened. He ignored them, walking through the hallway and trying to get as far away from the scene as possible. He allowed a small smile to escape him.

He had done it; he had successfully stood up for himself. Not because Morrison was there to back him up, not because Mirra had interfered, or James. Nothing of the sort. *He* had fought his own battle. All that he had needed was the proper motivation...

His heart dropped down to his feet. He stood frozen, right in the middle of the hall, his elation quickly turning to despair. The Map.

He turned around briskly and began running back towards the library. Why had he worked so hard to be as far away from it as possible? He nearly bumped into a third year as he rounded the corner, then saw the entrance to the library, his hopes high that his precious Map was still there...

"Not so fast!" someone screeched as he bolted into it. The thin, cruel and hooked nose librarian was pointing a shaky finger at him. "I said out!" she barked. "You've lost your privileges for today!"

"But Miss I left something-"

"You didn't have a bag" she snapped.

"No not a bag-"

"Your friend already left" she cut him off. "If you want a fight you do it in a different place! The library is for peace and quiet! For learning. Not Muggle scuffles!"

"Please I'll only be a seco-"

"Out!" she screeched again, this time her finger not even shaking, but merely pointing towards the door lazily, as if the fight was over.

Albus turned around on the spot and marched his way back to the Common Room.

He was still fuming at midnight.

"So just go back and get it!" Morrison said, staring into the fire of the common room. Everyone else had already went to bed, and Albus knew that Morrison would have joined them if he hadn't needed serious moral support. Scorpius was still not back as well.

"There's no way it's there" Albus said, pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back as if he was struggled to find a solution to a problem that simply could not be solved. "I didn't wipe the Map, someone picked it up obviously. Or that hag threw it away! James is going to kill me..."

"Just relax" Morrison said calmly. "James won't care. If he gave you the Map, he didn't have any need for it."

"It's not about it being a necessity" Albus said, still pacing. "He gave it to me to take care of. Stupid Eckley..." he muttered through gritted teeth.

"Look on the bright side of things" Morrison said, and Albus rounded on him in disbelief. "You pushed over *Eckley*" Morrison said, stressing the last word. "I mean, you've hated that kid for years. And you did it in front of Mirra too!"

"To be honest I'd rather he not showed up" Albus said. "I'd rather have the Map" added, defeated.

Just then they heard the Common Room entrance slide open. Scorpius marched in, his eyes blinking. He looked quite ready for bed.

"Where've you been?" Albus barked.

That woke him up. Scorpius stopped blinking his eyes and instead narrowed them angrily. "Never you mind" he said testily.

"You were in the Room of Requirement!" Albus shouted.

"Yeah, so what if I was?" Scorpius said. "What are you so bent up about? Did I miss an eight hour practice or something?"

Morrison interjected. "Al got into a scuffle with Eckley, and he lost the Map" he said quickly.

Scorpius looked quite taken aback. His first words however, as Albus had expected, had nothing to do with his confrontation.

"You lost the *Map*?" he said in surprise. "How could you let that happen!"

"Oh like you care!" Albus said. "And I wouldn't have even been in the library if the Room had been unoccupied! Did you really need to be in there that bad?"

"What does it matter?" Scorpius said. "You don't own the Room."

"But you knew I was always using it! Went in there to have a good long sulk over Rose I bet! Take you a few hours to realize that she could care less about you?"

Scorpius took a step back in surprise, apparently lost for words. His mouth turned thin as a line, and Albus felt his palms start to sweat. He knew that he had taken it way too far.

"At least I'm allowed to spend time with the girl I like" Scorpius finally said, his tone quiet and eerie rather than aggressive. "Must be hard to be with Mirra when mummy drags her precious baby out of Hogsmeade so that he doesn't go the way of Fairhart."

Albus felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. He too took a step back and let the words sink in. Morrison was looking back and forth between them, worried about escalation but apparently unwilling to interfere, lest he be attacked himself. Albus came very close to battling back, to saying "At least my grandfather isn't a murderer" but he did not think that it was in his

best interest to continue. Instead he turned on the spot and went upstairs, returning a moment later with a bundle of silver robes in his arms.

"I'm out of here" he said, throwing the Invisibility Cloak over himself and going to the Common Room door, which slid open at once. As it closed behind him he heard a few fragments of conversation.

"Good job mate" Morrison said sarcastically to Scorpius.

"What? He started it..."

Albus walked down the dungeon in darkness, with no clue at all of his destination. What he needed was a good place to sit and think, away from everyone and everything. A place to figure out why his life was spiraling out of control.

He didn't want to go to the Room of Requirement. That was Scorpius' sanctuary now, and he wanted nothing at all to do with it. But without the Map, he didn't know any secret places or rooms ; no where else that he could have to himself.

*"You take your time" Teddy said, shrugging. "Think things out. If you need a place to be alone, I always found the lake is cleared around midnight."*

*"The lake?" Albus asked. "That's out of bounds."*

*"Albus, who patrols the lake at midnight?"*

There *was* the lake, as Teddy had suggested. He supposed it was no worse than merely meandering the halls of Hogwarts. And besides, he'd be able to skip rocks too. Teddy had mentioned that.

Now clear on his destination, Albus walked up the stairs and through the Great Hall- finally exiting the castle and entering the grounds. It was a rather nice night for early in March, and the moonlight pierced the darkness just enough for Albus to make his way down to the enormous black lake. As he slowly descended down the grassy slopes leading to it the grass changed to dirt, finally reaching the brink of the water where there were smooth stones at the edge.

It was a rather serene sight. Albus understood at once why Teddy had preferred it. The stars reflected off of the lake, making Albus think that he had two skies to look at, one off in the distance and one right at his feet. He removed the Cloak. There would be no need for it now, surrounded by darkness and with no one even having a reason to assume that he was here. He sat down on the dirt and continued to gaze at the lake.

How had this all happened? Fairhart's death had started a terrible chain of seemingly unconnected problems. People were trying to murder him outside of the walls of this very castle. His friendship with Scorpius was all but broken. He had lost the Map.

He picked up one of the smooth stones and chucked it into the lake with confidence, sure it would skip. It crashed into the water with a single plop, failing to skip once. The delicate ripple it created seemed to make the reflection of a star explode. He frowned and picked up another, curving his hand a bit- surely this time he would get it. It couldn't be that hard.

His technique now refined, he tossed another one. He achieved the same result, but this time he had not even hit a star. He was right about to throw another one when he heard a voice.

"You don't skip rocks that often do you?"

Albus spun around frantically, his hand shooting towards the folded up Invisibly Cloak next to him. He was so surprised by his guest however that he stopped at once. Mirra was standing right behind him.

"How did yo-"

But then he saw it. She was holding the Marauder's Map in her hands. Albus took in the rest of her as she waved the Map. She was in a long, scarlet, night gown. Her black hair was messy- she had rolled out of bed.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked.

"Go right ahead" Albus said, distracted, though whether it was by her or the Map he didn't know. On one end he was incredibly relieved at the appearance of his invaluable item. But the surreality of the situation had started to sink in now. Mirra was right next to him, at midnight, by the lake. He'd have never guessed such a thing two minutes ago, not in a million years.

Mirra sat down on the gravel next to him, her knees up to her chin. Albus noticed that she was in bare feet. Her toes dug into the ground at the edge of the lake; she was letting the water caress them.

Only when he realized that he was staring at her toes did he turn his attention back to her. She held up the Map so that it was perfectly visible in the moonlight.

"This is some Map" she said, smiling. "Where'd you get this?"

"My brother" Albus said.

"Is James one of these people?" she asked him. "Like Prongs or somebody?"

"No" Albus said flatly. "He stole it from my dad, and I'm not sure where my dad got it. I don't know any of the Marauders."

"Well whoever they were they were brilliant" she said breathlessly. She handed the Map over to him, and he took it gratefully.

"You erm- you didn't tell-" he stopped there however. He recalled getting into a big fight with Mirra previously because of his accusations that she told Rose everything, and he could *really* do without one of those right now.

She smiled at him warmly however. "I didn't tell Rose" she said. "Or Charlie or anyone. I just picked it up, figured it was yours, and kept it for safe keeping."

He gave a slight smile and folded the Map up, placing it on top of his folded Cloak.

"What's that?" she asked, indicating the lump of fabric.

"Oh right" Albus said, and he held the Cloak up so that it too was illuminated by the light of the moon. "It's an Invisibility Cloak" he told her, figuring there was no point in trying to conceal it. "But it's-"

"-Also a secret" Mirra said, still smiling. "I get it, I won't tell."

"Thanks" he said, placing the Cloak back down on the ground. They continued to sit in the silence after this, Mirra playfully lifting her toes up and down to send small waves through the water. Albus changed himself into a most uncomfortable position now, only to have something to do with his body. His knees were nearly tucked up to his chin now as well.

He thought that he heard an owl hoot somewhere off in the distance, but he quickly realized that he was just inventing his own noises so as to have something to focus on other than the awkwardness of the situation. And yet...he didn't feel that awkward. It was not the first time he had ever talked one on one with Mirra. Though never outside in the dead of the night...

Mirra broke the silence. "You come here often?" she asked, gesturing towards the lake with her hand.

"First time" he mumbled.

Mirra nodded. She picked up a smooth stone and then chucked it. It soared across the water, skipping gracefully several times before finally falling through. He raised his eyebrows at her, impressed.

"I'm guessing it isn't yours?"

Mirra nodded. "I used to come by here a lot during first year" she said quietly.

Albus felt his stomach churn slightly. Mirra had been something of a different person during first year. Indeed, she had not even been planning on having a second at the time.

"It's a good place to sit and think" she said. "Thinking about anything?" she asked him.



He stared off into space. "A bit" he said, not sure why he was speaking so little. She didn't seem to be growing agitated with his brevity however, and this comforted him a great deal.

She too stared off into space for a moment before opening her mouth to speak. When she did, her tone seemed almost forced, like she was unwilling to say what she had to say.

"You know I wasn't supposed to come back here" she told him. "For second year. After that whole thing with my parents."

Albus turned to her, surprised. Her having mentioned her first year here was something of note, but he never heard her mention her parents, apart from briefly telling him that they had been incarcerated. She didn't seem to notice the look on his face however- she simply kept going.

"The Ministry people told me that I had to live with my grandparents for a bit, while my parents were "psychoanalyzed" or something like that. Once they found out that they weren't right in the head, my grandmother and grandfather took me in for good. I was given the option of coming back to Hogwarts for second year...but everyone suggested that I didn't. They all said that I'd have bad memories of the place, and that it could cause a lot of damage if I continued to come here. The Ministry people said that I should probably take up home schooling. I wasn't going to come back."

Albus looked down at the dirt, interested, but not quite sure why she was telling him this. He was not going to be so rude as to ask her to get to the point however.

"I don't think I even considered it for most of that summer" she continued. "But in August, my grandmother asked me if I had at least made friends here. I remembered sitting on the stool and putting the Sorting Hat on, and being so scared. Because he knew right away why I was here, what I planned on doing. But he ended up telling me that I was brave, and that all that I needed was a few friends."

Albus recalled, even now, seeing Mirra be sorted; watching her close her eyes and grip the necklace that she wore- actually a key- as the Hat's mouth had moved rapidly.

"And I did make friends" she said. "And when my grandmother asked me that, I remembered Rose, and I remembered Charlie and Donny," - Albus felt his stomach go weak, "- and I remembered you" she finished, turning to him. "I think that the Sorting was the first time I'd ever been called brave. And I think you were the first person who ever really looked out for me. I remember sitting there when my grandmother asked me that, and thinking 'What about Albus? If I don't go back to Hogwarts, I'm never going to get to thank him. And I'm never going to get to find out what he's going to do next'. I came back to Hogwarts for a lot of reasons, but my biggest was you" she finished breathlessly.

Albus continued to stare at the dirt, not even daring to try and comprehend what he was hearing. When Mirra next spoke however, her voice sounded sadder.

"But every year you got less and less like the person I came back for" she said. "Terrible things started happening, and I know that they weren't your fault. But sometimes you did things that the Albus I knew would never have done. Chasing that man in Hogsmeade. Setting up Rose... I don't know. Sometimes I just wish that the Albus that I came back for was still here."

Rather than stare at the ground, Albus closed his eyes and tried to take in what she was saying. She was right; he was different now. So much had happened. With Ares and Darvy, with Wilde and Fairhart and everything else. With his father. And he couldn't control any of it...but he knew what she had meant. There were so many situations that he could have handled differently.

He turned to her, and he wasn't sure what to say, so he just said the first thing that was on his mind. "I don't know what's wrong with me" he said. "That's why I'm sitting here right now. Because I need to figure this out."

"Then tell me about it!" she said. "Tell someone Albus! You can hide your Cloak and your Map, but when you hide what's on your mind people get hurt!"

Albus swallowed hard; he felt a terrible lump rise in his throat. He did not want to have to tell her anything, but he knew that this was his one and only chance. Few other people were willing to listen. He opened his mouth to speak-

And said nothing. He couldn't.

Mirra shook her head at the ground. "Well whatever it is" she said quietly. "I hope it gets better."

Albus gazed at her, at the way the moonlight made her pale skin seem to glow. She looked so sad. But there was something about what she'd just said that changed him completely. *Hope*. Not think. She wasn't going to bother telling him that things were going to get better, because she didn't know if they would or wouldn't. But she wanted them too, and that meant more to him than any false assuredness that anyone else could provide.

"Fairhart's dead" he said quickly.

Mirra looked at him, shocked that he had started to speak. "I know" she said. "Rose told me. I'm sorr-"

"And it's my fault" he added quickly, before she could give him any sympathy.

"What?" she asked, astounded.

"It's my fault" he said darkly. "That day, in Hogsmeade, that bald bloke took me to see Waddlesworth, and- and Fairhart was there. I told him that I was considering coming back, and I wouldn't listen to him, so he- he- he gave this memory" he stammered out, in disbelief that he was talking, but unwilling to stop. "And they must've found out that he was helping me, and they killed him. Because he had to show me something, because I *refused* to listen."

"Al that's not your fau-"

"And that's not all!" Albus blurted out. "And then I blamed my dad for it, like he killed him! Like he wasn't his friend! And I did ruin Rose's date on purpose!" he shot out, and though he already knew that she knew this one, he couldn't not help but mention it. He was talking very fast now. "It was all set up! I got rid of her and Scorpius went to work on Lance and I *watched*. I even *participated!*"

"Al-"

"And now me and Scorpius are fighting, and I know why, it's because I've been a total prat, I've tried to bury myself in work and Quidditch and everything because it turns out I've got a damn price on my head, and I'm taking it out on other people-"

"Al listen-"

"I'm not done!" he shouted, and he could not believe that no one in the castle could hear him. "I keep having these dreams" he said sulkily, and now his voice was the lowest it had been. This was, for some reason, the hardest thing to tell her. "I keep having these dreams where-where people- where people get hurt. And I don't know why."

He buried his face in his hands, and quite suddenly, he had an image of himself laughing...

"And it's not just that" he murmured, and he removed his hands to wipe at a tear that wasn't there, though he thought it soon would be. "They're not just getting hurt. I'm the one hurting them. And I can't always remember it, but I swear it's almost every night."

She opened her mouth, but decided against speaking; perhaps she realized that her interruptions were futile. He turned to her miserably.

"And it's getting worse" he croaked. "Because now it's like my skin starts to crawl sometimes. I just get angry, or annoyed, and sometimes...sometimes it's not just my dreams" he said, thinking about today with Eckley, and Hogsmeade with the Hammer. " Sometimes I- I- want to hurt people even when I'm awake. On purpose. *I want a reason to hurt people*. I don't know what it is, but something- something is just wrong with me recently. I can't control it, I can't explain it. I just-"

He broke off there, unsure of how to end his rant. He could not simply do what she had done and craft his way towards the main point. All that he could muster up was one more sentence, and the sad truth was that he knew that what he was about to say was a lie. All he could do was he hope that she believed him.

"I'm not a bad person" he choked out.

"I know" she said soothingly.

"No you don't!" he said, and he turned his head away from her to hide the look on his face.

Something impossible happened however. As he looked the other way he felt something- something soft- her fingers. They had gently touched the bottom of his chin and spun his face around. He stared at her and saw that she was moving closer to him, leaning in with her eyes closed, and it took every ounce of concentration that he had to realize that his eyes were supposed to be closed too...

Albus had never kissed a girl before, but he didn't think it could possibly get any better than this. Her lips were soft and warm- and the moment that they touched his he tasted the strangest sweetness in his mouth. Without even realizing it he brought his hands to her face, his left on her cheek and his right tilting up her chin as everything that he was thinking about evaporated on the spot. All that he could focus on was not breaking it- of holding his lips there forever-

She broke it apart, if only to breathe. His hands still on her face, she brought her own to her mouth as if to conceal a giggle. He gently pushed them away and leaned in for another one.

## Chapter 19: Two Weeks

"Okay so be honest, how many times did you kiss her?" Morrison asked.

"I don't kiss and tell" Albus replied. "But a lot," he added, not wanting them to think that it had only been once.

They were walking to Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Albus was grinning ear to ear. It was a grin, in fact, that he'd been wearing for the last week now. There was a certain strut to his step as he casually entered the first floor classroom and pushed the door open.

"So is there like a schedule or something?" Scorpius asked him. "For next time?"

"None yet" Albus said, maintaining his grin, though this time it was for a separate reason. Scorpius was talking to him again.

It was amazing how something so simple could mend a relationship, but the excitement that his friends had shown when Albus had told them that he was the first of them to kiss a girl ( and that it was a girl that, as Morrison had been quick to point out, hadn't been unconscious or hoodwinked in the slightest) was too much for either of them to stay in their sullen moods. Scorpius had given him a clap on the back and congratulated him, and that was it. No mention of their argument, of anything said or anything that wasn't, no remnant of unfriendly feelings at all. Instead, the last week had been filled with nothing but smiles from the three of them.

"Seats, settle down" Professor Handit said lazily from behind his desk. "We're going to continue our review of the jinxes that are most likely to come in exams. I want to see a few in particular, the Stinging Hex and Revulsion Jinx amongst them. Partner up now"

Albus, Morrison and Scorpius immediately headed to the nearest corner and withdrew their wands. Naturally, their conversation turned into something that had nothing to do with jinxes.

"Still little contact though, right?" Scorpius said, a hint of concern in his voice as he waved his wand ferociously but gave no incantation.

Morrison pretended to cling to his heart as though he'd been hit with a terrible curse. "Good one" he mock choked to Scorpius.

"Well yeah" Albus said, ducking as a stray jinx flew over his head. He heard Bartleby Bing shout an apology from across the room. "But I mean, we barely have any classes together anyway..."

It was certainly true that following the kiss by the lake, he and Mirra had spent very little time together. The memory of the walk back to the castle was still fresh in his mind, of the way that she had giggled as their hands had repeatedly bumped into one another's, from the way that she had blushed in the darkness as they'd wished each other goodnight...

But still, she hadn't mentioned dating. Or a relationship, or any of those things that James seemed to be able to create at will. And all week it had only been giggling or smiling. In every class they only waved to each other, perhaps a bit more exuberantly than usual, and the little conversation that they'd had didn't mention their midnight excursion at all.

Albus suddenly felt the happiness start to drain from him at the thought. "You don't think that like- that she- that it was just like one and done, do you?" he asked both of his friends cautiously.

Scorpius concealed a laugh behind a cough. "Oh yeah," he started sarcastically. "That sounds about right. She kissed you just for bragging rights, that's it. Since you're the most well liked, popular kid at Hogwarts and all..."

Albus didn't say anything, the thought was still dangling in his head. He thought of all the girls that he used to see with James only once, before he moved on to another one. Was Mirra like that?

In an attempt to hide the confused look on his face he turned away, just in time to see Milton Parish place a perfectly executed Skin-Crawling Jinx on his partner. The blonde boy tensed up and began to shiver uncontrollably. Albus, though unaffected, felt the hair on the back of his own neck rise...

"I'm sure it's nothing like that" Morrison said, pointing his wand at Scorpius. He gave it a fake wave and Scorpius, seeing that Professor Handit was looking over at them, clutched his "burned hand" in pain.

"Not so powerful mate!" Scorpius said loudly, hiding his grin.

"Sorry" Morrison said. "Don't know my own strength..."

"Well then what do you think it's like?" Albus said tensely, not even bothering to take part in the charade.

"Honestly?" Scorpius said. "I think that it was a personal moment, and you two need to be alone for another one. I mean, you're *not* dating" he said clearly.

"I know" Albus said quickly. " But I mean, I'm pretty sure that she's told some people about it..."

Pretty sure was a bit of an understatement. Two days ago he had seen James in the hall, and his brother had given him such an enthusiastic thumbs up that he had almost poked the eye out of the friend walking next to him. Lily had also give him an encouraging smile. But his biggest piece of evidence was that Eckley was now giving him murderous stares more rapidly than ever before. Albus took this as an added bonus of sorts.

"What do you think I need to do?" he asked. "To like- you know. Make this official?"

"Well you want to date her, right?" Morrison said, his wand hanging loosely at his side now. "So just go on a date."

"He'll have a hard time of that" Scorpius said, a small frown curling on his lips.

"Why's that?" Albus asked.

"You can't take someone out on a date in a classroom" Scorpius said. "It'd have to be Hogsmeade."

"No problem" Albus replied, but the looks on both of his friends faces told him that they were not thinking along the same lines. "Look, I'll be *fine*" he started.

"Oh no you won't!" Scorpius hissed. "You're not allowed in Hogsmeade! Since you know, someone wants to- what's that word Morrison? Begins with an 'M'?"

Morrison put his finger to chin as if deep in thought. "Marmalade?"

"No...not quite..."

"Mud?"

"Amst. I think you've got the first two letters right..."

Morrison smacked his head in surprise. "Murder!" he shouted, so loud that a few students turned and looked at him for a moment.

Scorpius snapped his fingers. "That's it! That's the one!" He turned back to Albus. "Someone wants to *murder* you mate" he said quietly, and his tone was now more menacing than jocular.

Albus scoffed at them both. "Waddlesworth's not dumb" he said. "His best guy got his fingers broken trying to grab me, and everyone else knows it too. I'll be fine."

"But Al it's not just being in Hogsmeade. It's getting there" Scorpius said, his wand now dangling loosely as well. "McGonagall says you're not allowed in the village. All the teachers know it too. How do you plan on getting in?"

Albus tensed up a bit. "Look, let me just focus on getting her to go on a date with me. Then we'll worry about the actual date, okay?"

His friends exchanged their usual look. It was Morrison who spoke however. "Mate...I know that you really like Mirra. But you've got to think about your safety here. Remember our talk about being reckless-"

But Albus held up his hand. He gave them both a serious look. "Do you want me to get her or not?" he asked.

They both nodded, but seemed to be at a loss for words.

Albus knew that the next Hogsmeade trip was not for some time- more than a month away in fact. Scheduled for the end of April, he would have several weeks to figure out a way into Hogsmeade; even if he was currently at a dead end of sorts. His Invisibility Cloak had immediately come to mind, but he realized that it was more of a useful tool than a sure fire thing. He'd have to walk alongside people, and his Cloak didn't make him intangible. Also, his brother knew about, and he had the feeling that James knew he wasn't allowed in Hogsmeade and wanted nothing more than to be able to exercise power over him. Even with these thoughts in the back of his head however, most of his time went towards planning the first step- having a reason to go.

He had never felt so comfortable around Mirra, and somehow, inexplicably, it had never been harder to ask her something. In between the random smiles and enthusiastic waves, and all of the playful touching and chattering, Albus still felt his heart plummet everytime she walked away without anything being planned. He thought that that this had more to do with the situation than anything however.

He was never alone with her. In all of their classes they were always with Scorpius and Morrison and Rose, occasionally coupled with a very angry looking Eckley and haughty looking Hornsbrook, but still always surrounded. Morrison and Scorpius were smart enough to try and give him some time by partnering up by themselves, but Rose's appearance made it impossible. He considered ambushing her on the way to the bathroom or something- possibly using the Map to pinpoint her whereabouts- but this didn't seem romantic at all. Whenever she was in the library she was accompanied by someone as well- she had taken to helping Hugo and Lily study with their exams.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do" he said with a shrug to Morrison as Mirra walked away from him after Care For Magical Creatures one day, briefly turning to wave at him. "How am I supposed to get her on her own to ask her?" he muttered, waving to her off in the distance.

"Lasso her?" Morrison suggested, shrugging himself.

It seemed however, after a week of not asking her, that doing so in class would have to be best option. It came down to either Care For Magical Creatures, Herbology, or Potions. As he could not quite risk Hagrid or Neville overhearing him, it seemed that the latter was going to be his best bet.

"Okay, nice and easy" Morrison said as they all took their seats in the dingy dungeons. Mirra was typically sitting in the back with Rose, but Albus had opted to sit closer to the middle than usual, so as to hopefully have a good window of opportunity to ask. Albus nodded as Professor Blackwood stared at the class.



Her eyes were still bloodshot; her hair disheveled. Her grotesque appearance no longer a discussion for the class, they chatted away as she struggled to give them their assignment.

"The Deflating Draught" she choked out, once more her voice garbled and close to tears. "You can find the necessary components in the cupboard-"

Albus began tuning her out almost at once, glancing over his shoulder at Mirra taking precedence. She gave him a jolly wave before turning her attention back to Rose. Albus smiled at her and spun around, exhaling. He looked sideways at Scorpius, who was shaking his head, his eyes closed. Morrison had not continued to badger him about the "Imminent danger" he was supposed to be placing himself in, but Scorpius had continued to make it well known that he did not agree with his decision.

But still, Scorpius would simply have to deal with it. Albus was not going to let all of his plans with Mirra go down the drain because Waddlesworth had made a desperate attempt to get to him a single time; and besides, the whole thing had probably blown over by now anyway. No, he only had two things to worry about now- asking Mirra out on a date and successfully having it.

He worked on his potion in silence, as did his two friends. It was not a particularly difficult potion, which irked him slightly- he had been hoping that Mirra might ask him for help. Instead he half concentrated on his work, allowing his thoughts to wander to how he should approach the situation.

Should he be funny? Perhaps try and slip his request into a joke? It was, after all, a light hearted situation. And yet, he didn't want it played off like a joke. Perhaps sweet? Sincere? But he didn't want to come off as a pansy either. Determined, that was it. But he couldn't act aggressive about it...

There was a terrible screeching noise, which he knew at once had come from a chair. He looked around wildly, distracted, expecting to see a student running off to the bathroom or something along those lines, but saw nothing of the sort. Instead Professor Blackwood had risen from her chair. She had covered her face determinately and had begun walking away briskly, barely audible sobs accompanying her whispered apology.

"I'm sorry students" she choked out. "I have to use the bathroom for a moment..."

And without further ado, she burst through the dungeon door and out of sight. The class began talking about it at once, but naturally, they went back to their own topics once the conversation of Blackwood's depression was exhausted. It seemed that they were too used to it to put much thought into it anyway.

Albus frowned to himself however, realizing that he was still among the very few people in the classroom that knew the actual reason behind her sadness. He told himself that perhaps he should give her an encouraging smile when she returned; anything to not seem like some oblivious

child. But she didn't come back. He waited and waited for it, unsure as to why this was so important to him, but there was no sight of her. The entire lesson went by, and by the time that the bell had rang, the students had filled up their flasks and placed them on the metal tray on her desk, ignoring her absence completely.

"Blimey, she gets worse every lesson, doesn't she?" Morrison said as they exited the classroom and began walking down the dungeon corridor to their Common Room. Albus threw him a marginally cold look, but he held up his hands in defence.

"Not in a bad way!" he said earnestly. "I mean like, I get it, I know what's up with her. It's just...I dunno. You ever feel bad for her?" he asked them both.

"Yes" Albus said plainly, having nothing to hide. He turned to Scorpius at once however, and saw that he had gone a deep shade of red.

Scorpius had the worst relationship with Blackwood. It was he, after all, who had taken the brunt of her torture. He moved his head back and forth as if trying to figure out how to word his answer.

"Kind of" he finally managed to muster. "I know why she's upset. But...eh, nevermind."

They continued walking down the twisted pathways of the labyrinth, but Morrison was quick to say something that made Albus want to turn around.

"Hey Al, weren't you supposed to do something this lesson?"

Albus could have kicked himself. "Dammit!" he shouted, so that his voice echoed throughout the dungeon. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Mirra was gone. "Thanks for reminding me now!" he spat, though he knew that it was his own fault. With Blackwood gone he had had the perfect opportunity to ask Mirra on a date, but as usual, he had been too preoccupied to make the right decision.

Morrison chuckled. "Sorry mate. I thought you were purposefully stalling or something. Always next lesson though right? Or there's the lasso idea..."

They entered the Common Room and went straight to their dormitory. Scorpius however, for some reason, still seemed intent on giving them both a straight answer.

"Okay look" he said, dropping his bag down at the foot of his bed and sitting down on it. "I mean, I feel bad that what happened to make her sad happened, but I *don't* feel bad that she's sad. That make sense?"

"Drop it" Morrison said, yawning and collapsing on his own bed.

"But you know what I mean, right?"

"I do if you'll drop it" Morrison replied.

Albus sat down on his bed and saw that Scorpius had turned to him, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"The whole thing just seems kind of strange though, doesn't it?" he asked. "I mean really, Fairhart and Blackwood. I'd of never guessed that?"

"I don't think that they were in a relationship or anything" Albus said, relaxing on his own bed. "I think they were just close" he said.

Morrison gave a chuckle. "Well that much is obvious" he said. "I mean, Fairhart was awesome, but look at him and look at her!"

"Looks aren't everything" Scorpius argued. "Look at Albus. He's like the plainest looking bloke I know, and he does just fine" he added, throwing a thumbs up Albus' way.

"Thanks mate" Albus muttered, unsure if he should take this as a compliment or not. "But yeah, you're right. It's not just about looks. Fairhart...he knew a lot about girls" he said.

With a pang in his gut, he remembered his conversation with Fairhart last year, and about all the great advice that he'd given him. He had remembered it all year, but this was the first time the benefits of it had really sunk in. Had Fairhart never given him that advice, would he be anywhere as close to being with Mirra as he was now?

Scorpius and Morrison continued speaking, but it was more to one another than to him. He instead rolled onto his side, not tired but still wanting to rest and think. Fairhart had been such a big help. He'd never get to thank him.

He thought of Blackwood, thought of her crying in a restroom somewhere. Whether they had ever been more than friends or not, Fairhart had cared about her a great deal. He had done all of that research on Lucius Malfoy, hadn't he? Hadn't he gone out of his way to find her parents murderer? For some reason, with him now gone, Albus felt like it was his place- his duty even- to help her somehow, just as Fairhart had once helped him.

He rifled through his trunk and pulled out the Marauder's Map. He tapped it with his wand, said the incantation, and immediately began watching the lines formulate.

"What are you doing?" Scorpius asked him, side tracked from his discussion with Morrison.

"Nothing" Albus said offhandedly. "Go back to bickering."

Scorpius shrugged and returned to his conversation with Morrison, while Albus instead tried finding Blackwood's name on the Map. She had returned to the classroom now- it seemed she

had only left so as to be away from people. Albus stared at the spot where her name was. It was unmoving. She was just sitting at her desk, all her lonesome.

"I'll be back" he said quietly, rising from his seat and going through his trunk again. Five minutes later he was walking down the labyrinth once more, dodging people as he slowly returned to the Potions classroom.

He heaved a deep sigh and knocked lightly on the closed door. No answer. He knocked a little bit louder, knowing full well that she was in there. He knew that it was wrong of him to disturb her, but still, he *did* have the best of intentions.

"Come in" a muffled voice said.

Albus entered and, once again, saw her sitting alone at her desk in the darkness. Her eyes were blotchy; she seemed like she'd just had a good cry. She wiped away at her eyes and pulled her formerly beautiful, but now withered and straggly blonde hair out from her face.

"Yes?" she said pleasantly, and Albus felt himself go cold. He recalled when he had first spoken to her alone, about Quidditch practice. He remembered her cold, harsh voice, and her dismissive attitude. He most certainly had not pitied her then.

"Erm" he took a good look at her and saw that there was something on her desk. An old, wrinkly photograph. With a sudden jolt, he realized that he had seen it before. It was the picture of her and her fellow members of WAR- including a hooded figure that he was all but positive was Fairhart. When she saw his eyes wander towards it she quickly stashed it away in her robes.

"Yes?" she repeated, her tone still wearing the facade of kindness. "Can I help you?"

"Erm" Albus started once again. He didn't know what to say. Instead he merely reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He placed Fairhart's silver ring down on her desk and watched her face for signs of recognition.

He definitely got what he was expecting. She took a single glance at the ring, and her face drained of color at once. Her skin began to look cold and clammy, and she looked almost fearful.

"Where did you get that?" she said, her voice now a cold whisper rather than a pleasant croak.

Albus couldn't blame her for her question. He could scarcely imagine what she was thinking right now, and he couldn't possibly know which question was more pressing for her. Was she wondering how he had obtained this ring? Or rather, why was he giving it to her? As far as he knew, she had no idea that he knew anything about her or Fairhart, let alone anything involving the two of them together.

"It doesn't matter" Albus said, pushing the ring across the desk slightly. "It's just- I think that- I'm sure-" he didn't know how to finish. "I thought that maybe you'd want that" he said.

She continued to avoid his gaze, her eyes focused only on the silver ring on the table. Albus knew that it didn't belong to her, but at the same time, it was something of Fairhart's. Something to remember him by, at least. Between the two of them, Albus thought that she needed it more however.

She stayed silent. She didn't pick it up, or push it back, or do anything involving it other than stare at it. Her mouth was wide open now, as if she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Albus, realizing that he'd be waiting a long time for something to happen, turned on his heel and left. He had done what he'd come to do. Whatever she wanted to do with the ring was on her now- the ring was hers now.

He closed the door behind him and walked back through the labyrinth briskly. It felt good to have done that. Partly because he felt as though giving the ring away had somehow helped him come closer to accepting Fairhart's death, and partly because he thought that he may have helped Blackwood in some way. Even if it was marginally.

For a single moment he wondered what she would do with the ring, but then wondered how hard it must be for her to continue being in WAR. If his father was right- and on this matter Albus was sure that he was- WAR was responsible for Fairhart's death. Did Blackwood understand? Did she realize that she was associating herself with the same people that had killed someone close to her? Is that what she had to think of, every time that she snuck into Hogsmeade?

He stopped dead in his tracks. *Every time that she snuck into Hogsmeade.* In trying to solve her problem, he thought that he had solved his own. The answer was right there- was so simple he could not believe that he had not thought of it before. There was a way into Hogsmeade, even without his Invisibility Cloak.

"Oh come on" Morrison said, shaking his head the next day at breakfast, when Albus had confided his plan to both of his friends. "You don't even know where the passageway goes. You're going to be feeling like a real git if it leads to a bathroom or something."

"It leads to Hogsmeade" Albus said, sure of it. "You think Blackwood's wanted privacy this whole time? It's definitely a passage to Hogsmeade. I'll be able to get in with no problem."

"Yeah, but where could it lead to *in* Hogsmeade?" Morrison continued his argument. "I mean what, a trap door or something?"

Albus shrugged. "I'll worry about that when I get there. For now, all I need is to officially ask her. Looks like it'll be Care For Magical Creatures tomorrow."

He looked over at Scorpius, who was chewing his bacon silently, his eyes darting away to make it seem like he wasn't listening.

"Can I count on you guys to help me get some alone time with her?" Albus said, looking back and forth between them.

Morrison nodded, and Scorpius threw him an agitated glance. "You're being a co-enabler, you know that right?" he said.

Morrison looked highly offended. "What are you on about?"

Scorpius turned to Albus. "You know I think this is a bad idea" he said. " Whether you have a way into Hogsmeade or not, you shouldn't be there period."

"Hark who's talking about bad ideas" Albus said, waving his finger back and forth. "I went along with your plan, now you help me with mine! It's one day Scorpius!"

Scorpius made a noise half way between a whimper and a groan. "Don't take this the wrong way mate" he said, "But I hope Mirra says no."

Still, Albus took this as confirmation that he had the blessing of both of his friends, and thus, the next day during Care For Magical Creatures, he strode across the grass with a confident look on his face. Hagrid emerged from his cabin beaming, welcoming the class and waiting for more to arrive.

The Gryffindors came down in their usual cluster, Eckley leading the pack with a snarl on his face. Albus saw Mirra wave to him from afar; he gave her a casual wave back, then quickly stopped it when he realized he was being too clingy. *Play it cool, Al* he told himself.

"Summat' of a recap today" Hagrid told them once they were all gathered around. "Bringin' back some Salamanders, yeh might remember them from last year, I think we did a lesson on 'em. All fer exams of course..."

The class gave a collective groan, but Albus knew that there were a few sighs of relief mixed in. After all, with the amount of terrible things they'd endured during the last two years, Salamanders were far from the worst thing on a list of creatures to recap. Albus in particular was pleased that he didn't have Bowtruckles to worry about.

Hagrid made several return trips to his cabin, bringing back a few rattling crates each time. The class approached them nervously, then withdrew the bright orange lizards and prepared to take care of them.

"Jus' feedin' 'em" Hagrid said. "We'll work on groomin' 'em next lesson. Fer now les' just keep their stomachs full. I've got some nice berries from the forest that they seem to like quite a bit..."

Albus scooped up his Salamander in his arms- it was a good two feet long but not that heavy- and moved it over to a spot near the Forbidden Forest, away from where Hagrid was throwing out random facts. He nonchalantly tipped berries into the lizard's mouth, not really caring if it

was being overfed or not, and kept his eyes peeled for an opening with with Mirra. She and Rose had picked a spot on the grass with which to sit down and feed their Salamanders together.

Morrison and Scorpius had settled down on the grass too, only they didn't seem particularly interested in the task at hand. Morrison had abandoned his pile of berries and was wrestling around with his Salamander, laughing heartily as it licked at his face and tried to scuttle away. Scorpius had pulled out a book from his bag and was reading it, giving his Salamander a single berry every time that he turned the page.

Albus frowned; he needed them to create a distraction of sorts to have one-on-one time with Mirra. For fifteen minutes straight he contemplated what to do, becoming less and less interested in his project with each passing second.

"Salamanders," Hagrid was saying, " Are actually cold-blooded. Yeh wouldn' think it from the orange glow and such, but they like to keep awfully cool as well. Tend to hide under rocks 'n such when the sun beats down on 'em. Also, helps 'em lunge at prey. We feed 'em berries, but they're known for scooping up smaller lizards. Obviously though, their man diet consists of fire..."

"Can't these things burst into fire at any moment Professor?" Denise Toils asked.

"On'y if they feel provoked" Hagrid said darkly. "Which reminds me, don' provoke 'em!" he yelled as an after thought to the class as a whole.

Albus chucked a berry over at Scorpius and Morrison to grab their attention. They both looked over at him. He made a wild motion with his hand, indicating that he needed their help. Scorpius heaved a sigh, but Morrison actually did something.

"Oy Rose!" he said, hollering over to her. Both Rose and Mirra looked over. Morrison beckoned to her. "Can you help me feed this guy?" Morrison asked. "He keeps biting my fingers..."

Rose gave her own sigh and, telling Mirra that she'd be right back, strode over to him. Mirra stayed on the grass, petting her Salamander. Albus saw that Eckley, who wasn't too far away, had looked over to see if he had an opening. Albus refused to let that happen. He marched himself over to her at once.

"Hey" he said, standing right next to her and casting a glance over his shoulder to make sure that they weren't about to be interrupted. Eckley had turned on his heel, looking furious.

"Hey!" she said, smiling widely and standing up. "All done feeding your Salamander?"

"Oh yeah" Albus said. "He's full. I think he's about to nap so I figured I'd come over here and check on yours."

She looked over his shoulder. "He looks wide awake" she said, still smiling.

Albus turned and saw that his Salamander was running into the dense Forest, completely out of sight. Having no excuse for this, he merely turned back around. "Right so anyway..."

She giggled again, but Albus was much too concentrated on how to word his next sentence to focus on her laugh now. He scratched at the back of his head as he prepared himself. "But erm...anyway, while I have you here. Erm. Next Hog- in like two we- I wanted to- there's a Hogsmeade trip in two weeks and I wanted to know-"

"Yes" she cut him off, quickly and breathlessly.

"Huh?" he said, shocked.

She cupped her hands to her mouth. "Sorry" she said. "I mean- keep going-"

"No wait-did you-"

"Sorry, you were saying-"

"I was saying- erm- do you want to-to go with me? To Hogsmeade?"

She nodded vehemently. Albus felt an enormous swooping feeling in his stomach, a sensation that felt so good that he knew it couldn't be true. He'd have to double check.

"On like- on- on a date" he stammered out, making sure that his words were quite clear. "Just me and you...right?"

She gave another small laugh. "Yes Albus" she said, her tone suggesting that she was talking to a child. "A date. Just me and you."

Albus stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned his head away to so as to hide the gargantuan smile that was on his face. In a desperate attempt to look cool and confident, he gave a shrug. "Alright cool" he said, his voice deeper now. "So that's settled then."

He turned to walk away, but she stopped him.

"Wait!"

He spun around. "Hm?"

She narrowed her eyes at him slightly, and he saw that she didn't look quite as happy now. The smile slid off of his own face.

"Are you even allowed in Hogsmeade?" she asked.

"What?" he said, giving a nervous laugh. "What are you talking about? Of course I'm allowed in Hogsmeade!"



Mirra gave a slight frown. "I just remembered. I could have sworn that you weren't allowed."

"Who told you that?" he asked, his fists clenched in his pockets.

"Rose" Mirra admitted. "She heard it from Scorpius, I think."

Albus threw a glance over towards his blonde haired friend, trying to establish a timeline. When had he let this slip? Either way, Albus had to find a way around it now.

"Well I wasn't" he said. "But it was just a momentary scare really. I'm allowed now."

She continued to eye him dodgily. Albus thought that he saw a very knowing look on her face, and he wasn't too pleased with it.

"Look, you'll have your proof when I show up, won't you? If I'm not allowed to go to Hogsmeade, then I guess I just won't show, will I?" he said cheekily.

"I don't think it works like that" she said quietly, her hands on her hips in an uncannily Rose-like manner. "Because you see, me and you both know you have a *very useful* piece of cloth-

"You can have the Cloak" Albus cut her off, and she raised her eyebrows at him. "I'll let you hold onto it the day before the trip, just so you know I'm not sneaking in. I'm legitimately allowed okay?"

She gave him a weak smile. "I'll hold you to that" she said. "No Cloak."

"No Cloak" he said, holding his hands up and smiling.

"Okay" she said, smiling and returning to her Salamander. At that very moment Rose returned, looking flustered from having helped the very hopeless Morrison. Taking his cue to leave, he flashed Mirra one more smile before walking towards his friends.

"How'd it go?" Morrison asked once he had met them.

"It's a date" he said, raising his fist triumphantly.

Morrison gave him a weak thumbs up, but Scorpius didn't look too pleased. Either way, Albus felt excitement stir in the pit of his stomach. After class his two friends darted towards the Great Hall for Lunch, but Albus detoured, telling them both that he'd catch up with them later. Instead, he wormed his way up two floors and stayed put at the center of the third.

There it was. The statue of a Humpbacked Witch, in all of its glory. Albus looked side to side and saw that the hallway was clear. He wasn't going to risk it now of course, but it felt good to know that there were certainly moments when the hall was deserted. He rubbed his hand up against the statue as if for good luck, grinning to himself. His ticket to Hogsmeade. Things were

finally starting to look up. He had a date with Mirra in just two weeks. In two weeks, this entire fiasco of a year would all be erased, replaced with a single great day. Just two weeks...

Warren Waddlesworth leaned back in his chair, his tone expressionless. Swirling a full glass of wine around in his hand, he allowed himself to rest his eyes for a moment, if only to relax and calm his mind; to clear his thoughts. The sound of a knock at his door opened them.

"Enter" he said sharply.

A gruff looking man with silvery hair stepped into the neat little office, taking in the crimson carpets and extravagant paintings on the wall before clearing his throat to speak. He took a single glance over to his left however, where another man stood. Bald headed and fierce looking, The Hammer was leaning up against the wall looking disgruntled. One of his hands was flexing each finger individually, as if he were itching for a fight. The other was heavily bandaged and dangling loosely at his side.

"You have information, Lawson?" Waddlesworth said, eyeing the man up and down, his eyes finally resting on the silver emblem stitched onto the man's black robes.

"A message from Hornsbrook, sir" he said.

Waddlesworth placed his glass of wine down on his desk. "Out with it" he said, giving his hand a wave.

Lawson cleared his throat again, looking slightly nervous. The Hammer was leering at him.

"Ho-Hornsbrook says that he's learned that the Potter boy won't be in Hogsmeade. Apparently his son told him. They're in the same year."

Waddlesworth gave him a stony look, as if he'd been expecting bad news, but not quite this bad. He picked up his glass of wine and took a miniscule sip before speaking.

"I see" he said. "This is unfortunate."

Lawson glanced both ways before speaking. "Isn't-isn't this good? This means that Ares can't get the boy."

"But neither can we" Waddlesworth said. "If my information is correct Ares *will* attack Hogsmeade in search of the boy. This was our opportunity to dispose of the boy and blame it on the Dark Alliance, or Disciples of Change, whichever terrible name Ares has given his men. This leaves me few options. The boy must be taken care of before Ares gets what he wants from him."

"And- and we're still not sure what that is?" Lawson asked.

"No" Waddlesworth said simply. "And if things go according to plan, we'll never find out. Ares' attack will undoubtedly cause panic. Naturally, the public will turn to us for help- the Ministry is

all but useless at this point, especially now that they've gotten rid of Potter. It seems that our best course of action is to kill the boy before-or rather, the day of the attack. Give Ares nothing to gain in his assault, and the public will see him for the terrorist that he is."

"How- how do we execute this?" Lawson asked, and he seemed to be surprised that he was fully engaged in a conversation with his leader. The Hammer was giving him a stare that resembled something like jealousy.

"Thankfully, I prepared beforehand" Waddlesworth said, his mouth thinning. "Send a letter to Ida. She's the only one in the proper position. Tell her to kill the Potter boy."

Lawson opened his mouth as if to object, but it fell just short of words. Waddlesworth, seeing this, raised his eyebrows. He threw his red hair over his shoulders. "Is there a problem, Lawson?"

"No sir" he said quickly. "It's just- Ida- Ida might not take kindly to her assignment. She certainly wasn't fond of her last one."

"Ida Blackwood has proven her loyalty" Waddlesworth said. "Her last task was an...unfortunate one, but she understood it's importance. She will complete the next one, I can assure you. Send word as soon as you can."

Lawson nodded and turned on the spot. As he approached the door he turned to The Hammer.

"How's your hand?" he asked.

The Hammer gave him a menacing glare and made to speak, but Waddlesworth held up his hand.

"Zydrunas has lost his speaking privileges" he said icily. "He will answer you next week."

"Ah" Lawson said, and he pushed the door open.

"Remember Lawson" Waddlesworth said loudly, before his messenger was all the way out the door. "We have a specific time frame in which to complete this task. Make it very clear to Ida that the deed is to be completed the day of the Hogsmeade trip. If I'm not mistaken, that's about two weeks."

Ares soaked in the view of the village, his lips curling into something resembling a smile. Fango had told him that it was unwise to put himself in the open; that it was a foolish move to do anything that he didn't have to. But he was well concealed. He'd found a rather roomy cave in the mountainous area overlooking Hogsmeade, filled only with rat skeletons and old newspapers, the perfect place to survey the village from afar...

He still remembered his first day in the village. His first glimpse into the corruption that society had created- the corruption that the Ministry had allowed. There were very few things that he

agreed with his adopted parents on, but Hogsmeade was one of them. An unrealistic representation of the world indeed.

He gripped the Dragonfang Wand through his robes, knowing full well that it would soon get its first great test. The village below him was so unsuspecting...so calm. So unprepared. They would think him a tyrant, soon enough. They had no way of knowing the good that he was doing them all. He would be slandered and hated, even more so than he already was, but it would be necessary. Fate had not given him the task of being loved...it had given him the task of changing the world.

He glanced down at his wand. Time had seemed to slip by ever so slowly recently, but he knew that it would not be long now. Just two weeks. In two weeks...nothing would ever be the same again...

## Chapter 20: The Date

For some strange reason, Albus found that the general mood of the castle seemed to lighten over the next few days. Everyone was all smiles- there was so much to look forward to these days that it was hard to keep track over who was talking about what. One half of the school seemed bent on discussing only the upcoming Hogsmeade visit; as it was the last of the year, everyone had big plans for it. The other half seemed interested in the latest in a series of epic inter-house battles between Gryffindor and Slytherin. The Quidditch Final was scheduled for only ten days after the Hogsmeade trip.

Albus, who would be participating in both, truly couldn't decide which he was looking forward to more. He enjoyed the competitive nature of Quidditch, and it was now starting to show. James and Fred, who would be his opposition, had stopped waving to him in the halls and were instead given him friendly leers. His team, though they hadn't quite forgotten his behavior, was willing to practice under his leadership once more. These things combined to make the game that which he was certainly more *excited* for, but a great deal of his *anxiety* went more towards his upcoming date.

"What do you think I should wear?" he said eagerly for the fifth straight day at breakfast. His friends, catching on to his nerves, had jokingly give him a different answer every day.

"I still say you should go naked' Morrison said, taking a sip of orange juice. "It shows that you're not afraid of your masculinity."

"I'll think about" Albus said with a shifty grin. "Scorpius?"

"Pink shirt" he said slyly. "Maybe a flower pattern on it. Show your sensitive side and all."

Albus grinned at this too- though of course, neither of their answers were particularly funny. He was simply in one of his cheerful moods, a mood that had started from the day he'd successfully asked Mirra out and hadn't subsided yet.

Both of his friends went back to eating, but Albus continued to eye one of them with interest. Both of his friends had made no comment on the so called "danger" that he was putting himself in, but of the two of them, Scorpius had been much less enthusiastic about his plan. Morrison seemed to think that he was old enough to make his own decisions, but Scorpius always seemed to have something important to say- even if he never bothered saying it.

Albus wished that he could put more thought into this- he even considered approaching his friend privately, not to instigate, but to clear things up with him. But with so much else on his mind, good things for that matter, he knew that he shouldn't risk it. Besides, Scorpius was getting busier every day. Exams were on their way.

Early April marked the first instance of the boring, multiple choiced practice test that the students had learned to loathe for four years now. Whereas he knew that people like Rose and Mirra and Scorpius had gotten head starts on studying, he himself had neglected it a great deal. As usual however, he wasn't alone. Just a few days before the Hogsmeade trip, he found himself at one of the stone cut tables of the Slytherin Common Room, Morrison at his side.

"I love how professors are saying that these are the most important exams yet" Morrison said, a sarcastic smile on his face. "They've gotten 'more important' every year, haven't they? The first set must have been really trivial..."

"It's just to scare you" Albus said, jotting down notes from his History of Magic notebook. Scorpius had told him that writing things down was the best way to remember them, but Albus didn't see how this worked at all. He didn't understand half of what he was writing. "James told me after he got his O.W.L's that they were nothing like the tests we take now. He said that if anything, these exams are just practice- we could fail them if we wanted."

"Yeah, but that's kind of embarrassing" Morrison said, scratching at his chin with his quill. "I mean, not for me. But can you imagine Scorpius?"

They both laughed, but Albus gave a hasty look around to make sure that Scorpius was no where to be seen. Not that anything particularly bad had been said, but Albus knew that merely mentioning him and failing in the same paragraph could result in a complete meltdown.

"Speaking of Scorpius though," Morrison continued tactfully, keeping his eyes down at his paper, of which Albus now noticed was there so that Morrison could sloppily doodle what looked like someones initials. It was too incomprehensible for Albus to figure out however. "He erm..he mentioned to me that-"

"Let me guess" Albus cut him off, exasperated. "He still thinks it's a bad idea for me to go to Hogsmeade."

"Mhm" Morrison said, giving a slight shrug.

"Yeah I figured as much" Albus said. There was a brief moment of silence between them before he continued. "But I mean reall- I'm too deep in now to back ou-"

This time it was Morrison who silenced him, but he did so with a wave of his hand. "Look I'm not trying to get you to back out" he said. "I'm just saying...me and Scorpius...we both just..." but his already broken sentence trailed off there. Albus got the gist of it though.

"I'll be fine" he said. "Just trust me on this one. And I'm giving Mirra the Cloak tomorrow, so after that- there's really no going back."

And tomorrow couldn't come soon enough for him. Albus thought that even beyond the Hogsmeade visit, the best feeling in the world would be to be able to show himself to his two

friends afterwards, completely unmaimed and free of unjury- to show them that all of their worry about him had been nonsensical.

"Quick question" Scorpius said at breakfast the next day. "You're giving Mirra the Cloak, but what's she doing with it?"

Albus shrugged. "I dunno" he said. "Keeping it away from me so that she knows I'm not sneaking into Hogsmeade I guess. It's not for keeps!" he added hurriedly, mortified at the thought.

Morrison tapped at his chin with his spoon. "Do any teachers know about your Cloak?" he asked. "I mean, people may think that you're going to pull something like- like what you're doing. Might be keeping an eye on you."

"Well if they do it doesn't matter" Albus said, swirling around his cereal with his own spoon. Thankfully, a sudden distraction came in the form of the mail. Owls began swooping down over the table, with envelopes and parcels dropping next to every other person.

Scorpius held out his hand casually and caught the newspaper without even looking. Morrison pointed out something curious however.

"Blimey" he said in amazement. "That's a big bird!"

Several Slytherins looked where he had pointed, and indeed, many students from the other houses were looking up as well. In addition to the owls that had fluttered down, a large, beautiful bird had soared along with them. It's wing span was wide and it's beak curved; it was among the most exotic looking winged creatures that Albus had ever laid eyes on.

"What is that a toucan?" Morrison said loudly, and Scorpius placed his palm to his forehead.

"It's an albatross" he said knowingly. "Weird though. I've never heard of one delivering mail..."

The entire Hall had their eyes on the bird, watching it to see who it would drop it's letter to. The majestic bird soared right over the four house tables however, and instead began skimming along the high table. The bird came so close to Professor Bellinger that she tried batting it away with her hand- Hagrid had to restrain her. The Headmistress eyed it warily as well, and as it went passed each teacher, it became very apparent to Albus who it was for. The bird stopped right in front of Blackwood, dropping a letter into her outstretched hands and then leaving the Hall at top speed.

Blackwood looked both ways and then down at the four house tables, keeping the letter clutched in her hands and looking nervous. The students all eventually returned to their meals, thoroughly disinterested, and the teachers did so as well. Blackwood heaved what looked like a sigh of incredible relief before tearing the letter open.

"Who do you reckon it's from?" Morrison whispered.

"Fairhart used crows" Albus said suddenly. "Big bird like that, my guess is Waddlesworth."

"Bit stupid though" Scorpius said, taking a swig of pumpkin juice. "I mean, the professors know she's part of WAR probably, but still, why risk having mail read?"

"He must've needed it to get to her quick" Albus said. "If it couldn't wait for one of their little get togethers."

He continued to stare at her as her eyes slid across the letter. The second she was done reading it, she looked down at the four tables, or more specifically, *at him*.

He felt his entire body go cold. Blackwood's eyes were boring in to his, as if she knew that he had been staring up at her. He saw the corners of her mouth twitch as she continued to eye him, and he saw, even from a distance, sweat drip down her cheeks. She stowed the letter inside her robes and, without warning, stood and left.

"What's up?" Morrison asked him.

"Did you- did you see that?" Albus asked them both. "The way that she looked at me? After she read that letter?"

They both shrugged. "I didn't see anything mate" Morrison said. "You sure she wasn't just looking down at the table as a whole?"

"It's easy to get confused" Scorpius said, nodding. "We're so used to her giving us those disgusting looks. You may have just imagined it was directed at you..."

"Yeah maybe" Albus said, though he was still looking up at her empty seat. "Maybe..."

The morning slid by slowly afterwards however, Albus still curious as to what her look had meant. He thought that perhaps- and he didn't want to mention this to either of his friends- it had something to do with giving her Fairhart's ring. She had thus far made no mention of it since it had happened, nor given any sign of recognition that such a thing had occurred at all. Indeed, if Albus was not quite sure that the ring was gone, he'd have thought that he had imagined sliding it across her desk.

Even as these thoughts sifted in and out of his mind however, his main focus stayed on Mirra. And thus, after lunch, he met her exactly where they'd planned at a prior lesson, a roomy little corner on the fifth floor.

"Got it?" she said to him, casting several looks around.



"I got it, I got it," Albus said, diving into his bag for his contraband. "Now once I give it to you" he said, "Do you promise that you'll lay off the whole 'sneaking into Hogsmeade' thing? I mean, this is proof, right?"

"Absolutely" Mirra said, smiling.

Albus too looked over his shoulder before quickly pulling out the bundle of light robes and forcing it into her hands. She quickly stuffed the Invisibility Cloak into her own bag.

"You'll get this back" she said, "After Hogsmeade."

"Deal" he said, smiling himself and turning on the spot so as not to look too suspicious.

The interminable wait for Hogsmeade passed by even slower following his meeting with Mirra, and Albus thought for sure that he'd burst before it finally came. On the morning of it's arrival however, he wished that he'd had much more time.

"Too plain? Not plain enough?" he said, doing a slow, extremely girly spin in front of his friends to show them every angle of his shirt.

"Mate I'm not going to lie I feel *really* uncomfortable right now" Morrison said seriously from his armchair.

Albus groaned. "C'mon. Help me out here guys!"

"It looks fine" Scorpius said. "Stop stressing. And fix your hair" he added.

Albus gently touched the tip of his head. "What do you mean fix it?" he said hotly. "I spent an hour combing it!"

"Exactly" Morrison said, reaching forward and knocking his hair out of place, so that it was messy once more.

"Hey! That takes forever to tidy up!" he said nervously, desperately running his hands through it once more. "I put a lot of effort in to that!"

"You're thinking of it in the wrong way" Morrison said. "It's supposed to be untidy. You're supposed to look like you just suddenly remembered you had a date, and quickly pulled a shirt over yourself."

Albus sighed. "She knows how much of a big deal this is" he said, flattening his shirt now.

"But you can't let her *know that you know that she knows!*" Morrison hissed.

Albus threw his arms up and turned away from his friends. Unlike last Hogsmeade trip, he was going all out. He had picked his best shirt today, made quite sure that his pants looked loose

fitting but still stayed up, and had spent a great deal of time trying to straighten the infamous Potter hair as well. His looks were among the least of his problems however.

"What are we supposed to talk about?" he stammered out as they walked through the dungeons. "I mean, go on. Give me a list of possible conversations!" he demanded.

"Talk about anything!" Scorpius said, waving his hands through the air dismissively. "Honestly, you've already snogged her. You know she likes you. The hard part's over. Just be yourself."

"Well slow down a bit" Morrison said. "Don't be completely yourself, 'cause you're kind of a prat sometimes..."

"Yeah" Scorpius agreed. "Be half yourself, and half someone who, you know...isn't a prat..."

Albus waited until they'd reached the Slytherin table to comment on this. "Okay so, don't let her know it's a big deal, and be sort of myself?" he asked them both, ticking the advice off of his fingers. "That's only two. There's got to be a third thing or something."

"Location" Scorpius said. "Where are you meeting her?"

"Three Broomsticks" Albus said confidently, but both of his friends made loud antagonistic noises. "What? What's wrong?"

"That's so basic!" Scorpius said. "Take her to Madam Puddifoot's or something."

"Madam Who's?"

"Do you even have a game plan?" Morrison asked him.

Albus stared down into his bowl of untouched porridge. "Not really" he admitted.

They both shook their heads. "Not at all?" Scorpius said. "I mean, even I had a plan with Rose..."

"This is *kind of* a different situation" Albus said. "Seeing as how I'm not trying to hoodwink or sabatoge..."

The rest of breakfast was spent going over tips and ideas, with Albus twice rising from his seat to change his shirt, only to be pulled back down by Morrison. He did not know why he suddenly felt so nervous. Like Scorpius had said...the hard part was over...

They rose from their seats at the same time as everyone else, with Neville giving his familiar call for people with permission slips. Albus noticed that he received a rather furtive glance from his Herbology professor as this occurred, and suddenly realized that more people may be keeping an eye on him than he had originally thought. Either way, he still muttered about his plans to Scorpius and Morrison as they lined up.

"Where are you guys going to be?" he asked.

"No idea" Morrison replied. "Haven't really thought of it."

"I'll probably be stopping by the Stationary Shop first thing" Scorpius said. "Running low on ink and all. Don't you worry! We'll steer clear of you..."

"It's not like that" Albus said with a frown, but then he noticed that Neville was still eyeing him. "But I got to go! Talk to you guys later..."

"Yeah see you..."

"Good luck" Morrison whispered.

Albus flashed them both a thumbs up before turning away from the Great Hall, trying to look disappointed at his inability to visit the village as he did so. Once he was gone from the prying eyes of his professors however, he practically skipped to the third floor.

Just as he had been hoping, it was quite clear. Everyone was walking to Hogsmeade, after all. He leered at the statue of the Hump Backed Witch, slightly shocked at the nerve of what he was doing, but enjoying the risk all the same. He thought of the stories that Hagrid had told him, of all the rules that his father had broken when at Hogwarts. Well, Albus may be topping him here. Not everyone was so bold as to use a secret passageway to get to Hogsmeade.

He removed his wand from his robes and tapped the statue. "*Dissendium*" he muttered enthusiastically, tasting the excitement on his own breath. At once the statue slid open, revealing the dark and narrow passageway that he had seen before. He was right about to step through when-

"Al?"

He spun around so quickly that he almost tripped. For a moment he had no idea who had said his name, before he looked down. It was Hugo.

"Hugo!" he shouted, with much more force than necessary. "What are you- wh- why aren't you on your way to Hogsmeade?" he demanded.

Hugo looked quite taken aback. "I'm only in second year" he responded obviously. "I figured maybe we could hang out, since I know that you're not allo- what is that?" he cut himself off, distracted by the pitch black passageway that Albus was desperately trying to conceal.

"What's what?" Albus asked nonchalantly, scratching at the back of his head.

"That" Hugo said, pointing upwards and behind him. "That right there."

Albus spun around. "Oh- oh *that*. That is - you've got to promise you'll keep it a secret though- that is a secret...bathroom" he finished rather anti-climatically, trying his best to concentrate as his plans crashed around him.

Hugo merely stared at him, not impressed by his lie. "So then I can go in there?" he said, and there was something to his tone- perhaps it was the sarcasm- that unnerved him slightly.

"No" Albus said shortly. "Because- because- there's a ghost in there" he finished weakly.

"Albus there's a ghost in every room in this castle" Hugo said, his own tone short now. "Is that a secret passageway to Hogsmeade?" he blurted out.

Albus felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. Why, oh why did he have to be Rose's younger brother? And why did he have to follow him? He remembered what Rose had said...That Hugo looks up to him...

Albus started to sweat. That certainly was true. He gave his younger cousin a shifty grin, not knowing if what he was about to do was wrong, but knowing that he had to act quick. He threw his arm around Hugo.

"You've got me there" he said cheekily. He then lowered his voice. "Look...I am sneaking in to Hogsmeade" he said, and Hugo looked mortified.

"*You're not allowed!*" he hissed. "James said that-"

"I know I'm not allowed" Albus said calmly, his arm still around him. "But I won't be long at all. I'm- look, you know I like Mirra, right?"

"I heard" Hugo said plainly.

"Well I have plans with her" Albus said. "And this- this might be my only shot with her. I mean, you don't want things to get messed up for me do you?"

"I guess- I guess not" Hugo said, looking down at the ground.

"I won't be gone long" Albus told him. "But you're not- you're not going to rat me out right?" he said, making it quite clear in his words that doing so would be of the utmost betrayal.

"I-I-" Hugo started to stammer out, but at the look on Albus' face, his excuses faltered. "No" he finally said.

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. He ruffled Hugo's hair affectionately. "I'll be back in a bit" he said. "Maybe tomorrow I can take you flying on that broom of yours" he added, feeling slightly guilty now.

Hugo gave him a watery, wry smile before walking away. Albus wiped beads of sweat from his forehead and, without taking another look down the hall, began the walk through the dark passage.

The entrance slid closed behind him, throwing him into complete darkness. He suddenly wished that he had used the passageway at least once before promising that it would work. How was he supposed to know if there wasn't a dead end of sorts? Perhaps only Blackwood could access the exit?

He lit the tip of his wand, giving himself just enough light to make sure that he wasn't tripping over his own feet. The passageway was ominous even with the pierced darkness, and it all looked the same- he was quite glad that there were no recognizable twists or turns with which to confuse him. He wasn't sure how long he walked for before his legs started to grow tired however. Soon enough, he was seriously contemplating turning around.

The thought of his date kept him alive however. Meticulous planning, for almost four years it seemed, had gone into this walk. Besides, he'd been in worse places. At the very least, he could say that there was no deadly mist in it.

He trekked through the stone passageway with his head hung low, careful not to over exert himself. Just a bit further, he was sure of it. He kept his wand held high, the beams of light revealing more and more ground for him to cover...

He reached an end. What looked like stone cut stairs were there, spiraling upwards. Albus felt his cheeks go red with excitement. He walked up them and muttered the incantation to turn his wand off. Once again concealed in darkness, he pushed at the would be ceiling and found that it was a trapdoor of sorts.

He opened the trapdoor just enough to give himself a glimpse of where he could be. Before seeing anything however, he knew that it was Honeydukes. The second he'd slid the trapdoor open a most delectable scent had wafted into his nostrils; the smell of scrumptious chocolates and various other sweets, all of them mouth watering on their own, but absolutely incredible when put together. He sniffed heartily and examined the room. It appeared to be a storage cellar of sorts, with boxes stacked up in the corners, each of them secure and labeled. He saw a pair of rickety stairs in the corner of the room, and felt his heart drop when he saw feet moving down them. He hastily lowered himself further so that he could only hear through a crack.

"Ray, sort the Bertie Botts Beans by color" someone was saying in an annoyed, mock squeaky voice. "Ray, make sure these Blood Pops taste like real blood. Make sure these Acid Pops don't taste like real acid!"

"Ray!" a gruff voice yelled from upstairs. "Get the chocolate and get up here! We have customers!"

Ray heaved a tremendous sigh and picked up a box nearest him. "Coming Mr. Flume!" he yelled in his voice normal. As he marched up the stairs it returned to its squeaky, agitated form however. "Ray, jam these swords into your skull, I could use a laugh..."

Albus waited until the Honeydukes employee was all the way up the stairs before dashing out from the trapdoor. He wished that he had brought his Cloak, but knew that giving it to Mirra was necessary for authenticity. He silently crept his way up the rickety stairs, surprised how little noise they were making- he was getting rather good at sneaking around.

Ray, who he now saw was a rather weedy looking young man, had his back turned to him and was facing a counter bridged the outside and inside of the shop. Albus saw him depositing coins into a magical cash register that opened automatically- and occasionally putting a sickle or two in his pocket as well. He stalked right by him, careful not to make too much movement, and then, just as he was turning around, leapt the other way over the counter and into the busy streets of Hogsmeade.

He gave a laugh of relief as Ray spun around and saw him on the other end of the counter. "Can I help you?" he said dryly.

"No thanks" Albus said, smiling, before walking down the crowded streets feeling ecstatic.

He could not believe it. Could not believe that right now, he was walking through Hogsmeade, on his way to have a date with Mirra. All thoughts of Hugo, or Renegades, or anything in between left his head as he strutted down the street happily.

He kept an eye out for his professors however- he knew that they were prone to chaperoning students from afar during Hogsmeade visits. It had, after all, been their duty for quite some time. And yet, Albus saw no glimpse of a single recognizable adult, not even Hagrid, who would certainly stick out. And as everyone was quite sure that he was stuck in the castle, Teddy would have no reason to go spying either...

He jogged through the sunny streets, taking in the beautiful weather and making quite sure that he was receiving no evil stares. The pedestrians and shopkeepers did not seem quite as frightened by his appearance now- they merely either ignored him or called out to him to check if he was a potential customer or not. Albus was enjoying the atmosphere of the village so much that he had half a mind to simply walk on his own for a bit, but the temptation to go and see Mirra was too much. He began walking towards The Three Broomsticks.

He walked passed several familiar faces, all of them students who didn't seem surprised in the slightest by his being there. Only once did he run into a small snag- James had emerged from a corner, nearly bumping into him. He was so distracted by the giggling girlfriend that he was pulling by the hand however that he didn't notice, and apart from that, the journey to the cozy pub was incredibly easy.

He saw her waiting at the entrance to The Three Broomsticks looking- there was no other word for it- beautiful. She was wearing a very pleasant white dress that clashed terrifically with her dark hair, and her pale skin seemed to sparkle just as much in the intense sunlight as it had underneath the moon. She gave him an enthusiastic wave as he neared, one which he returned. He stopped mid-hand motion however when he noticed that she was waiting with someone. Hornsbrook.

Albus neared them, slightly confused but appreciative all the same as she gave him a hug. He hugged her back, distracted by Hornsbrook's appearance.

"What's he doing here?" Hornsbrook snapped.

Albus nearly jumped back. His feud was with Eckley, not his sidekick...

"Donny!" Mirra hissed. "I told you I was meeting someone" she said.

"He's not supposed to be here" Hornsbrook said quickly.

"Nice to see you too pal" Albus said sarcastically, wondering what in the world was going on. Mirra was right about to say something when Hornsbrook hurried off.

"What was that all about?" Albus asked.

"He offered to wait with me" Mirra said. "Charlie and Rose are at Dervish & Bangs, he probably went to go meet them. I don't know what got into him though..."

Albus shrugged. "Well anyway," he said, smiling brightly. "Shall we begin our date?" he said in a crude impression of a fancy voice, outstretching his arm as if welcoming her into a carriage.

"Yes we shall" she said, fanning herself off with her pocketbook.

They began walking down the street together, Albus never more excited in his life. "Where to first?" he asked, his voice returning to normal.

"Wherever you want to go" she said, smiling.

"Well you know I saw this nice looking ice cream stand when I was walking..."

Even with Hugo's brief appearance, and the easiness of sneaking into Hogsmeade, and the sudden callousness of Hornsbrook, Albus thought that the biggest surprise of the day was undoubtedly how easy it was to talk to Mirra. He had been so nervous at the idea of being on a date with her that he had nearly forgotten that they were good friends. The pressure seemed to leave him with each simple sentence that slipped from his mouth- never once did he feel uncomfortable around her.

Their conversations ranged from classes to favorite foods and animals to even Quidditch, which Albus felt especially comfortable with as they neared the ice cream stand.

"It's not that I don't know how to play the game" Mirra said. "It's that I don't understand the big deal about it. I mean, it's pretty much all about which Seeker is better anyway..."

"That's not true!" Albus said. "You're just saying that because you see me dominate so frequently!"

She laughed. "No I'm serious! No game is ever one hundred and fifty points out of reach..."

"That's not the point" Albus said, shaking his head. "Everyone contributes. If your chasers are dominating, than your opposing Seeker doesn't even want to catch the Snitch. And even he did, good Beaters would prevent it. It's very well balanced. Not my fault I catch the Snitch before you get to see anything else."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that happening next game" Mirra said, smiling broadly. "James seems out for revenge after last year."

Albus shrugged as he paid for their ice cream.

"Four sickles" the old, grumpy man behind the makeshift stand said, handing over cones.

Mirra reached into her pocketbook, but Albus was much quicker. His Quidditch reflexes paid off as he handed over the money.

"No way!" Mirra said defiantly. "You're not paying for my ice cream!"

"Oh yes I am" he said as the grumpy man held the coins loosely, unsure if a purchase was made or not.

"No you're not!"

"Yes I am!"

"No!"

"Please?" he said, his tone earnest. She heaved a sigh and threw her arms up.

"Fine" she said, though he saw the shadow of her smile as the man greedily pocketed the silver.

All in all, the playful ice cream argument proved worth it as their next conversation turned to their favorite ice cream flavors- Albus stubbornly refusing to accept her answer.

"There's nothing wrong with plain vanilla" she said, licking her all white cone smugly.

"Other than the fact that it's, you know, plain..." Albus rebutted smoothly.



"Sorry that I like to enjoy my food *and* take care of my teeth" she said as she eyed his cone- which was filled with various candies and nuts to accompany the chocolate in it.

"Is that a shot at my teeth?" Albus said, holding his hand up to his heart as if he had indeed been shot.

"It certainly wasn't a compliment..." she said, giggling.

Only when the ice cream was finished however did Albus realize how extremely lonely his hands were. His fingers stretched back and forth, waiting to cling to something. Mirra was in the middle of a sentence when he swiftly scooped up her hand in his own, praying that hers stayed...

Their fingers intertwined perfectly, and they were officially holding hands as they walked. She briefly broke her sentence to smile before returning to it, not mentioning, but certainly acknowledging what had just happened.

"To the Shrieking Shack then?" she said.

"Wherever you want to go" Albus said, trying to think of a better day in his life but failing on all accounts. They took a sharp turn at the next corner and began the walk down the dirty streets that led to the fenced off area where the most haunted house in all of Britain sat. There was a few seconds of silence before Mirra said something most un-date like.

"You know I'm surprised you showed up" she said after a moment.

Albus raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "Why's that?" he asked.

She shrugged, and Albus noticed that her grip around his hand was stronger now. "I could have sworn that you weren't allowed in Hogsmeade" she said. "I thought- I thought for sure that you were going to get caught trying to sneak in without your Cloak or something."

They continued walking. "Well I'm here aren't I?" he said. "Where is the Cloak by the way?"

She patted her bag with her other hand. "Just in case you need a quick escape" she said, smiling. "In case you *did* sneak in."

They stopped walking once they reached the fenced off area. The Shack, a considerable distance away, was far from a romantic piece of scenery, but there was something chillily about it- even in the warm weather- that gave him a foreboding feeling that he couldn't quite explain. Perhaps it was just the serious nature of the conversation.

He turned to her. "I'm not going anywhere" he said. "Even if I did sneak in...it wouldn't matter. It was worth it."

She gave him a large grin and moved closer to him. For some inexplicable reason, they were the only two people outside of the Shack. All alone. She looked up at him, and only now, with them both standing, did he realize that he'd gotten taller over the course of the year.

"We haven't kissed since the lake" she said quietly, and Albus felt his palms go sweaty. What had James told him, years ago, about girls who took the initiative? Was it not two things? That they were always trouble, and always worth it? "And I've wanted to kiss you again for a while" she added.

"Me too" he said, moving closer himself .

"How do you suppose we solve this dilemma?" she said giddily, still looking up at him with her cool grey eyes.

"I guess we could...hug?" he said, smiling.

She laughed, but wrapped her arms around his neck. He tilted her chin up, knowing full well that this was it. Their last kiss had been their first and only kiss as friends. This one, this was the kind of kiss that relationships were made of. Her lips were centimeters from his-

Someone screamed loudly. A high pitched, terrified shriek that Albus was sure could have only come from the Shack, though his sense of direction told him otherwise. Mirra broke apart from him and looked around.

"What was that?" she asked.

"I dunno" Albus said, not caring in the slightest. He tilted her chin up to give it another go-

Another scream, this one even louder. This was followed by manly yells, all coming from down the street, towards all the shops and civilians. And then, quite suddenly, there was a loud bang that echoed through the air.

"What's going on?" Mirra shouted, but just as she said it Albus saw something. A body was being levitated in the air upside down, high above the shops, the body of a young man spinning like a top uncontrollably. There were more screams of terror, and suddenly, people were running towards them, men and women and children all running for their lives-

"Death Eaters!" a man yelled. "Death Eaters in Hogsmeade!"

"What's a Death-" Mirra started to ask him, but there were more loud yells and more banging noises, and suddenly, flashes of light as well...

Albus knew that he had heard the term before, but he didn't have time to think of its relevance- he only knew one thing; they were in danger. No sooner had he thought it did he see the actual source of commotion. The stampede of people, which was now quite close to them, was being

ushered by several figures in dark cloaks, all of them marching, cackling and pointing their wands into the sky as more people joined the spinning man in the air...

"Put the Cloak on!" Albus shouted, spinning around on the spot.

"Albus-" she started, and their hands slid apart. She looked completely panic stricken.

"Put it on!" he barked.

She reached into her bag, and the next thing Albus knew she was completely gone- he only knew of her presence because he could feel her breath next to his.

"Take my hand' he said, and she did so at once. "Don't let go" he added, and he began marching towards the crowd of people.

"Albus you're going into it!"

"They're backing everyone into a corner!" he said. "We have to fight through now!"

She kept her grip around his hand as they fought through the waves of people. The cloaked figures, Albus now saw, were nearly identical to the ones from the Department of Mysteries the previous year. Only now, they were wearing the strangest red masks to conceal their identities.

"Keep holding on" Albus said as he reached the last row of people. He pulled her aside and into an alleyway. The hooded figures went right passed him, too preoccupied by the carnage they were creating to notice him. He left the alley as soon as they had merged with the crowd, and suddenly the flashes of light were more prominent; people were collapsing left and right. Albus only saw red however- no green.

"Albus we need to find Rose and Cha-"

"We need to find Morrison and Sc-"

They both stopped mid-sentence. Mirra pulled the Cloak off of her, and Albus saw that her hair was now ruffled, her eyes wide with terror. Albus tensed up; they both had different obligations to different friends. Albus in particular felt guilty, as Rose was his cousin, but she was much more powerful magically than someone like Morrison, who would need all the help he could get.

"I'm sorry" Mirra said. "Find your friends" she said. " And we'll- we'll go back to the castle."

"Stay with me" Albus said briskly, and even as he said it he heard more screams and shouts of violence from the direction that they were now going. They continued walking until they reached a street that could go two ways.

"I can't" she said, and she handed over the Cloak. "I need to find-"

"Keep the Cloak" Albus cut her off. "Find Rose. Find Eck-Char- find Eckley and his stupid friend and get all of them out of here!"

"You need the Cloak!" she said, pushing it into his arms, but he thrust it right back.

"Take it!"

"Albus they're after you!" she said, and he froze on the spot. Was that true? It was Renegades that were supposed to be after him, right? Not Ares' men. What were they even doing here? *Were* they here for him?

"It doesn't- even if they are-" he stammered. "Take the Cloak, you need it!"

"Albus-"

"TAKE THE CLOAK!" he yelled as a shop just a street away exploded. He turned and saw two masked wizards cackling as an elderly man ran out of the building, the smoke rising into the air now filled with people spinning rapidly.

She took it and threw it over her. Before she could say anything however their hands slid apart, and this time, in all the disarray, he had no idea where she was. People were running through the streets screaming in fear, bumping into him now and nearly knocking him over. The most that he could do was hope that Mirra was safe, that she was concealed, that she'd be able to get Rose and get out...

Within seconds he understood the situation. The entire village, it seemed, was under attack. But where were the teachers? Were was Hagrid and Neville and Bellinger? What of Flitwick and Handit? No one was fighting back...

He raised his wand high and aimed it at the nearest masked wizard. "*Stupefy!*" he cried, and the wizard crumbled to the ground at once. He ran straight by him and through waves of more people running frantically, encountering two more enemies as he did so. He raised his wand and prepared foolishly attempt to take them both on-

Two blue spells emerged from within the crowd, and both masked figures fell over in pain. Albus looked around wildly as the people continued to panic, looking around as well to see where these spells had come from. He was answered almost instantaneously. A third masked figure had grabbed him and thrown him to the ground.

He raised his wand to fight back, unsure of what was going on, but the man seized him once more and tossed him into an alleyway. He collided with a trash can and felt a sickening pain in his back. He raised his wand once more as the masked figure approached him slowly.

"*Stu-*"

The wizard ripped off his red mask, and Albus gasped.

"/"

"Quiet!" Lucius Malfoy hissed, bending down and pushing him further into the shadows. He looked even older than when Albus had last seen him. His hair, formerly white with streaks of yellow, was now gray with streaks of white. His skin was sallow and gaunt and his eyes droopy- he reminded Albus very strongly of his own father. His hair loosely dangled down as he rounded on him.

"Where is Scorpius!" Malfoy snapped.

"I don't- I'm trying to find him now. What are you doing here!"

"There isn't enough time" Malfoy said, his voice raspy. He looked over his shoulder at the chaos on the streets. "Find Scorpius."

"I'm trying!" Albus said. "I'm trying to find him and Morrison-"

Albus felt Malfoy smack him across the face ridiculously hard.

"No!" he hissed coldly. "I don't care about your other friends! Find my grandson and get him out of here! That is your first priority! You both must leave!"

"What's going on!" Albus said, feeling his numb cheek with his hand.

"Ares is in the village" he said, and Albus felt his insides go cold. "Or more accurately, on the outskirts. He's allowing us to run amok."

"Us?"

"You must pay attention!" Malfoy barked. "He has placed extremely strong enchantments around the village. The Ministry can not penetrate in."

"Where are the teachers?" Albus asked frantically as he heard another small explosion. He felt the ground rumble and knew that it was close by.

"The castle" he said. "All of them. They believed that Ares was going to attack Hogwarts."

"What? Why?"

Malfoy sighed. "Because of an extremely poor tip off! Now you must flee! Ares wants you dead! Help is not coming!"

Albus swallowed. Mirra had been right in her guess. Ares wanted him...dead. But why?

"W-w-why?" but he received another hard smack.

"There isn't time!" Malfoy said. "Don't you understand! Now is not the time for answers! You must leave at once! But first you must find my grandson..." he said this last word with a sad tone that didn't match his harsh hands. Albus understood everything at once. Lucius Malfoy was a spy- he was the spy his father had mentioned months ago. But right now he wasn't thinking like a spy, or like a wizard even. He was thinking like a grandfather.

"O-okay" Albus said, pulling himself up. "I need- I need to find him. But I'll need help fighting through-"

Malfoy brandished his wand, and Albus flinched. At the next moment however, he felt the most curious sensation. It was as though an egg was being cracked over his head...

He looked down at his feet and saw that they were gone. Sort of. He could scarcely see himself. He was blending in with the ground as well as the wall next to him.

"This is a Disillusionment Charm" Malfoy said. "So long as you keep moving, it will be very hard to see you. I don't know how long the charm will last. You must go. Now!"

Albus nodded and bolted by him. No sooner had he done so did he nearly run into another masked figure. He skidded to a halt, and the masked figure hollered right through him.

"Who are you talking to Lucius?" he demanded.

"No one" Malfoy said, pulling his mask back on. "I was- was knocked aside. Slightly disoriented" he lied, fixing his mask onto his face securely.

"Well get that thing on tight!" the man wheezed. "Sebastian put a lot of effort into making these things!" he cackled. "And hurry up and join the fun. The boss says we only have another hour before he unleashes those things..."

Albus sped passed them, but he felt his stomach burn with a terrible curiosity. What things? He had no time to ponder however, he was now literally leaping over shaking bodies on the ground as he ran street through street, people dropping left and right. The sun was completely down now, but so many things had been set ablaze that there was plenty of light. It was ten times worse than the riot in Diagon Alley.

Albus came to a sudden halt, letting himself think as a masked figure literally ran by him. His top priority was his friends and family. James he thought would be okay...James could take care of himself and was most likely surrounded by friends. He had to find Morrison and Scorpius and help them get out of here. But Mirra was still on his thoughts to. What if the Cloak slipped off? What if she was trampled? Would she be okay? Would she be able to find Rose?

He needed this battle to stop. His friends had little chance of survival if they were on their own. The Ministry was blocked off and the teachers oblivious. But there were still people who could fight. People right here in Hogsmeade. There was WAR.

He felt indecision crawl in his stomach. Wands and Redemption undoubtedly knew what was going on, but Albus was currently in the heart of the battle. He could alert them, point them in the right direction, and that would perhaps clear the streets for his friends. It was risky, yes, but necessary. Price on his head or not, WAR was the only help he was going to get.

He turned around and sped back through the streets, only stopping to help a third year boy up from the ground. The boy looked around, baffled at his invisible helper, before running away. Albus tried remembering the way to WAR's headquarters. The Hammer had taken him there so long ago. It was in a section of Hogsmeade known as the Hogspenn, was it not? A dirty and dingy section? But everything was dirty now. Everything was destroyed.

He side stepped a hooded figure that was blasting holes into the walls of a shop and nearly tripped over another body- this one, he was pleased to see, was a masked wizard as well. He saw two wizards spinning a woman in mid-air right next to where the ice cream parlor had been. She was screaming and crying as they twisted her around effortlessly. Albus took aim with his wand, anger bubbling up inside of him.

*"Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus!"*

Two identical beams of red light emerged from the tip of his wand, both of them so strong that the two wizards were knocked to the ground, definitely unconscious. The girl began to fall through the air, and Albus, thinking fast, aimed his wand upwards.

*"Wingardium Leviosa!"*

Concentrating with all of his might, he successfully levitated her down to the ground. Once her feet had touched the floor she looked around in surprise, she too trying to find who had helped her, but even if he hadn't been all but invisible it would have been impossible. He was already speeding down the next street.

He took several sharp turns on oddly shaped streets, trying to find something that he could use to recognize his way. With each passing second however he grew more desperate, knowing that he would never find it. His friends were all in danger, and he was doing nothing, nothing at all, just standing there, unsure of where to go or what to do...

He felt his body tense up. Suddenly he felt weak- yet powerful. It was as though his limbs were collapsing, but his insides were brimming with power. The next thing he knew he was on all fours.

*Not now* he told himself, but even as he said so he felt his eyes begin to sting. He felt a strange buzzing noise fill his ears. Suddenly, everything that he could see was golden, though he was having trouble understanding where he was, or having any cognizant thought for that matter...

*Not now* he said again. He needed to get back up, there wasn't time for this. But he could feel his eyes burning now, could feel power flooding through his fingertips...

And then, out of nowhere, there was a most curious sensation. It was as though he was being stuffed into a small glass cube. Everything around him went black, and suddenly he couldn't breathe- now he was dying-

He took a breath of fresh air. His eyes were no longer stinging. Everything about him felt fine, except that he felt wobbly as he rose to his feet. He was still in Hogsmeade. Still surrounded by destruction and screaming. But he was somewhere else. He looked up and saw a raggedy looking shop. An old Quality Quidditch Supplies store. The headquarters of WAR.

He blinked furiously, wondering how he had gotten sensation that he'd felt was not entirely new. He'd felt it before. It was strangely familiar to when he had apparated alongside his father. But he could not have possibly apparated. He didn't even know how! And besides, hadn't Ares placed anti-apparition jinxes around the village? No one could possibly break through them, especially not someone who didn't even know how to apparate...

But there was no time to question what had happened. Perhaps he had lost control of himself and merely stumbled his way through the streets. Either way, he was here now. Where he wanted- no, *needed* to be. He had to alert WAR. He pushed the door open, expecting to see them all prepared to fight, their wands out-

He was half right. The comfortable and cozy sitting room looked more full than last time, with at least fifty wizards and witches in black robes crowded around in a circle. They did not look eager to fight however. They were merely staring at the center of the room, where Warren Waddlesworth stood, he himself dressed in black robes, his hands moving demonstratively.

Albus checked his hands to see if he was still camouflaged, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized he was. The door closed behind him, but no one noticed his arrival. Waddlesworth was speaking.

"Do you hear it?" he announced, and Albus could see The Hammer standing by his side, leering at them all, his hand bandaged. "Do you hear the chaos? Where is the Ministry? Where are the Aurors?" he asked sarcastically.

Albus realized that he had entered during one of Waddlesworth's ostensibly inspirational speeches. He began to breathe heavy, unsure of what to do.

"Ares walks these streets, just as I knew he would. He plans to destroy this world, and Hogsmeade is his message. They are dying! Your friends and family! Dying! On those streets? Why? Because Ares does not fear us. The Ministry has cowered away, and allowed him to take a free reign. But we will not. Ares does not fear us now, but he will. Fear is respect. He will respect our power, our unity! That is what we seek! That is what we *crave!* That which can not



be bottled and sold, or stolen or bargained for! We demand *respect*! And tonight, we show him why!"

They all cheered, but Waddlesworth continued, silencing them at once.

"We are what is left! We are the defence! Your government has abandoned these people! And these people- these civilians- they persecuted you. When you chose the way of the Renegade, they mocked and slandered you! Called you vigilantes, said that you only sought blood! But today, they will know that you are heroes! Let no one forget this day, when the Wizarding World stood on the brink of defeat after a single battle. When Wands and Redemption emerged from the darkness as a beacon of light! On this night, you redeem yourself for every battle that you never fought! This world is still being rebuilt! We will *not allow* it to crumble once more!"

They cheered even more, all of them raising their wands as if the battle was already over. At the mere sound of his voice they had seemed more enthusiastic about fighting, but from his words they now seemed to be itching for battle. Even amidst their cries of glee and excitement however, Albus heard another voice.

"Dad, I just want to go home-" someone whined from outside the door.

"Not yet Donny!"

Albus stepped away from the entrance just as the door burst open. First in was a tough, familiar looking man. Albus recognized him as a member of WAR at once, both from his black robes with the silver emblem on them and from having seen him months ago. Next to him was a very distraught looking Donovan Hornsbrook.

The room filled with silence as both of them stepped forward. Albus pressed himself up against the wall of the crowded room. Though he was still not visible, he could not risk being touched.

"What's going on, Hornsbrook?" Waddlesworth said, stepping forward out of the crowd.

"Tell him, Donny" Mr. Hornsbrook said gruffly. "Tell him what you told me!"

Albus watched as Waddlesworth leered at his classmate. Hornsbrook looked terrified- a far cry from the cool and unconcerned companion of Charles Eckley.

"Dad I don't-"

"Tell him what you told me! About the Potter boy!"

There was muttering throughout the crowd, but The Hammer stepped forward, silencing them all.

"What about him?" Waddlesworth said icily, and Albus felt his heart speed up.

"Dad I don't want anyone to get hurt-"

"Tell Mr. Waddlesworth!"

Hornsbrook swallowed. "Al- Al- Potter is in Hogsmeade" he stammered out to Waddlesworth, whose eyes widened in surprise. He looked at Hornsbrook's father.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him" his son said.

Waddlesworth turned back to his soldiers. "Ida has failed in her mission to kill the Potter boy" he said, and at this Albus almost felt his heart explode. "And for some reason, despite previous information, the boy is here in Hogsmeade. Rest assured, Ares is here to kill him."

There was muttering throughout the group, but Waddlesworth silenced them by raising his hand. "There is a solution" he said crisply. "For whatever reason Ares wants the boy dead, we know that he wants to be the one to do it. This side," he said, raising his right hand towards a group of Renegades that included The Hammer, "Fight Ares' men. This side," he said, raising his left hand, "Seek out the Potter boy. Be careful not to confuse him with his older brother, I've heard that they look similar."

One of the Renegades from the left side stepped forward. "Where will you be sir? To bring him to you?"

"The boy means nothing to me, I don't require him" Waddlesworth said icily, and Albus slid down the wall in terror. "Ares wants to murder him. Kill him on sight."

## Chapter 21: The Hunt For Albus Potter

Albus bolted out of magnificent room, not caring about making noise, colliding with anyone, or anything else. He tried to catch his breath as the discussion went on behind him, but his panting was now so heavy that he could not hear what anyone was saying- nor did he care at this point. His chances of getting his friends, as well as himself, out of here alive had just diminished dramatically.

Everyone wanted him dead. Ares was here to kill, and Waddlesworth had no reservations either. And now both of their soldiers would be in the village, scouring it for him. There was nothing that he could do now.

He nearly fell to his knees as he started up the dusty street leading away from the Quality Quidditch Supplies shop; he felt emotionally drained. People were still storming by him, innocent victims screaming as they pushed their way passed something invisible; masked figures shouting expletives and cackling as streams of light issued from their wands. Then he heard a door burst from behind him, and knew that the Renegades had officially joined the fight. He pressed himself up against the wall of a shop in which a window was shattered as men in black robes collided. Had it not been for the red masks of Ares' men, they'd of all looked the same.

"*Stupefy!*" a random Renegade cried, blasting the first opponent that he saw square in the chest. No sooner had he fallen did another emerge from behind him.

"*Crucio!*"

Albus saw the Renegade drop to the floor, screaming in agony as the curse hit him.

The Renegades began to split up and go in different directions, while a small group of masked figures continued to push their way down the street. Albus saw Waddlesworth waiting in the doorway of his headquarters, watching the fight but not participating in it. The Hammer was standing next to him, observing the battle as if looking for the right opportunity in which to join it.

"He's here!" someone from the crowd shouted at the top of their lungs. "Ares is here!"

Albus continued to keep himself pressed against the wall, his head looking both ways to see if what was said was true. It certainly seemed so. The way that the people were running by him now made their previous behavior seem tame in comparison. They were forcing each other out of the way from his right with so much intensity that they seemed to care very little about the safety of anyone else. One poor woman near the front of the crowd of screaming people was pushed so violently that she toppled over and began to be trampled. Albus watched in horror as she screamed, people stepping on her face- not caring-

He reached out an invisible hand to help her, but she obviously didn't see it, and he could not get any closer without being carried away by the crowd himself. He could only close his eyes and try not to look, and when he opened them he saw that she was no longer there, she had been kicked all the way down the street, carried by the legs of the innocent people just like here...

Ares' men were still laughing as they ran by, flicking their wands upwards and making the occasional person fly into the air, sometimes shooting different colored curses into the crowd as a whole to see how many they could get. As the crowd began to turn a corner the street cleared slightly, and Albus could see, through the gap of bodies, a man who was not running or chasing. Merely standing.

Ares was indeed in the village. He stood at a considerable distance away, his wand not even drawn. As his men caused torment he merely moved his head from side to side, as if he was looking for something. He reminded Albus of a Seeker taking advantage of a stopped play to find the Snitch.

*He's looking for me!* he said to himself. Ares remained unmoving for some time, and it was painfully obvious that he didn't care about the battle at all. Yes, he was definitely looking.

An elderly woman tried scurrying by him but accidentally bumped into him. She fell to the ground and gave a scream when she saw him, holding her hands up in defence. Albus could not hear what she was saying, but it seemed like she was mouthing rapid apologies and pleading for her life. Ares looked down at her, said nothing, then moved a few feet to his left as if to ignore her. The woman looked up for a moment, then crawled away looking as if she'd never believed in divine intervention more in her life.

Albus was not feeling quite as lucky however. Several yards to his right stood Ares in the middle of the street, looking as if the only thing on his mind was the corpse of a teenage boy. An equal distance from his left stood Waddlesworth and his personal bodyguard, who both seemed to have just now noticed the arrival of Red War. Albus saw Waddlesworth lean in and say something to The Hammer. Albus, who had something of a talent when it came to reading lips, thought that he saw him mouth "Take him out".

The Hammer cracked the knuckles on his unbandaged hand and stepped out of the door frame, nodding his head obediently. People ran by him looking nearly as frightened of him as they were Ares, but like the man standing across from him, he was more interested in other things. He began jogging, and then quickened his pace, knocking over people as he stormed down the street as if counting on the element of surprise. He sped right passed the still nearly paralyzed Albus, and he had to admit that he could not help but envy him for his lack of fear. Ares did not seem to notice The Hammer in the slightest as he ran towards him...

Albus waited with baited breath to see the result of the confrontation. The Hammer removed his wand from his robes and, while running, fired a green curse right through the crowd of people, all who screamed and ducked as it flew towards Ares-

Ares merely stared at it, looking almost bored. He moved his head slightly to the left, and the green jet of light soared over his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes to see who had fired it and then- Albus could have sworn he saw it- rolled them when he saw that it was The Hammer running towards him, teeth bared and looking ferocious.

Ares casually swung his arm upwards, and despite having no visible wand, Albus saw The Hammer begin to panic as he was raised off of the ground, his legs still moving- he looked like he was running on air. The people screamed as he soared high above them, muttering enchantments to try and get himself back on the ground but failing in each attempt. Ares made a sharp movement with his outstretched arm and The Hammer flew diagonally through the window of a sinister looking trinket shop, the shattering of the glass making people duck down and crawl through the streets. Some of the masked figures who had turned to watch the battle went back to causing havoc as if the winner had been obvious the entire time.

Ares lowered his arm, then snapped his fingers. The shop in which he'd tossed The Hammer into collapsed itself at once, leaving him buried in several tons of wood, glass, and metal. Albus raised his eyebrows in shock and then turned back to Ares, expecting to see a look of victory on his face, but there was none. He had merely returned to scouring the street as if nothing of importance had occurred.

Albus, realizing that The Hammer was officially out of the battle, turned to see how Waddlesworth was taking the loss of his prized henchmen, but could barely catch a glimpse of his face. The second that The Hammer had lost he had turned on his heel and frantically began running down the street with the rest of the pedestrians, trying to get as far away from Ares as possible.

Albus seized his opportunity. The street now clear from one of his main forms of opposition, he pushed off from the wall and began running down the street as well, still invisible to all who ran by him. He supposed if he followed the crowd he could get back to the main parts of Hogsmeade; he could find Morrison and Scorpius and everyone else...

The crowd of panicking people did lead him back to familiar ground, but the battle scene was worse here. Now practically void of regular citizens, it was merely filled with Renegades and masked wizards dueling. Albus was forced to duck a lethal looking purple curse immediately as he entered the fray, and had to keep his head down as curses continued to fly over him. He saw two Renegades drop at his feet simultaneously, and nearly stumbled over them as well. He looked up at the masked wizard who had accomplished this task, and saw him raise his wand towards a seemingly random shop as well. Albus knew otherwise however. He recognized it as a shop in the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes chain, a shop filled with all sorts of unique and

dangerous items- including explosives like fireworks. Albus knew what the oblivious wizard was going to do a second before he did it-

*"Expulso!"*

There was a noise like rumbling thunder as the shop blew up, streams of fire and smoke issuing from the top as the walls burned themselves into ash. The screams of the few non-fighters grew louder. The force of the blast was so much that Albus was knocked off of his feet; he fell to the ground, his head smacking against the concrete as he felt a sharp pain in his hand. Something- debris from the destroyed shop most likely- had peirced it. He felt the warm blood drip from it, and then looked down at it in surprise. It looked a red mess, but what scared him most was that he could see it period. His Disillusionment Charm had somehow been knocked off of him.

He ripped an already torn piece of cloth from his pants and wrapped it around his bloody hand, which he then cradled silently, trying to keep low and quiet so as not to draw attention to himself with his method of hiding in plain sight now ruined. He tried to fight through the intense pain- to not yell. He looked up and saw that the masked wizard had stupidly knocked himself unconscious from his own blast, but a harsh looking, wild haired Renegade who had just gotten to his feet looked around. He saw Albus on the ground next to him and smiled with glee.

Albus reached for his wand in an attempt to defend himself, but he was still disoriented from the blast, and was having trouble finding his pocket, let alone withdrawing his weapon and using it correctly. He saw the Renegade raise his wand high and drag his feet closer so as to ensure accuracy. Albus, still slightly dazed, closed his eyes-

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Albus saw a flash of green through his eyelids and opened them; the incantation had been said by a woman. He watched the Renegade crumple to the ground, unmistakably dead, and saw his murderer right behind him, her wand outstretched and her face expressionless. It was Blackwood.

Her hair looked like it was falling out and her cheek was bloody, but she appeared almost stoic as she stared down at the body of her comrade. She turned her attention to Albus, who, despite having just snapped himself out of his daze, was now more confused than ever. Was it not Blackwood's job to kill him?

"What are you still doing here?" she spat, and for some reason it felt like they were the only two people in the world- the battle going on around them was just a backdrop of sorts.

"I-"

"Sancticus Fairhart considered your life of the utmost importance!" she said, her voice shaking. " You are my responsibility! Leave! Now!"

"I can't" Albus argued, hand still killing him but now the least of his worries. "I can't! I need to find my friends first! I need to find Morrison and Scorp-"

But as he began to say this next name he saw her face harden, and he knew at once that she had information that he didn't.

"Do you know where they are?" he asked her pleadingly. " Please! I can't leave here without them!"

Albus saw her swallow, indecision etched on her cold, once beautiful face. He immediately knew the dilemma. Her top priority was his life- the life that the man that she had evidently loved had entrusted her with. But she could not save it unless she helped him find Scorpius- the grandson of the man who had all but taken her life from her. Did she feel more love for Sancticus Fairhart or more hatred for Lucius Malfoy?

She gave an inarticulate yell of rage. "I think I saw the Malfoy boy and your friends in Honeydukes!" she barked. "They were hiding. As far as I know they're safe but they're blocked off from leaving. There is a hidden passage in the shop's cellar. Get to them and get out of here!"

Albus heaved a tremendous sigh- there was still some hope left. "Thank yo-"

"Ida!" someone yelled. "What treachery is this?"

They both looked and saw Waddlesworth standing next to the fallen Renegade, his arms raised in surprise. He looked marginally injured from the battle, as if he'd spent most of his time since running hiding. "Ida! How could you! We are your *family* now-"

But Blackwood cut him off by raising her wand at him. Waddlesworth held up both of his hands, but then eyed Albus. "This is the life you choose? This boy's life is a burden! He can not continue to live! His life is-"

"His life means something!" Blackwood cut him off, and Albus saw that she was now hysterical with tears.

Waddlesworth removed his own wand from his robes and pointed it at Albus. Blackwood was quicker. There was a burst of red light from her wand, and Albus saw Waddlesworth fly backwards, his wand soaring out of sight.

Blackwood rounded on Albus, who was still kneeling down in shock of what was going on, cradling his hand. "Why are you still here!" she yelled furiously.

Albus snapped out of his stupor and rose to his feet. He was right about to turn around when he saw Blackwood reach into her robes and throw something at him. He caught Fairhart's ring with his only available hand.

"And take that with you!" she said, tears now pouring down her face. "That doesn't belong to me. San made that quite clear..."

And with that she turned away and entered the battle once more. Albus stuffed the ring away and exchanged it for his wand. Still keeping low, he stuck to the sides of shops as he tried to maneuver his way through the battle without participating.

He had to get to Honeydukes. If his friends were all still there, then he could show them the secret passage- get them back to the safety of the castle. This thought alone kept him moving, but at the same time, he moved with caution. Ares would not be looking in the same place for long, soon he would move about. And now, unfortunately, he was visible.

He ducked more stray curses as he turned at a corner and saw the destruction behind him from a distance. The flaming joke shop had ignited other shops as well, creating something of a ring fire around where he had just been. With a jolt, he wondered if Blackwood would be okay...

After walking for ten minutes Albus began to realize that the village streets were all but clear of pedestrians. Anyone who had survived was hiding or had made it out on foot- Albus had the funny feeling that Ares was not concerned with stopping them. The only people left on the streets now were those fighting- the Renegades and Ares' men. But bodies were still loitering the ground, some of them stirring, some of them still. Albus noticed a few in Hogwarts colors as well, and felt his heart sink.

Would this be happening if he weren't here? Ares most definitely still would have attacked, but Albus knew that WAR had not expected his presence. Would the village have merely been swept and searched if it wasn't known that he was in Hogsmeade? Did WAR's determination in finding him exacerbate the battle? If it did...was he to blame for the injuries of his fellow students?

Albus began limping through the nearly quiet streets, the amount of walking he was doing on his already exhausted body taking its toll. He saw flames rise from a few more places in the distance, but the loud bangs of terrible curses were becoming more and more infrequent with distance...

He found Honeydukes after a few more minutes, and it looked wrecked. Albus expected to have to peek in through a window or something to first see if it was safe, but the door had been blown off its hinges. The very counter attached to the store that he had hopped over hours ago had been reduced to rubble. He entered the shop and heard cries of surprise.

"Albus!" everyone shouted, and he felt arms wrap around him. It took him a moment to realize that it was Rose. Her cheek was cut, but otherwise she looked okay; only disheveled.

He looked passed her and saw a mostly familiar group of people. Lance was there with a few sixth year students that Albus did not recognize. Backed up in the corner of the shop was Mirra. She looked the most fine out of all of them, as Lance and his friends were only sporting



scratches. She seemed almost pristine, and Albus knew that the Cloak had done her good. It was laying in a pile next to her. But then Albus saw two more people...

Scorpius was on the floor, stirring slightly, his face bloody. He appeared to be very close to falling unconscious. Rose, immediately after taking her arms from around him, went back over to Scorpius, apparently to check on him. But Albus could see a rather tiny body next to Scorpius. Red hair thrown about on the floor and looking pale, Hugo was laying next to him.

Albus swooped down upon them both. "What- what happened?"

"Hugo's been stunned, we think" Rose choked out. "We have no idea what he's doing here though, or even how he got here..."

Albus felt his insides crawl. Hugo had followed him through the passage, perhaps to tell him that he had reconsidered their agreement. And he'd gotten himself hurt. He felt guilt wash over him...

"And Scorpius took a nasty curse to the face" Lance said, shaking his head. "But we think he'll be alright. He's falling in and out of consciousness though."

"Have you seen James?" Albus asked, looking around the room in fright at his absence.

"I'm pretty sure he got out okay" Lance answered him. "I know he wanted to fight, but I saw his girlfriend leading him away..."

Albus looked down at Scorpius and Hugo. "Is everyone else okay?" he asked.

"Are you?" Mirra said, and she walked over to him. "Albus your hand..."

She tried to take it in her own, but Albus pulled it away from her. "It's fine" he said quickly. There wasn't time to check on his injuries. " We need to get out- Where's Morrison?"

He could have sworn that he had seen him when he'd walked in, but he was nowhere to be found. One of Lance's sixth year friends, who would be about the same size as him, must have looked similar. They all exchanged a look at his question.

"We lost him" Lance said, and Albus felt his heart drop.

"You- you lost- he-"

"I mean we can't find him" Lance said quickly.

"What? What happened?"

But Rose interjected. "We all met Lance and his friends at Madam Ostensa's Cosmetics Shop" she said. "He wanted to buy me some makeup-"

Albus heard Scorpius give a light groan from the ground, and he gave a sigh of light relief as he did so. At least he could still hear and comprehend.

Rose continued. "That's where we were when it all happened-"

"I knew that's where they'd be" Mirra cut in. "I met them there, and Scorpius and Morrison were there too, they had all just met up. We were closer to the outskirts of the battle but we knew we had to go. Morrison stayed behind to help some girl who was getting trampled on the ground- everyone was running and screaming-"

"We thought he was right behind us" Lance said. "He might even still be back there."

"We all ran to Honeydukes" one of Lance's friends said. "It was on the way and it was already ruined, we figured we'd hide here and wait it all out- we thought that the teachers must be here at least, Blackwood passed us-"

"And we found Hugo" Mirra said. "He was already like this, they must have thought he was dead and just kept moving. But everything was still going on, and when we tried leaving we couldn't get through the crowd and then we heard that Wands and Redemption had entered the battle-"

"We're stuck here" Rose said. "It's too far to get back to the entrance, we'd have to go through the entire village. We have to wait for the battle to end."

"It's not going to end" Albus said, dropping his head down grimly. "Ares is looking for me. I'm what he's here for. I don't know why, but it won't stop until he finds me. It's the same with WAR too."

They continued to stare at him. Rose spoke again. "Oh Al..."

"You can leave right now" Albus said quickly, having heard enough. They all looked at him in surprise. He walked over to the storage door and opened it. "There's a trapdoor down there. It leads back to Hogwarts, that's how Hugo got in."

They all ogled him. Mirra was the first to speak. "You did sneak in!"

"Yes" Albus said. "But we can talk about that later, you guys need to get down there and get out of here- get help from Hogwarts, they might not still know, and if they do they might not realize you can't apparate in-"

"What do you mean 'you guys'?" Rose said, her lips pursed.

"I'm going to look for Morrison" he said boldly.

There was shouts of outrage from everyone, even the people that he did not know.

"Albus don't even think about it!" Mirra shouted, looking fearful.

"I already did" Albus said stubbornly. "I'm not leaving him behind, and that's it!" he said, so hotly that they all stopped objecting at once. Rose looked like she was about to cry.

"Oh Al! Be careful!" she said, holding her hands up to her face.

"I'll go with him" Lance said determinedly.

"No" Albus said sharply. "You guys all get back. Get help. Just give me the Cloak."

No one gave it to him, so Albus went and retrieved it himself. Lance was still protesting however.

"Let me go with-"

"No!" Albus shouted. No one else was going to get put in danger because of him. "We can't both fit under the Cloak. Pick him up, "Albus said, nodding towards Scorpius, "And get him through that trapdoor. You're all wasting time! You could be getting help!"

They all fell silent, and Albus took a moment to realize that for some inexplicable reason, he was in charge here. He was not the oldest, the smartest, or the most powerful- but he still felt obligated to lead. No one moved for a moment, but then Lance did as he'd been told. Brushing his now dirty, but still somehow straight blonde hair out of his face, he scooped up Scorpius into his arms.

"No" Scorpius moaned in agony, his head lolling from side to side. "Not him- anyone but him- let Death take me-"

"He's erm- delusional" Albus said quickly. "So get him back!" he added fiercely, and they all made for the door that he indicated, and began walking down the stairs that led to the storage cellar, where sure enough, Hugo had left the trapdoor partially opened...

Mirra walked over to him as if to say something but he didn't let her. Her mouth was half way opened when he closed it with his own. He had come to Hogsmeade to share a kiss with her again- this time as a couple- and he'd be damned if he didn't do it. Their lips interlocked, for a moment she tried to push away but then decided against it- all that he could feel was her lips on his, and his on hers...

It took every ounce of control that he had to break the kiss. He brushed a lock of her hair out of her face and threw the Cloak over himself, refusing to let her try and talk him out of it. As he headed through the doorway, now invisible, she called to him.

"Albus please! Take care of yourself!"

He gave her no answer and dashed back into the streets. Things were a bit quieter; the screams had toned down considerably. But he could still see smoke in the air, still see bright orange flames looming in the sky. He ran as fast he could go, the Cloak swishing along behind him.

He re-entered the portions of the village that were near the heart of the battle and saw that it was still going on. He could no longer distinguish anyone from anyone else- most of the hooded figures had their masks knocked off, and most of the Renegades were so bloody that they could have been anyone. The only way to tell the difference between them would have been the silver emblem on their robes, but Albus didn't take the time to check. He strode through the battle cautiously but still quickly, once again quite pleased to be invisible...

He had a vague idea of where the Cosmetics Shop was; he thought that it was near Dervish & Bangs. The journey wasn't too far however, and it took very little time in his invisible state. He managed to make it through where most of the fighting was, and ended up once more in a portion of streets where there were only bodies on the ground. He quickly hurried passed them all, but he was still dead on his feet. There was a pain in his side as well, hindering his movement-

He tripped over someone who was moaning loudly. Going head first, the Cloak slid off of him as his face smacked against concrete for the second time. Thankfully his other limbs were uninjured, but he could have sworn that he felt his tooth go loose. He stood up and looked around frantically to see who he had tripped over, and gasped in surprise.

It was Eckley. He looked terrible. His face was gaunt, and his eyes were blinking slowly. His robes seemed splattered with blood- they looked like Scorpius' face. He continued to moan, but his eyes widened in shock when he saw Albus.

"Help...me..." he stammered out.

Albus picked the Cloak up and looked around. He could not allow anything to slow him down in his search for Morrison. He himself didn't have much time- he had do this all before Ares could find him.

"Get up" he said harshly. "There's a way out in Honeydukes, go there."

But Eckley didn't look much like he was ready to move. "Hit by...curse..."

Albus sighed. He grabbed his arch nemesis by the arm and tried to hoist him up- as he had expected though, he was quite heavy.

"Help me out here you prat" he spat. "I've only got one hand-"

Eckley managed to pull himself into a standing position, but he was still leaning on Albus' shoulder, making it very hard for him to move. Albus could not merely leave him however- regardless of how much he wanted to. "Come along" he said. "We have to find Morrison, he's by Ostensa's, it's not too far-"

He had only taken a few steps when Eckley had collapsed again. Albus screamed an expletive into the sky.

"Come on!" He yelled as the curse word echoed through the air. "Get up! Get up you useless piece of shi-"

But Eckley had given a tremendous cough- and blood had dripped from his mouth. His condition was even worse than he looked. He realized that the curse that hit him may have had an internal effect.

Albus heaved another sigh as he paced back and forth on the spot, the Cloak still draped over his arm. What was he supposed to do? Just leave him to be picked off?

*He'd leave you.*

Well that was certainly true. He continued to pace however, while Eckley stayed on the ground, moaning and flopping in a small puddle of blood. Albus stared down at him in anger. Eckley had done so many horrible things to him. And even here, he was slowing him down. Wasting time.

Eckley looked up at him, his blonde hair dirty, his normally smug expression replaced with a pitiful one.

"Don't...leave...me...alone..." he said, coughing up more blood.

Albus would have to. But he definitely couldn't just leave him out in the open. That's what he was most worried about. Those masked figures coming through this way, taking the battle somewhere else. Finishing off the survivors...

Albus groaned. He hoisted Eckley up with surprising strength and leaned him up against the wall of one of the few shops that was only partially destroyed. He slumped down at once. Albus threw the Cloak over him, and he immediately became invisible.

"Don't take that off" Albus said stupidly. "Don't even move. I'll get help after I find Morrison" he said.

He couldn't see if Eckley was nodding his head or not- or showing any sign of having heard him for that matter. But he didn't speak, which meant that he at least wasn't objecting. Albus glanced up and saw the name of the shop. It was a tacky clothing store called 'Travis' Tasty Trousers And More'.

Making a mental note of it's name, Albus continued to hurry off through the streets, now looking over his shoulder every once in a while to check that no one was around. He could not believe that this was happening. Could not believe all of the destruction- all of the chaos. All of the innocent people...

His thoughts returned to the passageway back to Hogwarts, and he found hope in that his friends might be alright. None of them had looked beyond repair. And the teachers could use the passageway as well- Blackwood certainly had done so earlier, before any of this had occurred. Soon Hagrid would be here, and Bellinger and McGonagall. Things could turn out okay. They might all have lived through this terrible day...

He reached what was left of the Cosmetics shop. Whereas most of the shops surrounding it seemed to still be sturdy to a certain degree, Madam Ostensa's was little more than a pile of rubble. It had the strangest smell to it- a combination of all the smashed perfumes that filled the debris, and Albus walked across all sorts of lipstick and make up as he trekked through the splintered wood. He felt panic rise in his chest.

"M- Morrison!" he yelled out. "Morrison!"

There was no way he could still be here. And if he was, Albus didn't even want to see what was left of him. He thought he'd cry if not from shock, but instead sadness seemed to be leaking out of his pores. It was nothing like having seen Hugo or Scorpius- he had known from their mere appearance that there was hope for them. But Morrison- he may never get to see him again at all...

"Over here!" came a stifled cry, and Albus felt his heart leap. It was Morrison's voice.

"Morrison!" he shouted in excitement, not caring at how much noise he was making. He looked around frantically. "Morrison! Where- where are-"

"Under something!" came the muffled yell again.

"Under what?" he yelled back, picking up splinters of wood stupidly and tossing them about.

"Something big!" he answered.

Albus continued to look around, digging through rubble in an attempt to find any sign of his friend. "Where?"

"Under something!" Morrison repeated. "I don't know- it smells- it smells like raspberry-"

Albus looked around, sweat pouring down his face. What did a raspberry even smell like? And how was he supposed to detect a lone smell amidst all of the scents in the air?

"Wh- how am- can you see anything?" he called out, now feeling like a complete idiot.

"I'll throw something!" Morrison yelled back, and Albus immediately heard a small smashing noise, as if a bottle of perfume smashing. He turned on his heel and ran over, just a few feet in fact, to where he'd heard the noise. From underneath what looked like a giant shelf he saw an extended hand waving around.

"Morrison!" he yelled, and he tried lifting the shelf up. "It's too heavy!" he cried.

"Is- did- is your wand broken?" came Morrison's muffled response.

Albus could have smacked himself. He stood back. "*Erecto!*" he exclaimed, and the shelf bolted upwards at once, revealing his friend, who resembled a dusty pile of clothes.

Morrison climbed to his feet- he looked horrible as well. Not bloody like Scorpius or dazed like Eckley, but rather extremely sick. His face was covered in dirt from having laid on his stomach, and his hair was matted and dusty. He even looked shorter- he may have been hunched over. He did have a very berry like smell to him however.

Morrison gave a tremendous cough and then gave him a large bear hug. "I owe you mate" he said breathlessly. "Where is everyone? Is it all over?"

"Not quite" Albus said quickly, grateful as Morrison let go- it had been hard to breathe for a moment. "But everyone's okay- kind of-" he'd tell him about Scorpius and Hugo later. "Most of the people left, but there's still a fight going on in the middle."

"How are we supposed to get out?"

"Honeydukes" Albus replied. "That's where-"

"Your passage is" Morrison said, nodding and coughing again. "What are you doing here though? How'd you find me-"

"I found everyone" Albus explained quickly. "They're all getting help now. But Ares is still here, and he's looking for me, and so is WAR-"

Morrison's eyes widened. "Then what are you doing here! You can't go wandering about, you should have just asked someone else to come get-"

"I had the Cloak" Albus said quickly.

"Well then where is it?" Morrison said, baffled. He looked around as if expecting to find it on the floor.

"I- gave it to Eckley" Albus said testily.

"*Eckley?*" Morrison asked, bewildered. "What? Why- who- like- like which Eckley? Does he have like an attractive sister here or-"

"Charles Eckley" Albus said. "Long story, but now we've got to go and get out of here... and we have to collect him to. We should both be able to carry him."

Morrison groaned but nodded. They both turned to walk away, back towards Honeyduke's, but Albus suddenly collapsed onto his knees.

"Al? Al!" Morrison said, grabbing at his shoulders.

But Albus was feeling very dizzy for some reason. He expected something to happen- to feel the sharp stinging in his eyes and hear the strange buzzing in his ears- but nothing of the sort occurred. It wasn't even power flooding through him now, it was something far better- it was control. He could not even explain the sensation, it was too strange, too surreal- but it was definitely control that he felt. But over what? He didn't have the slightest idea. All that he knew was something terrible had happened. Something terrible *and amazing*.

"Al!" Morrison called out to him from far away. "Snap out of it mate!"

Albus needed to be shaken a few more times before he could stand up again. He shook his head as if to get rid of something in his hair, and then, inexplicably, examined his wand.

"You okay?" Morrison asked him.

"Is this my wand?" Albus asked, running his fingers across it. What a strange feeling. He suddenly felt defenceless.

"I- I think. Did you pick up someone else's or what?"

Albus blinked a few times before coming to his senses. "I- no. No, this is mine" he said, shaking his head again.

"What just happened?" Morrison asked him.

"Nothing" Albus said, not even aware that his feet were still carrying him. "I just- what happened to you?" he said suddenly. "How'd you end up under there?"

He did not know why he was asking- perhaps it was just to change the topic. Things were at their quietest now. Though the flames of the once beautiful village still danced in the sky, the battle seemed to have trimmed down significantly- he could no longer hear explosions or screaming. Perhaps everyone had retreated. Perhaps he had outlasted the danger...

"I held the door open so people could get out" Morrison said, tossing his arms up as if he seriously regretted his altruism. "Then I saw some girl get knocked over, and I helped her up, and then one of those masked idiots blew up the whole damn shop and the shelf fell on me, and everyone just cleared out and I got stuck."

"Couldn't you just blow the shelf off of you?" Albus asked him, wishing that he could move faster, but his feet were too tired.



Morrison scoffed at him. "Sorry I can't just shoot golden beams of awesome out of my wand like you Al! I couldn't even *reach* my wand, all I had was one free hand, and I could barely move-

"Wait!" Albus said, holding out his arm as his ears picked up a faint, but strange sound.

"What?"

"Be quiet" he said, and they both stood still on the spot. "Did you hear-

An ear splitting shriek penetrated the stillness of the air. It was a scream so high pitched and so terrifying that it could not possibly be human. Albus felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he plugged his fingers into his ears. What could have made such a sound?

And then they saw it. Turning the corner of the next street was one of the most disgusting and menacing things that Albus had ever seen. Standing more than seven feet tall was something resembling a half decomposed body- a skeletal being with graying papery skin literally dangling from it's body- a cracked, rounded skull with bugs dripping out of it's eyes...

It walked lopsided, dragging one of it's bony feet and making a noise halfway between snarling and breathing. Albus and Morrison merely stood on the spot, staring at it in terror, hoping that it didn't see them-

It did. The thing- whatever it was- turned its head and saw them standing in their stupor. For a moment it eyed them with something resembling curiosity- it was hard to tell do to it's lack of actual face- but then it opened it's jaws wide and replicated the scream it had made. Then it started running towards them.

"What is that thing!" Albus shouted, turning on his heel and running the other way. Suddenly his feet were not nearly as tired.

"Run run run run run run!" was Morrison's only answer. They both dashed down the street, back the way they'd been walking, staggering away and looking over their shoulders at the ferocious creature, too surprised to even comprehend the situation. For something that moved lopsided it was exceptionally fast. Albus saw it flex it's fingers as it ran after them, still screeching- they were as sharp as claws-

But they were faster than it. They started to put more distance in between themselves with it, surely they'd be able to turn another corner and hide from it-

It kneeled itself down like a skeletal dog and began running at them on all fours. It was three times faster when using its arms as legs, and Albus knew that whatever it was, it was now in it's hunting position. He withdrew his wand.

"*Stupefy!*" he shouted, aiming his wand over his shoulder. The stunner bounced off of the creatures skull like it would Hagrid's. It continued running, not deterred or harmed in the

slightest. Morrison had taken his cue and was firing his own stunners, but his were mostly off their mark and did just as little even when they did hit.

Albus searched his head for more offensive spells. "*Reducto! Impedimenta! Crescendium!*"

All three spells failed horribly; if anything they only irritated the creature. Albus raised his wand again to fire another one, for he certainly could not stop trying, but he lost his balance in his attempt to look over his shoulder and tripped over his own feet. He slid across the ground in agony, his hand becoming unraveled from its wrapping and colliding with the dirty ground. He gave a scream of pain as he laid on the ground motionless, looking up only to see Morrison continue running.

His friend spun around from a considerable distance away. "Al!" he shouted, standing motionless himself. Albus looked behind him and saw the creature gaining ground. It looked prepared to pounce even as it continued to scream its battle cry, bugs dropping from its eyeholes and mouth.

"Keep goi-" Albus started to yell at his friend, but Morrison had ignored his plea before he'd even had the chance to complete it. He ran back for him, even faster than when he'd been running for himself it seemed, and scooped Albus up much like how Lance had Scorpius.

"I'm slowing you down!" Albus yelled as his feet dragged across the ground, and indeed, the creature was now gaining on them both.

"I know!" Morrison said, aiming his wand over his shoulder.

"Spells don't work on it!" Albus choked out.

"Shut up!" Morrison barked sharply. "*Accidere Moblia!*"

A small patch of ground in front of the creature seemed to glow for a moment, and the second that it had neared it it had flown into the air as if hit by something. It somersaulted through the sky, landing on its skull with a sickening thud.

"Trip jinx!" Morrison cried triumphantly. "Can't block stupid-"

But then he stopped running. The ground a few feet in front of him was starting to crack. He slowly backed up, and Albus worked his way into a standing position as well. The crack in the ground started to widen itself, and suddenly Albus could hear a very unpleasant humming noise coming from it, and soon a blinding red light...

An identical creature pulled itself out from the crack and stood tall, giving a monstrous roar to signify its arrival. The crack slid itself shut and Albus got a whiff of a terrible, putrid smell even more disgusting than the monster's appearance. He exchanged a glance with Morrison, and they both ran right by it before it could acknowledge them. It gave a scream identical to the previous one's however, and spread its fingers wide as Albus shot passed it...

He felt a powerful, nauseating pain in his thigh. It was a pain far worse than anything else that Albus had experienced tonight, worse than his hand or his head or his tooth. The creature's claws had dug themselves into the flesh on his leg and ripped a chunk from it with relative ease. Albus felt warm blood effortlessly trickle down his leg as he gave a growl of anguish; he fell over, his bloody hand now clutching his bloody leg.

"Al!" Morrison called out, and he dove for him, but the creature grabbed him in mid-air and threw him through the air like he was a ragdoll; its strength must have been magical to accomplish such a task. Morrison soared a great distance before landing far enough away for Albus to realize the intent of the beast. It had already decided on the order in which it would kill them, and it had decided on Albus first.

He tried to drag himself across the ground, too panicky to even comprehend a thought apart from survival. His wand had flown from his finger tips as he'd sunk to the ground, but with his one good leg he could push himself towards it. Where was his power now? Why now, when he needed to save himself, was he completely helpless?

The creature bared down on him, grabbing him by the leg and pulling him back just as he'd managed to grab hold of his wand. Albus saw the shadow of its partner; it looked completely unharmed from what Morrison had done to it. They snapped jaws at one another as if in a primitive form of communicating, but eventually it seemed as if Albus was stuck with the one that had slashed his leg. The other stepped over him and briskly ran, four legged, over to Morrison.

Albus looked up at the creature staring down at him- it was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen, easily. So much so that it even momentarily distracted him from the absurdly excruciating pain in his leg. How it could even see him he was not sure, for it had no eyeballs, and the ash colored skin dangling from its bones seemed to be acting of its own accord as it swayed back and forth in the chilly wind. The creature raised its massive, spider like hand, and Albus could see the fingers were indeed thin and pointed- it was not nails that had cut him, but rather, as he had assumed, claws. It was designed to kill.

Albus closed his eyes and tried to raise his wand but couldn't; it merely fell on top of his body. He heard the rustling of wind as the creature began to bring its claw down, to swipe at his face mercilessly. All he could do was yell, and he yelled the only word currently in his vocabulary-

"Stop!" he yelled, tears now falling freely from his face. He opened his eyes. The bony hand had stopped just centimeters from his face.

Albus looked up at the creature, unsure of what had happened. Had it just malfunctioned? Or had his command been worth something? "Get- get off of me!"

The creature rose up and stood tall, illuminated by the moonlight. It was looking down at him blankly, and though it had no face, there was a certain sense of understanding to it that Albus could not quite put his finger on...

He rolled over onto his side and saw that Morrison was back on his feet- he was engaging in a very elaborate game of hide and seek with the monster attacking him. He repeatedly ducked behind trash cans, occasionally throwing something as if to distract it while slowly backing up as well.

"Morrison!" Albus called out from the ground, his beast still staring down at him. "Morrison they listen to you!" he said, realizing the truth in his own words. These creatures were not intelligent...he wasn't even sure that they could think. They did as they were told, by anyone.

"What?" Morrison yelled back, pushing the trash can down so that the vile beast would trip over it as it lunged at him.

"They listen! Just go up to it and tell it to stop!"

Morrison looked at him, and even from a distance he appeared skeptical. Still, he cautiously approached the monster, his hands held out as if it were a regular animal. "S-s-s-stop!" he stammered quietly when he was next to it.

The creature took a single glance at him and swiped. Morrison ducked, and Albus thought that he saw strands of hair fly through the air from how close it had been.

"YOU TRYING TO GET ME KILLED MATE!" he bellowed as he retreated back behind his trash can, the beast giving another ear splitting scream and raising it's arms intimidatingly.

Albus panicked. He didn't understand. Why did his creature obey him, but Morrison's didn't do anything but want to kill him? Perhaps he had been fortunate enough to get a flawed creature- perhaps the one standing over him was simply, for some reason, naturally obedient. Either way, it was his only shot.

"Go-go help my friend!" he yelled at the beast standing over him, indicating Morrison with his free hand.

The creature gave another battle cry, then leapt over him and towards the creature attacking Morrison. It jumped at it, knocking it into Morrison, who fell over and collided with the wall of an alleyway. He fell to the ground, looking knocked clean out from the impact. The two skeletal beings rolled around on the ground, slashing at each other and picking at one another's bones-

It was impossible to tell which was the one who's help he'd requested, but they seemed evenly matched. They continued to roll over on top of one another, and Albus saw that eventually one of them had enough sense to reach it's sharp claws into the eyeholes of the other. It gave an almighty pull, and the skull of it's opponent was ripped clean off. It fell loosely from it's fingers,

a strange, dark green substance that may have been blood oozing from the bottom. The winning creature stood up triumphantly.

It took Albus less than a second to realize that his had lost. The terrifying fiend had looked over at him with a hungry expression on its face, and Albus knew that it now considered him his target rather than the unconscious Morrison. Albus was more of a challenge.

He tried crawling in any direction but couldn't. He couldn't even move. The blood from his thigh had leaked so much that he was beginning to feel a dizziness that he had not yet experienced tonight, a quaint, light headed feeling. He tried to open his dry mouth, to yell at this one as well, but he couldn't even speak. He blinked a few times as loss of blood slowly inched him towards unconsciousness himself. The creature was running towards him now. It leapt, and he saw it high above him-

It exploded in mid-air. A spell had hit it, and the one piece that jumped landed in multiples. He saw its skeletal limbs fly through the air, dark, thick goo and dust staining the sky as the creature gave a final screechy wail. Albus saw its skull explode through his half closed eyelids, and felt pieces of it rain down upon him.

Someone had saved him. He could not even so much as raise his head from fatigue, but he knew that it was someone powerful. Who else could have easily destroyed the creature? He tried to keep his eyes open to see his savior, but was unable to. He blinked them shut, the swishing of a cloak being the only discernible noise in his ears. It was his father! Yes, it must have been him. But he could not apparate in. And he wouldn't have been able to save him anyway...Fairhart! It was Fairhart, back from the dead, somehow alive, just as Albus knew he was, here to save him from death and perform magical feats that few others could...

He blinked his eyes one last time as he felt someone pick him up, his robes almost stuck to the ground from blood. He could not open them enough to see who it was. He simply slipped away into darkness...

## Chapter 22: The Choices That We Make

Albus slowly blinked his eyes open, the dizziness now gone and replaced with an uncomfortable stiffness in his head. He immediately looked down and saw himself still on concrete, his legs spread out ahead of him loosely. His leg was no longer bloody, and the wound appeared to have been sloppily sealed by magic. It didn't hurt however. In fact, he couldn't feel anything at all.

He tried moving his injured hand, which he surmised had been healed as well, but couldn't. No part of his body could move in fact, except for his head- he was completely paralyzed from the neck down. He felt his heart quicken from panic. He tried to take in his surroundings. It was a bit darker now, but he was still in Hogsmeade. In fact, based off of the familiar looking rubble around him, he wasn't far from where he'd collapsed. He looked straight ahead of him and saw someone standing a considerable distance away, their back turned to him. He had been wrong; it wasn't Fairhart. It wasn't even his father. It was Ares.

He felt beads of sweat trickle down his cheek. He still struggled to move but could do nothing more than twist his head back and forth, his teeth gritted. Ares had been the one to destroy whatever that thing was...had been the one to heal his leg and drag him away. But why?

Ares was not aware that he was conscious once more. Albus knew it was him from the back of his head only; he was standing quite still. From the back of his robes he appeared to be virtually unharmed, as if he hadn't participated in a battle at all. Albus's heart sped up. Ares obviously had him under some sort of spell, preventing his movement. And he wasn't going to be able to move unless Ares knew he was awake.

He looked down and saw his wand stowed away in his pocket, looking as if it had been picked up, examined, and then quickly thrust out of sight. He turned his head as far to each side as he could, but saw no sign of Morrison. Was he okay? Had Ares...?

"Where's Morrison!" Albus blurted out into the air, unsure of what else he could possibly say.

Ares turned around slightly so that he was half facing him. "Good" he said, gruffly. "You're awake."

He looked strikingly similar to how he had the last time Albus had seen him- in the Department of Mysteries. There was something different about him however. His cheeks looked flush now. His normally bored face seemed like it was trying to mask something. Was it excitement?

Albus swallowed, his breathing heavy. He knew that he was in the presence of perhaps the night's greatest threat, but he was not dead yet. How long would that last?

"Your friend is fine" Ares continued in his cold voice. "I left him where he was."

Albus continued to struggle against his magical imprisonment, and he realized, with grim dissatisfaction, that this was the second time in two years he'd ended up unable to move in the

presence of a dark wizard. He was not sure which he preferred- both Ares and his psychotic brother were formidable tasks to deal with in their own right.

He realized that he was slumped up against the remains of a mangled shop, and knew that there was a certain reason for why he was in the sitting position. The view, from this particular spot, was astounding. The smoke billowing in the air could not cover the intense orange flames that elegantly caressed the backdrop of the sky- the stars seemed dull in comparison. Ares turned his back to him once more, so that he too was staring into the sky. He seemed to have read Albus' mind.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? The village of Hogsmeade?" he said. "Without the flames, of course. In my youth I was never permitted to visit the village. My adopted parents deemed it an inaccurate representation of the world in which I would one day enter- the world in which Voldemort would rule. They did not support him, but they were not very optimistic people, Johnathan and Debra Ares. They were quite sure of what the results of the war would be, and considered themselves quite fortunate to have adopted me- I showed great magical promise even in my youth. They thought that in the world that Voldemort ruled, a pure blood like myself would be highly regarded. Imagine their surprise when he fell at the hands of your father. Imagine my surprise, when I discovered that I was not pure blooded at all..."

He trailed off there, though he then tilted his head to the side curiously, as if he had just realized something. When he spoke, it was in a tone suggesting that his next words had not been planned at all.

"That's the first time I've used the names of my adopted parents in decades" he said, more to himself than Albus, and sounding quite interested in his own revelation. "Their names still roll off of my tongue with malice, even today. It's quite strange, blessed though I am with an extraordinary memory, I can not recall my original surname. I was always Reginald, but Ares has been all that I've ever known. I believe my true last name may have began with an 'R' as well. Or possibly a 'D'..." he added to himself, and his voice drifted off here as though he were talking to himself.

He turned around on his heel and began walking towards him. With each step Albus felt his heart pound faster. Based on the way that he was walking however, with his head still inclined upwards as if in deep thought, he was not done speaking. He shook his head briskly as if to shake off his previous thoughts.

"Either way, I was thus unable to catch my first glimpse of Hogsmeade until my time as an Auror. My very first day as your father's apprentice, we were called to it. Three regular civilians- now called Renegades- had encountered four men that they recognized to be Death Eaters- now called 'EP's'. By the time that we had arrived, three lives had been taken in the ensuing chaos. Can you guess who had been so unfortunate?"

"Three children. Two of them just barely teenagers, the other I believe not quite eight years old. One had been murdered by a stray killing curse, the other two due to debris from collapsed buildings. Of the seven partakers in the battle, four- the Death Eaters- had been previously incarcerated for participation during the war and were released for having given up the names of their comrades. Of the seven, only one was later imprisoned for a substantial sentence- the Renegade who had fired the curse. The other six could not be accurately proven to have hurt anyone specifically. Their bodies, Albus Potter. The bodies of those three children haunt my dreams...even to this day..."

Albus had no idea why he was being told these things- he made no sense of the nostalgic ramblings of a man out to kill him. But still, he was talking, not murdering. Albus was going to do whatever he could to keep it that way, even if it meant talking himself. Sadly, he didn't put much thought into the first thing that bursted out of his dried lips.

"Why did you do all of this!" he said fiercely, jerking his head upwards as if to indicate the destruction in the air.

Ares looked highly offended. His tired eyes bulged out of their sockets for a moment, and he swung his arm through through the air just as he had when he'd made quick work of The Hammer. Albus flinched, but he hadn't been attacked. Instead, Ares was pointing to the sky.

"Do what?" he sneered. "This? You think that I...did this? Albus look around! I am not fighting! I'm standing right here! *This* is not my responsibility! This is the result of actions *against* me!"

Albus started to breathe heavy, unsure of what he was trying to say, but still trying to seem concentrated- he thought that it might make his life slightly less expendable.

"No one has seen me for a year!" Ares continued. "I've tip toed around caves on nameless islands, and walked the streets of deserted towns. The last time anyone saw me was a year ago, at the Ministry of Magic. And behold, look at the result! Riots and rallys, protests and fights. I *tested* them Albus, I tested the people and they failed! In my absence they could have banded together- stood united. Instead they fought for control. Vigilante scum like Waddlesworth fed them bile. The Ministry tried to control them with it's own mangled version of law. And the public couldn't even pick a side, they ran rampant through the streets with picket signs, proud of their barbarism!"

Split flew from his mouth as he spoke- he suddenly looked like a ravenous dog.

"Do you hear them fighting? Perhaps you can not, for we are of a considerable distance, but the war continues to wage! I removed the anti-apparition spells from the village, they are free to leave at any time! But they don't. They continue to fight. Do you know why? Do they? Of course not. Their primitive behavior can only be explained by admitting that they are flawed by design."

"They're fighting because they're scared!" Albus gasped out. "Scared of you!"



"Of course they are frightened!" Ares groaned, and he brought his hands down and clenched his fist as if it hurt him to say it. "They're scared because this is all that they've known! 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. You think that this is the first time these very men have fought and killed? The men that I brought into this village have all murdered before! But due to your government, they have avoided arrest, or escaped punishment by technicality. And they murder again. These Renegades are but cowards- cowards who refused to fight when it counted most, and who attempt to redeem themselves by fighting when it's not even necessary! I stepped back Albus Potter. I stepped back to see how the wizarding world would act, and at the mere mention of my name, it destroyed itself..."

His voice had grown in volume with each subsequent sentence until the last. His final words had been marked with something that sounded like shame. They were barely whispered.

Albus watched as Ares began to pant heavily; he looked just as exhausted as he felt. Albus tried to tire him more.

"But then what's the point of all this?" he spat out. "Just to eradicate? Is that it? People are useless, so destroy them all?"

Ares stood up straight and stared into his eyes. "Just as the blacksmith forges the very sword that can slay him, so does the man create the chaos that envelopes him. What you see here- this destruction- is a symbol. A sliver of the Wizarding World as a whole. Collectively, we have destroyed ourselves. How many battles could have been prevented- how many lives spared- in the last year alone, had everyone simply united against me? Humans, Albus Potter, tend to choose only the things that are of most hindrance to them. It is thus the task those chosen few whom fate has given both the power and wisdom... to guide them.

"You no doubt accuse me of pretension of megalomania, but I assure you, I attribute none of what I have to myself. I merely understand my purpose- to lead. How could a wizard of my caliber- of my level of power- be a half blood, adopted into a family of pure blood enthusiasts? And what are the chances then, that I fall into the hands of the Ministry, and be randomly assigned to be the apprentice of your father- who single-handedly ended the very war in which I was prepared my entire life to live through? Fortuitous indeed! Coincidence is a term for the weak minded fool who can not accept that things can and do exist outside of his control. I did not pick my life, Albus Potter. It was assigned to me."

"So what, you think that you're meant to take over the world?" Albus asked through gritted teeth, and his neck was now stiff from how he was sitting. He spared a glance to his right to see if someone-anyone- was coming. They weren't.

"Take over the world?" Ares said quietly, looking like he'd never heard a more sinister sentence in his life. "Albus I want to *save* it! Save it from this!" he said, once more flopping his hand towards the ruin in his wake.

"By destroying it?"

"Yes!" Ares shouted. "By showing them what they stand to lose! Only then can the first step be taken! Albus, in all my time as an Auror, I never knew anyone to be asked as many questions as your father. People begging him for tips or ideas- how to improve or practice. In all the time I spent as his apprentice, and later as one of his partners, I asked him but a single question, and it had nothing to do with technique or skill. I asked him if there was any characteristic more important to success than apathy. His reply...Was empathy.

"For the longest time I did not understand what he had meant, but now I do. The few of us who have been placed above the rest- who have been entrusted with the aim of saving them- can not do so until they've seen their strengths from their position. And I have. I've been a member of the public. Of society. And I see where it's only strength lies. In unity. They will hate me Albus Potter, but they will hate me *together*. And though they loathe me now, it is imperative that they do, for only then can they understand the next phase in my plan. Many who hate me will learn to realize what I offer them. But they must show contempt first. Must realize what they have that is worth fighting for.

"You think that I'm crazy. That I actually, secretly, enjoy the negativity associated with me; that their fear strengthens me. But you are wrong. And really, am I the first to do this? The first, to be willingly hated, so as to establish a common interest?"

This was the first thing that Albus really listened to, and he did so because he had a very good idea as to who Ares was talking about...

"Even as we speak, Albus Potter, the commoner sits at his kitchen table, the newspaper propped up against his coffee mug as he shovels his evening snack into his slackjawed mouth, skimming the articles for a reason to blame *your* father for *their* shortcomings. For *their* inability to act; to take the initiative. Yes Albus, I will be hated for my 'evil' the same as your father is hated for his 'mistakes'. And yet, it serves it's purpose, does it not? Once the strongest are together, the weakest are trimmed down. Once the best of the Wizarding World have decided to fight the common evil, I show them what the truest evil is."

"And what's that?" Albus asked through gritted teeth.

Ares inhaled. The chilly wind seemed to blow his dark cloak out of place as he spoke. He looked to the sky just as his mouth was opening.

"The Ministry of Magic is corrupt. The government that you know has sat aside and allowed it's world to implode. I do not blame the public for it's faults- it is natural. But the catalyst is in it's

leadership. Can a barbarian tame another barbarian? I knew it all along, for the duration of my entire life, but I didn't realize it until perhaps my own release. I am a criminal, Albus Potter, imprisoned for theft. And your government let me out. Why? To please the public" he sneered.

"My only payment was a measly favor to your father, which he later stupidly cashed in on a trivial matter as if to erase the memory completely. Because the Ministry feared the people that *they* were meant to govern, I was freed. If you really want to be specific with who to blame, Albus Potter, you could say that this-" he waved his hand towards the destruction again- " is all because of your father and his Ministry."

Albus looked down at the ground, in disbelief that he was letting Ares' words get to him. But still, Albus did think the same way. Had thought the same things before...

"And that's not all! How many murderers freed through cooperation? Through technicality? How many never apprehended, through leniency? Through tolerance? The government that you know is responsible for this chaos; it refuses to control its citizens. That is my first step, Albus Potter. You wish to call me responsible for destruction? You may! Once I make the people understand that their lives need to be managed, I will annihilate the Ministry of Magic!"

Albus would have had a laugh to stifle if he wasn't immobilized, three feet away from a dangerous individual in the middle of a war torn village. He remembered his father saying this very thing at the beginning of the year. That Ares wanted to take on the Ministry. Albus had thought such a thing silly then...

"Then go for it" Albus snorted. "Just let me go! You can fail in your plans without me!"

"Fail?" Ares inquired.

"Yeah!" Albus shouted, and for some reason, he felt angry. He felt angry because he agreed with Ares on everything that he'd said about the Ministry, and more importantly, because even though he agreed with him, he'd never do this to innocent people. He allowed his rage to momentarily overcome his fear. "You're one person with a handful of masked garbage! And creepy skeletons!" he added bitterly.

Ares' expression was unfathomable. He merely stared for a moment before speaking.

"You're right" he said, and Albus blinked. "In my current state, I have only strategical advantage. I carefully allowed Waddlesworth's vigilante trash to exhaust the Ministry, and then invoked panic to make them lose whatever public approval that they had. But I remain, in this form, powerless. My ultimate plan is to create a new world- that is the plan that fate has given me. But it is done in steps. To create a new world, I must first destroy the old. To destroy the old, I eliminate the leaders that have allowed it to deteriorate."

His face lit up at the idea of his new world- and there it was again, that excitement in his face that Albus had never seen before. He looked like a man who'd waited decades to be standing where he was right here and now.

"The masked wizards that attacked today are but mud I've accumulated from having walked through filth. I hate them- they are mindless animals. I hated myself every day for having them do my deeds, but it was necessary. From this day forth, I have new allies."

He plunged his hand into his robes and withdrew his wand- the Dragonfang Wand. It sparkled in the moonlight, and the thrill of foreboding that Albus had been restraining since opening his eyes returned. He felt a most peculiar sensation as the wand drained the color from the rest of the scenery however. For some reason, he was salivating now. Had his lips not just been dry?

"The creatures that you saw today, I am to understand, are but a taste. A fragment of what this wand can control. In addition to giving me both power and wisdom, this wand provides me with a force unlike any other. Your Ministry, for all of its shortcomings- is powerful. Time has proven however, that it has weaknesses. It can not deal with what it does not understand. Voldemort, as has been said, amassed an army of dark creatures that the Ministry simply could not contain. They have learned from their mistake- you will never see a Dementor. But I attack with something far more dangerous and far more unexpected. Your Ministry has never dealt with these creatures before, and once I can control them, I can show their true power. I can destroy your government" he finished darkly.

Albus swallowed, the color draining from his face as he continued to eye the gleaming wand. For some reason, his eyes were fixed more intently on its golden glitter than they were the man holding it. Ares did not seem to notice however; he seemed too preoccupied in capitalizing on his chance to share his views and ideas.

"And from its ashes, I will rebuild. A new government- a new leadership. A new world! I have seen the errors of this one and I understand how to prevent it. After I destroy the Ministry of Magic, the one that I control will flood the world with order. Gone will be the days where the murderer continues to murder, the thief to steal! I seek a paradise; a utopia. A perfect world, managed as such."

"But you can't do that!" Albus bellowed, somehow snapping himself out of his gaze. "It doesn't work like that! You can't control people! They'll always-"

"Do what?" Ares spat. "Rebel? I do not expect you to understand, Albus Potter, you have not lived through turmoil as I have. The people are only as powerful as what they're allowed to do. Those who disobey my new world will be killed. There will be no technicality, or leniency, in my government! It seems crass, and cold, but how else can the world grow? Many will die, Albus Potter. For some time after I create my new paradise, those who rebel against it will be slaughtered. But it must be that way. They can not be allowed to contaminate. Their toxicity can

not prevail. Those unwilling to adapt to perfection will not survive, but they will not be missed either; for they will not have belonged. This world is full of people who don't belong Albus. In my world, anyone who is there has proven that they are supposed to be. Once the world learns that it can not get away with anarchy and destruction, and murder, and filth and corruption, it *will* cease. That is why we trim the edges, and dispose of rebellious dross like Waddlesworth, and of sadistic sycophants like the masked hoodlums I've sadly been forced to employ."

"And why stop there? Why should the Wizarding World only be allowed paradise? Fate is not a respecter of blood. I will embrace the Muggles as well. Co-existence will not be frowned upon! Have I not already explained the importance of unity? By the end of autumn, I will have destroyed the Ministry of Magic. All of it. Your father's death in particular, I confess, will rattle me, though I can not allow emotion to overcome logic. By next spring...the world will understand what it can be. And it will embrace itself, and become the utopia that it is capable of. But it begins...Here."

Albus blinked a single time, before realizing what was going on. Ares had not stowed away the Dragonfang Wand, it was still being held loosely at his side. It served more of a purpose than simply being a visual cue. It was still an instrument of destruction.

Albus felt his lips go numb as he said his next words, because he knew that at this point questions were useless; Ares' speech was over.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Ares stared at him. "Yes."

Albus began to hyperventilate. Even after everything that he'd encountered tonight, after being attacked by Renegades and chased by vicious creatures, this, he knew, was his most improbable of escapes. He could not even move. All that he could do was protest- beg even-

"Why?" he practically hiccuped. "Why? What does killing me accomplish, huh!" he screamed ferociously, and he was now struggling, though obviously doing a very poor job of it, as only his head was moving back and forth.

"I'm afraid to say that I digressed Albus Potter" Ares said calmly, not even blinking as he watched him struggle against his invisible bonds. "I apologize. I was so excited to share the ideas of my new world with you that I momentarily forgot that you will not get to experience it. I did not want it to come to this. I wanted it to be another way. Any other way. Be remember...fate assigns us our lives..."

He raised his wand up high and took a step forward. Albus felt fresh tears slide down his cheeks.

"Please!" he shouted miserably. "You don't have to do this! I'm not in your way! Destroy the Ministry, unleash those things, I don't care, do whatever, I can't stop you-"

"I can not use the full power of the Dragonfang Wand so long as you live" Ares said sadly, and Albus felt more angry now than sad.

"What does that even mean!" he barked. "I don't care what you do, I'm not going to stop you, this isn't about me, you can do whatever you want-"

"I'd explain the ancient, complex magic that renders your death necessary but I'm afraid that I'd only be prolonging the inevitable further. I'm truly sorry that it must be like this, Albus Potter" he said, loud enough so that his words overtook Albus' pleas. He pointed the Dragonfang Wand square at his face. "And I'm sorry that it must be me that does it. Any other way may contain complications."

"Please, I haven't done anything, I'm not going to tell anyone, I'm not going to try anything I just want to-

"Just know, Albus Potter. That it is nothing personal. Everything that I know of you suggests that you are a reasonably talented and exceedingly courageous young man. It is unfortunate. You had...so much potential..."

Albus stopped shouting and braced himself. He jammed his eyes shut violently, his tears and snot trickling into his mouth. This was it. His final seconds. His life's end. He thought of all that he'd never be able to do. He'd never be able to laugh with his friends again, to kiss Mirra again, to do anything that he'd taken for granted...

What would his final thoughts be? He had but moments to decide now. He never thought that he'd have to. Never thought that he'd have to quickly pick what the last image in his head would be, what the last words he'd think to himself would be...

He instinctively thought of his first kiss with Mirra, by the lake, but that was too recent. He needed to dig deeper. He thought of his sorting- of the surprise on everyone but James' face as he'd become a Slytherin. He thought of when his mother had once tried teaching he and James how to cook, how all three of them had ended up putting out a fire due to James' blunder, and later laughing about, describing it to Lily. He thought of his eight birthday, when his father had taken them all to see his mother play Quidditch professionally. He remembered sitting atop his father's shoulders, and then, for the first time, confiding in him that he was frightened of heights. That he did not like Quidditch. He thought of how his father had, for his birthday, abandoned the match for him and taken him to a regular muggle park, where he'd played on the slide and was pushed on the swings...

That was it. His father. He wanted his last moments to be a memory of his father, because that was the only protector that he had left. Today he had been protected by people he'd never expected, like Lucius Malfoy and Blackwood, and by people that he'd always counted on, like Morrison. Just weeks ago he'd been protected by Hagrid, and last year by Fairhart. But not his

father. His father, who he realized just now did not want this- was not purposefully making mistakes- his father, who he knew had always prepared him for moments like this, who had always explained to him things about life...about death. Who had been his only comfort when he'd doubted himself. Who he'd always looked up to, and just now, just recently, started to rebel against, despite him not having intended for anything bad, but had only done his best to be a father, even if it meant concealing the truth or being hated... he wanted his last thought to be a memory of his father. But which one?

*He was very young. Five, maybe six years old. He could scarcely move from how tightly his mother had tucked him in, but he didn't mind; it just meant that he was safer. Normally his father tucked him in first, and then his mother, but this time it was reversed. His father was now sitting on his bed, wiping away tears and cleaning his glasses.*

*He was in his physical prime. This was during the height of his popularity as an Auror. Albus had never known someone to be more respected, and had never known someone who he felt safer around. And he had never known his father- the unstoppable, unbreakable Harry Potter- to have cried.*

*"Why are you crying dad?" he asked tensely, the blankets all the way up to his chin.*

*Another tear leaked from his father's eyes. When he spoke his voice shook. "Because Aberforth was a very good friend of mine, and I'm going to miss him."*

*"Why can't he just come back?" Albus asked.*

*His father gave him a watery, wry smile. "Because he's gone Albus. That's what dying is. It's when you can't come back."*

*"Even if you want to?" Albus asked. He had heard of death before- a few times, but he'd never known the specifics of it. He'd never known if there was some way to cheat it or not.*

*"I don't know if he would want to, Al" his father replied, putting his glasses back onto his face. "He may really like it wherever he is."*

*"Then why are you crying?"*

*"Because I'm going to miss him" his father said, choking back another tear. "You never feel bad for the person who died Al. It was Aberforth's time. It's me and everyone else who knew him that's hurting now."*

*"Does dying hurt?" Albus asked cautiously and quietly, in case James had his ear pressed up against the door. He knew that it was a childish question, and he didn't want his older brother to go off on another tirade about how cowardly he was; about how he'd be sorted into a bad house like Slytherin.*

*"I don't think so Al" his father said. "I think it's a bit like falling asleep."*

*"But I hate falling asleep" Albus moaned, frowning. It was certainly true. Even completely tucked in, he somehow managed to toss and turn at night, and sometimes he even spent what felt like hours staring up at the ceiling.*

*His father gave a watery chuckle. "I know" he said. "But it's quicker and easier than that, I promise."*

*Albus didn't feel very convinced, and his father seemed to notice it, for he leaned in close as he said his next words.*

*"But you don't have to worry about that right now Al. You're not going to die for a long, long time, until you're more than ready. Don't even think about it" he said, wiping away one of his own tears and giving him a kiss on his forehead.*

*"Promise?" Albus said. He knew that his father would never break a promise- would never lie.*

*"Promise..."*

Albus continued to breathe heavily. Was this it? Was this what his father had meant by a long time? Just a few years? For some reason however, he felt comfort in this memory. There's no way that his father could have known what dying felt like; he'd instead told Albus what he'd wanted to hear; what he'd needed to hear. And strangely, he'd been right. For his eyes were still jammed shut. He could feel no pain. Why, for some reason, he felt like he was still alive...

He opened his eyes widely, unsure of what was going on. Had there not been a wand pointed at his face? But it was still there. Only curiously, it was shaking rapidly...

Ares' eyes were closed now. He appeared to be muttering to himself, looking just as nervous as Albus felt. His hand was shaking so violently that Albus that it might poke him in the eye; he even tilted his head back slightly. And that's when Albus realized it. Ares had not yet made his decision on what to do...

His eyes shot open, and at once the cold gray in them connected with the emerald green of Albus'. Looking into the eyes of his helpless victim seemed to awaken him slightly, and Albus quickly panicked, realizing that their eye contact may have edged him towards the more murderous decision. He saw Ares arm jolt, though whether he was lowering his wand or raising it to fire he did not know-

*"EXPELLIARMUS!"*

A monstrous streak of red light- one ten times the size of any disarming spell that Albus had ever seen, bolted its way towards them both- though it was closer to Ares. Albus watched as Ares spun to his right and deflected the spell upwards into the sky with a sharp wave of his wand.



Albus looked at who had casted it. Running towards them were two people- his father and Uncle Ron.

His father looked gritty and dirty; his regular wizards robes were torn, though he looked able bodied. Uncle Ron was wearing his Auror robes and looked a bit worse. There were spots of blood on his robes and face, and what looked like a chunk of bright orange hair missing from his head, but he too seemed prepared for battle. They both had their wands drawn.

"You stay away from him!" his father barked, looking murderous. "You stay away from my son!"

Ares sneered, and Albus noticed that he looked much more comfortable with two trained wizards approaching him than he did when his task had been to kill an unarmed teenager. He strode forward.

"Still unwilling fire a killing curse Potter? Have we not learned?"

"Had you not been standing next to my son I would have!" his father growled, and his face was cold with hatred.

"Stay where you are Albus!" Uncle Ron called out to him, and he seemed to be a bit more right in the head. His words weren't rippling with malice like his fathers.

Albus jerked his head back and forth to show that he couldn't move anyway, but was distracted by Ares' laugh.

"Really Potter? Of all the Aurors that respect and idolize you, you chose Weasley to be your dueling partner? Certainly, a jug of water would have sufficed? Or a house plant? Both would be just as useful for you here."

His father and uncle didn't laugh or show any sign of having heard him however. Instead, his father fired another spell.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Albus' eyes widened in shock as a jet of green issued from his wand- something that Albus thought that he'd never see. Even Ares appeared slightly shocked, but he still dodged the spell merely turning his head away, just as he had The Hammer's.

Albus saw Uncle Ron grab onto his fathers arm. "Calm down Harry!" he said. "We can't be reckless!"

No sooner had he said it did something occur that Albus knew was not going to help the situation. There was a loud *crack!* and then, right next to Ares, his brother stood.

Albus almost threw up when he saw Darvy, whose wild blonde hair looked dirty and matted as if he'd just now left the fight. His electric blue eyes looked hungry, like he still wanted to engage in action, but had something more important to say.

"Red!" he said breathlessly, grabbing on to his brother's robes. " Why'd you take off the anti-apparition charms! The Ministry is here! And I saw Potter! Potter is-"

But then he stopped when he saw him again. Darvy had just noticed Uncle Ron and his father. He withdrew his own wand quickly, though Albus thought that he looked a little out of place. His eerie blue eyes were darting back and forth, as if unsure if he was prepared for this particular fight. As he looked around, he saw Albus as well.

"Red? Why haven't you killed-"

"Quiet, Sebastian" Ares cut his brother off. He said his next words loud enough so that his opponents could hear him. "You came here to do something, did you not Potter? To test fate? And yet it favors me again, in presenting me with a partner of my own!"

Ares' brother looked at him before turning back to the opposition. With all four wands drawn, no one had the jump on anyone else.

"Double team Ares" Albus heard Uncle Ron say. "The psycho is irrelevant..."

Albus saw Darvy wince, but Ares spoke for him. "You seem confident in your abilities. Let's see them. You believe I am incorrect in my belief of fates vision for me, don't you Potter!" he yelled. "Now we find out! What is meant to be is all that can happen! If your son is meant to live," he said coldly, "You have to go through me!"

The two on two began. His father fired a lethal looking blue spell right at Ares, while Uncle Ron fired a canary yellow spell at Darvy. Ares blocked his easily, but Darvy was caught off guard and knocked off of his feet. Ares moved in front of him and whipped his wand around like a lasso. What looked like electricity surged through the sky from the wands tip, branching off and soaring towards both Uncle Ron and his father. They both narrowly avoided it by side stepping it.

Darvy hopped to his feet angrily, and Albus saw that he was bleeding from his mouth. "*Crucio!*" he cried, aiming his wand at Uncle Ron. Albus watched as his father deflected it with a silver beam of light. Ares, taking advantage of his father's insistence on protecting his partner, jabbed his wand through the air menacingly. Debris from a nearby shop raised itself up into the sky-sharp beams of broken wooden and shattered glass included. With a sharp wave all of it soared towards his father, but Uncle Ron blasted it away by repeatedly using *Reducto*.

So much was going on that it was hard for Albus to follow who was doing what. No one fired a killing curse, but Albus knew it was like this in fear that it would miss it's intended target, and

that included himself, who was still forced to struggle against invisible bonds as the battle progressed. He noticed however, that his father and uncle seemed to have the clear advantage. Whereas Ares appeared to be the most powerful wizard in the battle, he and his own brother lacked coordination. On numerous occasions he was forced to duck as Darvy stupidly fired a spell in a sad attempt to get lucky, and once Albus even saw Ares trip over Darvy's feet.

On the other side however, his father and uncle looked like they'd done nothing but fight together for their entire lives. They moved with both synchronization and with a level of unnatural comfort; sometimes it seemed as though they were one wizard sporting two wands. They forced each others head down at quickly fired spells, deflected things for one another from unseen angles, and at one point, Uncle Ron had done something truly phenomenal in that, after being knocked down, he'd wrapped his legs around his fathers mid section from the ground and pulled him out of the way of a stream of crudely transfigured knives that Darvy had fired from behind.

They were mostly using nonverbal magic, Albus realized, making it hard to get a good grip of who was aiming to do what, but Darvy seemed most intent of inflicting the most pure pain. He was firing Cruciatu Curses every second or third spell, all of them either being blocked or dodged easily.

Albus watched as his father fired a red spell that may have been a stunner right at Darvy. He successfully deflected it, but Uncle Ron had simultaneously crouched down and fired his own, and as Darvy was only capable of blocking one, he was caught just beneath his knees. His legs flew from under him from the force of the spell, and Ares, who had been charging up what looked like an actual meteor with his wand, was forced to abandon it so as to pull him up from the ground.

"Focus!" he spat, and he nonchalantly swirled his wand through the air. What looked like miniature fireballs soared towards Uncle Ron and his father, but they took turns extinguishing them with their wands.

Darvy threw his brother an angry glare before repositioning himself. Albus saw him shoot a stream of purple flames towards his father, but Uncle Ron deflected them away with a stream of red light. Albus saw his father whip his wand back behind his head and make a complicated twisting motion. What looked like a bead of solid white light formed at the tip, and the next thing Albus knew, a truly ferocious, blinding spell had burst from his wand, so powerful that it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up straight. He watched in awe as it danced through the air towards Darvy. He tried deflecting it with his own spell, but it proved useless and simply disappeared before it could even make contact. Ares was forced to step in front of his brother and, with great concentration it seemed, he drew his wand through the air in a circular motion. What looked like a silver bubble floated in front of him, taking the full blast of white light and somehow absorbing it before vanishing. There was silence for a moment, and then the orb reappeared behind his father, the jet of white light that he'd fired now coming directly at him-

Both he and Uncle Ron turned on the spot and conjured identical crimson shields, which were shattered within seconds but still managed to take enough of the brunt of the blast. They both stumbled back and Albus saw Darvy grin with murderous intent as he stepped in front of his brother.

"Watch out!" Albus yelled, sensing the cowardice in Darvy's move.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he cried, slashing his wand through the air.

The beam of green light came inches from Uncle Ron, who, despite stumbling, managed to instinctively leap to his left after having heard the curse be fired. The green light exploded upon contact with the ground where his feet had just been.

Albus breathed a sigh of relief as Uncle Ron rolled away to safety, but his father looked horrified, perhaps at having been unable to protect his partner. He planted his feet firmly into the ground to stop further stumbling, then muttered something under his breath vindictively as he slashed his wand through the air.

"No!" Ares shouted, and now it was he who pushed himself in front of his brother.

Albus watched the curse connect as if in slow motion. As Darvy was knocked backwards, a flash of red entered the air. Ares gasped in pain; it was as though he'd been slashed by an invisible sword. From his left shoulder to his right hip a diagonal wave of blood spilled out copiously; but the killing curse, it was the most lethal thing Albus had ever seen fired.

Ares sank to his knees, choking and stammering as blood leaked out of him. Albus saw his father's eyes widen in shock- though whether it was from what he had done or from Ares jumping in front of Darvy, Albus did not know. Uncle Ron too seemed taken aback, but it was nothing to Darvy, who watched his brother sink to the floor in agony with a completely blank expression on his face. The Dragonfang Wand slipped from Ares' fingers and rolled a few feet away, signifying a highly unexpected pause in the battle.

Ares now lay on the ground, clutching his bloody stomach. He was laying in a pool of dark red far worse than what Albus had been in from his thigh, though he was not moaning or showing any sign of pain apart from his clenched teeth. His fingers were clenched as well, into tight fists that banged on the ground as he tried to ignore the pain. He gave an almighty heave and blood spilled from his mouth onto his robes.

"Don't move!" Uncle Ron shouted at Darvy, who had risen to his feet and was still looking at his brother in disbelief. He looked hurt himself; or at least fatigued. Nothing compared to his brother however. Albus saw that Darvy's wand had been knocked from his hand as Ares had pushed him out of the way- he raised both of his arms up as if innocent.

"Don't move" Uncle Ron repeated, his wand still raised as he slowly started walking towards them both. Albus noticed that his father seemed just as paralyzed as he was. He wasn't moving in the slightest; his eyes were intently fixed on the bloody figure of his former partner.

Ares gave a groan and spit up more blood. Darvy took a few steps towards him.

"I said don't move!" Uncle Ron said fiercely, and it seemed like he'd have to be in control of the situation.

But Darvy didn't listen to him. He took another step, and Ares spoke a single word.

"Se-Se-Sebastian" he coughed out, more blood now spilling down his robes. He tried to move his arm, but it simply raised itself a fragment of an inch before hitting the ground again. He made a desperate, pitiful attempt at crawling on his back, but all that happened was the blood seemed to leak out more.

Darvy reached down and picked up the Dragonfang Wand.

"Put that down!" Uncle Ron said. "I mean it, don't you give that to him or you get the same!"

"Sebastian..." Ares croaked. "Sebastian, my- my- my wand..."

Darvy turned and looked at Uncle Ron. Then he did the unthinkable. He smiled widely. Uncle Ron lowered his wand slightly in confusion, and then Albus realized what was happening. Darvy was not holding the wand as if to hand it over. It was gripped as if to be used. He took a step towards his brother and pointed the wand downwards at his bloody face.

Everything went quiet. Uncle Ron and his father seemed to be too in shock at what was happening to know what to do. Albus heard the wind blow through the destroyed city, and then saw Ares pick his bloody head up just enough to look at Darvy's smiling face in fear.

"Se- Sebastian?"

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Albus eyes widened in shock. The bolt of green light hit Ares square in the face, his head bouncing off of the concrete twice before laying still. He felt movement at once- the spell binding him was broken, but he could think of nowhere to go. No way that had just happened. *No way.*

"*Stupefy!*" Uncle Ron shouted when he'd returned to his senses; Albus' father was still standing still, his face now pale white from shock. His uncle was so distracted however that the spell flew right over Darvy's head.

Albus watched as he spun around and looked at them- all three of them. He then cast another glance downwards at his dead brother, the sick and satisfied smile still on his face. He raised the

Dragonfang Wand up high and Albus heard a loud banging noise like that of a cannon. Crimson sparks rose into the air, twisting themselves into a ferocious, fiery sword in the sky.

Albus heard cracking noises all over Hogsmeade- the sounds of dozens of wizards disappearing. Darvy turned and gave him a ferocious, wild look before disappearing as well with his own malevolent *crack!* and Albus realized everything at once. This was planned. It had been a full blown mutiny of sorts. Ares had come to Hogsmeade for the opportune moment to kill him, and Darvy had come in hopes of the opportune moment to kill Ares. Only the latter had succeeded.

Albus sat motionless, still looking at Ares' bloody corpse. His father had snapped out of his trance and was running towards him, but Uncle Ron had went to check the body- which is where Albus went as well.

He stood up and ran over to it, stumbling as he did so and landing right next to the pool of blood. His father hurried along behind him and wrapped his arms around him.

"Albus are you okay! Albus look at me! Albus your hand!"

Albus said nothing. Uncle Ron stood up and walked away, having seen enough, but Albus could not do so. He could not draw his eyes away from the body of Reginald Ares. He recalled someone- possibly his mother- telling him that dead people looked like they were sleeping. Ares did not. His eyes were wide open from shock and betrayal, his mouth ajar and still filled with blood, the harsh lines of his face still filled with anger. He looked as though even in death, he was fighting a war.

## Chapter 23: Rise Of The Dark Alliance

Albus felt the blood of Ares begin to soak his pant legs; without realizing it, he had kneeled in it. For some reason his eyes stayed transfixed on the cold, murdered face in front of him. He felt relief flood his body- relief that it was over, that Ares had sought to kill him and failed. And yet, he felt something resembling pity formulate within him. Why did he even care?

He felt movement beside him, and though his father still had his arms around him- was still yelling at him to respond and check that he was okay- it was his Uncle Ron's quiet voice that he heard.

"Albus you need to go to the Hospital Wing" he said, and Albus saw, from the corner of his eyes, something glow blue. The next thing that he knew, a trash can lid had been placed down beside him.

Albus stood up and looked down at the portkey as Ares' blood dripped down his leg. He wanted nothing more than to leave, but at the same time, felt that he needed to stay. He glanced up at the fiery red sword in the sky; just now contemplating it's meaning. A red sword. Red War. Darvy had been mocking his brother...

"Albus quickly now!" Uncle Ron said, and Albus felt his father remove his arms from around him and give him a painful, exasperated look.

"Albus you must take the portkey to Hogwarts-"

Albus picked up the trash can lid just as it began to glow. In a matter of seconds he felt a sudden jerk behind his naval, and soon he was hurling through space. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was the image of his father and uncle looking down at Ares' body in confusion, as if unsure if they were supposed to just leave it in the street...

His feet hit solid ground, and he was so exhausted that he collapsed onto the cold floor at once. Before he could even open his eyes he heard a familiar voice.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN OTHER PATIENTS TO ATTEND TO!" he heard his brother yell.

"Mr. Potter please!" he heard a half frightened, half angry Madam Clearwater shout back. "I understand your worry, but I am doing all that I can!"

Albus opened his eyes and saw that he was in the Hospital Wing. Or more accurately, the Hospital Hall. The entire place had been widened, so that the amount of beds with curtains drawn around them had been more than quadrupled. He could hear people moaning and shouting, others crying as Madam Clearwater attempted to attend to them all. These were the victims of the ambush at Hogsmeade. He saw numerous other random objects loited around the floor; old newspapers, a broken cash register, even a bloody sneaker. Those unable to escape the carnage had been portkeyed out.

He looked up and saw, further down the long hallway in which he had collapsed, his very angry looking brother. His hair was windswept, and he was bearing down on Madam Clearwater like a man of power ready to sack a worthless employee. Albus saw the source of his rage at once. In the bed that he was standing next to lay Hugo; still unconscious and breathing softly. Two girls were attempting to restrain James; his girlfriend and Rose. Both seemed to be having a hard time of it.

"James she's done all that she can!" his girlfriend yelled.

"The quicker she gets to everyone else the more help she can give us!" Rose squealed as well.

Madam Clearwater made a huffing noise. "I suggest you listen to them!" she said icily. "I've already told you that your cousin is stable! We can only wait now! Now if you'll excuse me, I have to stick this into patients that haven't been fortunate to have been attended to!" she added fiercely, holding up a glowing green needle that was making an intimidating humming noise.

James bared his teeth at her snotty remarks. "I'll jam that up your-"

"Albus!"

Albus looked up and saw that Rose, in her attempt to turn James away by his arm, had spotted him. She let go from surprise, and James, upon hearing his name, spun around at once, his expression still angry. Albus slowly rose to his feet, but his brother had already begun running down the hall. Albus braced himself for a hug-

CRACK! His brother had cocked his fist back and punched him so hard in the face that he was quite sure his left cheek had collided with his right. He fell back down to the floor, once more in agony, clutching the side of his face.

"James!" both Rose and his girlfriend shouted, but James ignored them.

"What the hell were you doing in Hogsmeade huh!" he roared. "What the hell were you doing! Trying to get killed! Huh!"

Albus moaned in pain, seeing stars as he did so. He heard the shuffling of feet and saw Madam Clearwater's legs by his side.

"Out!" she barked at James. "You'll hurt none of my patients!"

Albus listened from the ground as James' girlfriend, who alone seemed able to restrain him, marched him down the hallway, where he continued to make a considerable amount of noise. He felt the nurse pick him up, but it was Rose who wrapped her arms around him.

"Can you escort him to a bed?" Madam Clearwater asked her. "He seems manageable- let me attend to other matters-"



Rose nodded, but even before she'd done so Albus had seen Madam Clearwater hurry off. Albus, still clutching the side of his face, rounded on her with misplaced anger.

"What was that all about?" Albus asked, snapping his jaw up and down to check that it still functioned.

"Oh that's just James!" Rose said, flapping her hands. "He's furious. Madam Clearwater said that she can't identify what Hugo was hit with, so she can't restore him or else he could go into shock. She said we have to wait..." she finished, tears welling up in her eyes, and Albus noticed that she looked just as disheveled as she had in Honeydukes. She had wasted no time in coming to the Hospital Wing.

"Yeah but why'd he hit-" Albus started, but he was cut off as his cousin wrapped her arms further around him, now crying hysterically.

"Oh Al!" she choked out. "I'm so sorry! I should have stunned you right then and there! But you were right, we were all wasting time- and you're so stubborn- and Mirra showed me the Cloak- I thought there's no way we'd talk you out of it- I thought we'd just let you go- but then you didn't come back and I-"

She trailed off there, still sobbing into his shoulder. "I'm okay" he said, patting her on the back, but then he felt a sharp stinging in his hand. Only now, with imminent death gone, were the pains of his body truly sinking in. "Where's Morrison?" he cringed, fear rising in his chest. Ares had left him there. Had he been recovered...?

"He showed up with a portkey" Rose said, wiping at her eyes. "They're all over here..." she started, and she led him down the hall. She started to speak but Albus was too distracted by the sights to his sides. Every step that he took showed him a new bed, with a new body in it. Some of them small children, definitely third years. Screaming as they clutched bloody legs. Others looked older, more mature- baring their teeth to hold back the pain of their various ailments. He saw a few adults as well; they were crying next to unmoving bodies.

"How- how many?" Albus asked, cutting her off from a sentence that he hadn't even been registering.

"Huh?" she said, looking at him as she led him down the hall.

Albus jerked his head in the direction of a random, moaning student.

"Oh I couldn't possibly count..." Rose said. "They're not all too hurt" she continued. "Just most" she finished sadly.

"How many- how many are- are- are any-"

He didn't have to finish his sentence. Rose just merely nodded her head sadly, looking down at the ground as she did so. Albus instinctively looked at a bed with a figure in it covered by blankets from head to toe, the student's tortured looking mother weeping over the body of her precious child...

The silence following this was too unbearable, and Albus found that he had plenty to ask. He did not know how much time had elapsed in between his falling unconscious and Ares' murder, but there was at least enough time for the Ministry to get there.

"Did you guys get help?" he asked. "After you went through the passage?"

Rose nodded, now wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. "We got the teachers, but only half of them went. The other half stayed behind here to help Madam Clearwater with all the students coming in. Hagrid had to stay by the gate to help students get in."

"Are the teachers back?" Albus asked her.

Rose nodded. "Except- I didn't see Blackwood" she said thoughtfully.

Albus said nothing, not even knowing what to make of this sentence. Had Blackwood escaped the battle? Or stayed until the very end?

His thoughts were knocked out of his mind as Rose came to halt in front of a series of beds with a crowd of people around it. Before he had the chance to even acknowledge who was in his presence he had been scooped up into a familiar, painful bear hug.

"Albus!" Morrison yelled, squeezing the life out of him. He began speaking without pausing "Albus I'm so sorry! I wanted to come find you! I woke up and no one was there and those things were gone and I went looking for you and I called out for you and then I heard people coming and then I hid and then I attacked them and it turned out to be your dad and they stunned me from surprise and the next thing I knew I woke up and I was here-"

"It's okay" Albus breathed through cracked ribs as Morrison let go of him. He looked around the beds and saw, first and foremost, Scorpius. Half of his face was bandaged, but he was now awake.

"Scorpius-" Albus started.

"What happened with you?" Scorpius asked, not even acknowledging his own poor condition.

Before Albus could answer he examined the other people. Mirra was there, at Scorpius' side and looking white as a ghost, though relieved at his presence. She seemed incapable of speaking- of saying anything at the idea of him being there, still alive. Lance was cooped up in a corner, sitting awkwardly in a chair, looking like a very tense person trying to be confident. His sixth year friends had left; he had chosen to stay behind with Scorpius.

"What happened mate?" Morrison asked him again. "Where'd you go?"

Albus took a deep breath, just now for the first time realizing that he was quite safe in the haven of Hogwarts' walls. That he could speak freely. That no one was chasing after him. He tried to gather his thoughts. "We got attacked by those- those-"

Morrison waved his hand. "I already told them about that" he said, and they all nodded. "I mean after I got knocked out."

Albus took another deep breath. "Ares found me" he said sharply.

They all gasped, and Mirra clasped her hands to her mouth.

Scorpius went even whiter than Mirra. "How did you- what did he do?"

Albus hesitated. Ares' words were still ringing in his head; all of them. Those that he had neglected to comprehend at the time were squeezing their way into his thoughts with relative ease now. Words of destruction...of utopia...of some kind of sadistic new world where no one made mistakes...

"He just- I woke up with his wand pointed at my face" Albus lied, not sure why he was skipping Ares' speech. For some reason it felt almost personal. It was as if Ares had wanted no one but him to hear it, and for some reason, he felt obliged to keep it that way.

They all gasped once more, and Lance looked up now as well, out of his stupor and curious as to how he had gotten out of this one.

"And then my dad showed up" Albus said quickly. "With my uncle."

He knew that he was skipping something here- skipping the part where he'd reflected on his life, where he'd cried and begged for it. Knew that he was skipping a moment when Ares had closed his eyes as well...

"And then?" they all asked collectively.

Albus could not possibly formulate the words to tell the rest of the story. He wondered when they'd all find out if he didn't however. He skipping right to the ending.

"Ares is...dead."

They all widened their eyes in shock, all of them making different noises, some of them gasps, others triumphant yells.

"Your dad did it?" Scorpius asked.

"N-no" Albus stammered out.

Rose's jaw dropped. "M-my- my dad?" she said, sounding both mortified and impressed.

"No" Albus said, a bit firmer this time.

They all exchanged glances with one another before Morrison raised his hand for a high five.

"Way to go Al!" he said, bringing it down, looking exhilarated.

"Not me either" Albus said, shaking his head. "Darvy."

*"What?"*

The explosion of different noises occurred once more, only now they had a much more bemused tone to them. Morrison had even turned his head to the side, making him look very much like a confused dog.

"What are you- huh?"

"You look tired mate" Scorpius said. "And like you've lost a lot of blood-"

"I know what I saw!" Albus belted out, feeling his skin crawl. He knew that they could not believe him however. He himself was having trouble believing it. The entire idea behind it was preposterous. He buried his head in his hands, unsure of what emotion he should be feeling. Relief was first and foremost, but then...triumph? Or joy? Anything good, because a man out to kill him had been murdered himself? But then there was fear. Fear of Darvy...and bewilderment as to what happened next.

Though his head was in his hands he could still feel their eyes on him, all of them clearly doubting his words- writing it off as a hallucination. It didn't matter though. They'd all know soon enough. it wouldn't be long now before Darvy sent a message to the Ministry, before he announced his new position as supreme ruler of the universe...

He felt a pair of arms wrap around him, distracting him from the total silence. Without even looking he knew that they were Mirra's. He could not bring himself to look up, could not bare to take another glance around the hall, which was still filled with screaming and moaning students. He simply allowed her to rest her chin on top of his head. What felt like years later he heard Madam Clearwater's voice.

"Okay, let's give you a look!"

Mirra removed her arms from around him, and Albus saw the flustered looking medical professional wiping at her forehead; she looked exhausted. "I've got more people to see. Let's take a look at that hand first."

Albus cringed as she snatched his bloody hand up into her own. There was the strangest combination of numbness and pain; he could not quite explain it. She examined it, making him flex his fingers as she wiped the dry blood from it with a cloth.

"And you're not sure what pierced it?" she asked casually, pinching the tip of each finger. With the blood gone Albus could see what looked like a small hole perfectly placed in the palm of his hand.

"Just debris" he said. "Wood and stuff..."

His friends were all cringing as well, just from the sight of it.

"Well it's just a regular wound" she said, and she removed wrappings from her pocket and began to bandage him. "Just change these every day. Any curse wounds?"

Albus nodded, though he wasn't sure if the term was correct. He held out his leg, where sure enough, his pant leg was still ripped from where the creature had siezed his flesh and ripped it effortlessly. There was more cringing from his friends. Madam Clearwater examined this more thoroughly than she had his hand, and Albus knew it was for good reason. Rather than just coated with dry blood, it looked purple and swollen.

"Did someone already heal this?" she asked, running a single finger up and down the most callous part of the mark.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Erm- I dunno" he lied. "Don't remember" he added, hoping that she would simply account it all to the confusion of the battle. Once more, the fact that Ares had healed his leg seemed a little to personal, in addition to baffling.

"Well whoever it was they did a fantastic job" she said. "But it still needs treatment. Could get infected, even if it isn't open. Dark magic tends to sink through the skin almost- it's usually more of an internal thing. I'll bring you an antidote and some sleeping potion" she said, standing up now. "Anything else?" she added.

"No" Albus said, though he knew that there were probably a few more aches and pains that he was neglecting. He watched as she brandished her wand, and another bed squeezed itself between Scorpius' and another persons. She bustled away to get his potion, leaving Albus with his friends once more.

Mirra looked for a moment as if she was finally going to say something, rather than merely wrap her arms around him, but Albus had turned his head away. It wasn't out of anything other than an

unwillingness to talk however. He had gotten the gist of how the night had occurred outside of what had happened with him. Now he was looking at the ramifications.

He saw that a bed across from him, on the other side, had what looked like a fourth year girl in it. She looked dazed, as if she'd just woken up from unconsciousness. The person in the bed next to her was barely visible from being covered by bandages, and seemed unable to move. There was still loud talking all throughout the hall; still the occasional scream as someone else arrived by portkey, as students either breathed sighs of relief and shrieks of terror at the appearance of their peers...

"Drink up, drink up" someone said, and he saw that madam Clearwater had returned. Without even glancing at the potion he tipped it down his throat. It tasted terrible- he imagined it would be like drinking the sweat from socks. He quickly downed the next potion, the sleeping one, as if hoping to wash it down, but it tasted hardly better. He next laid back in his bed, his friends now dividing up their conversations amongst themselves. Lance and Rose were talking, and Morrison and Scorpius as well... Mirra was sitting on the foot of his bed still looking lost for words...

He blinked his eyes a few times. He had not expected the potion to work so quickly. He already felt his eyelids grow heavy. Once more he tried mustering incoherent thoughts before they closed, trying to decide what would lead him to sleep. Once more, he focused on his father. Was he still in Hogsmeade? Scooping up barely alive bodies and sending them back to Hogwarts? Had he found anyone else? Had he found Eckley? Eckley still had the Cloak, after all...

He was running through darkness again. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he bolted down an endless tunnel, nothing behind him, nothing ahead of him. All he knew was that he could not stop. But alas, even as he thought it, he did. He stopped for a single moment to wipe the sweat from his brow and saw that his deviation from routine had cost him. They'd caught up with him.

He heard his own breath rattle as he began to panic, looking around at the dark ground to see where the first strike would come from. And then it happened, from right behind his ankle, a hand had shot up. He fell down at once, but he noticed that it was not the usual hand that grabbed him. This one was meatier. It was a human one. He felt a hole open up beneath him, a hole of blinding crimson light. He struggled in vain as the hand continued to pull him down the hole, his fingers scratching the pitch black ground. He looked down and gave a shout of fright at who was pulling him.

It was Darvy. He had a maniacal smile on his face, his beady blue eyes glinting with insanity as he gave a powerful tug, and Albus' hands came loose from the ground, he was falling now...

A hand grabbed his own. He looked up and gave another terrified shout. It was one of those-those things. Disgusting and rancid, it looked down at him with eyeholes that contained no eyes, the teeth of it's jaw clenched with determination. Despite it's lack of face, it looked almost human

in it's concentration. The hand that grabbed him was slimy and almost skinless, but it was powerful as well, and now Albus felt his body stretch as Darvy tried to pull him down and this creature- for some reason- tried to save him...

He felt everything spin. He closed his eyes in confusion, and suddenly the grip around his hand was gone. Instead, he had closed his own fingers around someone else's wrist...

He looked down and saw that he was now the one standing outside of the hole, and the person that he was holding up was no longer himself. It was Ares. Darvy, however, stayed firmly in place. He continued to tug at his brother's foot, and Albus was now stuck trying to pull Ares out of the hole, and now *Ares* was being stretched, only he was speaking...

"Take it boy!" he barked, and Albus nearly let go from the sound of his harsh voice. "Take it!" he repeated. "It's all yours now!"

"I don't- I don't understand-" Albus said, and he felt Ares' hand slip through his fingers slightly, so that he was now just barely hanging on. He was not even sure what he was doing. Why did he want to save Ares? Why not just let Darvy kill him again?

"Take it!" Ares roared. "It belongs to you!"

Albus felt his body tingle. Suddenly, the shocks that went through his skin were there again, as well as the buzzing noise in his ears. He gave a mighty heave and pulled Ares up, away from the clutches of his brother, and then...and then he felt it...

Everything turned golden. But now he saw that the light was not just his eyes. Now it was his entire body glowing, as power flooded through him. Power and control. He became immersed in it, and for the first time, he examined his immaculate body. He held up his glowing hands; Ares and Darvy were now gone completely. All that was there was him and the darkness.

He flexed his fingers- his instruments of annihilation. He stared down at his golden feet and saw that they'd left the ground. He was floating. Literally levitating. He almost laughed from how powerful he felt. He could do anything, anything that he wanted, anything that he could think of, with just a thought...

The light radiating from his body pierced through the darkness, and he saw hundreds of them. Hundreds of those skeletal creatures, all lined up, bowing. Kneeling before him, as he rose up higher and higher into the dark sky, his arms outstretched. He no longer even needed his wand. He could destroy everything with a breath. He could end it all with a snap of his fingers...

"Blimey, she's a dangerous one, isn't she?"

Albus shot up straight, his legs numb. Someone had thrown a white blanket over him, which he immediately tried to tear off. Still sweating, he looked around. What an incredibly vivid dream...

"Rise and shine sleepy head" Morrison said, and Albus realized that it was this voice that had awoken him. The sounds of the Hospital Wing still penetrated the air, but there seemed to be more cries of relief than despair. The hardest hours were over...

Albus saw that curtains had been drawn around them, and then realized why he couldn't move his legs. There was a wave of red hair flowing over his them. Lily had fallen asleep, curled up on his bed at his feet like a cat.

"When did she get here?" Albus asked.

"Teachers let the younger students out of their common rooms a few hours ago" Morrison said. "It's day break now. Danger's over I guess."

Albus looked around to see what else had changed. Mirra was curled up in a chair, sleeping but somehow still looking tired. She had obviously gotten up so as to allow Lily to take her place. Scorpius was still in his bed, and still bandaged. He was looking over at two other people, apparently unconcerned with anything else.

Rose and Lance were sitting side by side in separate chairs, right at the corner of their little enclosed space, both sleeping. Rose's head, however, had fallen onto his shoulder.

Albus wiped at his eyes. "Someone said something about danger?" he asked stupidly.

"Your Aunt Hermione was here" Morrison said tensely. "Had a bit of a- erm- spat with Madam Clearwater. Apparently Hugo's awake now, but she refuses to move him from his spot towards us. Your aunt and uncle are still with him.

"Uncle Ron?" Albus asked, looking around wildly as if expecting to see someone. "Did my dad show up?" he asked quickly.

Morrison shook his head. "Sorry mate". Then he saw the look on his face. "But I mean, he's definitely fine. We'd of heard otherwise. By the way, your uncle brought something" he snarled, indicating Mirra. Albus glanced at her and saw something that he hadn't noticed before. There was a fresh newspaper curled up in her hands.

He gently slid it off of her and, dreading the sight of it, glanced at the first page.

### **Death Toll At More Than Sixty, Dark Alliance Makes First Strike**

*The death toll of last night's "Hogsmeade Massacre", as it's been dubbed, has officially been counted at sixty three, with a very strong chance of increase as more people are found. In an official statement by Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Ministry has announced that such an act is the first sign of an impending war with what has been called "The Dark Alliance".*



*"The Ministry of Magic, shortly after the battle subsided, received further terroristic threats and messages from Sebastian Darvy, who in addition to naming his group of dangerous individuals, promised more to come. We can only ask that the public- as hard as it may be- try and remain calm and understand that we are doing our best prevent such things from occurring."*

*The idea of Darvy being the spokesperson for his new group is a difficult one, but the former accomplice of Reginald "Red War" Ares may be the closest thing to a leader that is known. Shackbolt revealed just hours later that the deceased body of Ares was found among the wreckage of the war, undisputedly by murder. The person responsible, though unknown, is believed to be former partner of Ares and famed former Head Auror Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter, who was seen at the end of the battle.*

*"I saw Potter charge through the streets just as the fight was thinning out" says Angus Atherbody, a shopkeeper who stayed behind to help usher innocents into his shop so as to flood out. "He looked like a man on a mission. Did things with a wand I'd never seen before."*

*Though many escaped by flooding out through shops or walking straight out of the village (Hogwarts students, in their last trip of the semester, did this to reach the castle), Anti-Apparition charms prevented Ministry employees from entering the fray. Potter, who is receiving a considerable amount of praise from the public for his actions, was one of the few making a difference in the battle outside of those who already resided in the village. Wands And Redemption, a hugely popular organization dedicated to fighting the Dark Arts in a manner reminiscent of the Order of the Phoenix, lost many in its attempts to defend the people.*

*"It was not our obligation" says WAR leader Warren Waddlesworth, sporting scratches and bruises from participating in the battle himself. "It was our duty. Our job is to protect the people when the Ministry can not- as they clearly proved unable to. Many fell- but they did not fall in vain. Every life is valuable, but serves a great purpose in protecting others. My single greatest regret is that I myself could not have died in place of the poor children who did; I urge any grieving families in need of monetary assistance to come forward. Though I can not take away their pain, I will willingly provide them with the assistance necessary to properly bury their loved ones."*

*In addition to his unprecedented munificence and powerful compassion, Waddlesworth has promised to not relent in his plans of stopping the threats aimed at the Wizarding World.*

*"This was but a single fight" he went on to say in a brief press conference. "Wands and Redemption lives to fight another day. Ares is dead. Many of his supporters with him. But we remain strong. We have lost many good souls, but have made progress in our attempts. Wands and redemption is created by the people, for the people. And as long as our good citizens do not surrender, nor do we. This Dark Alliance can not understand our unity; that is why they run amok in embarrassment. We are more than wizards, and that is what they do not understand, that is why they will fail. We needn't wear masks to conceal our identities, or summon creatures*

*to fight our battles for us. Courage is our sword, and wisdom our shield. Wands and Redemption will protect the people at any cost, so as long as there is breath left in our bodies."*

*Waddlesworth was, of course, referencing the grotesque creatures that remain unidentified ( for more information, see pages 6-7) -*

Albus tore through the pages, unwilling to read Waddlesworth's ostentatious lies and eager to learn more about one of the biggest mysteries of the night. Morrison started to say something about ripping the paper, but Albus ignored him when he reached the proper page. Right at the top was a black and white, unmoving photograph of (Albus felt his stomach drop) a pile of bones and skin. Albus recognized it as the very creature that Ares had destroyed. The caption underneath read *Pictured Above: Remains of unidentified dark creature. Believed to have been destroyed by a member of Wands and Redemption.*

Albus rolled his eyes, then lowered them to the text.

*Though the Hogsmeade Massacre is over, leaving carnage in its wake, some mysteries about the terrible ordeal remain unsolved, among the most pressing of them the identities of several ferocious, Inferi-esque creatures seen during the battle.*

*"It was the most disgusting thing I've ever seen" said Svetlana Altukhova, 19, who escaped certain death by putting a hastily made Disillusionment Charm on herself and standing in an alley. "It walked with a limp, but gave this terrible screech with every step. I saw its fingers up close- they were like claws."*

*Though this is quite an accurate description, others have claimed different behavior, possibly relevant to the skeletal monster's method of execution.*

*"It ran on four legs" said Curtis Dezerian, a Wands and Redemption member who sustained major injuries during his battle with the creature. "Or at least it seemed like it. And it repelled everything- even my most lethal curses did nothing but irritate it."*

*Dezerian was fortunate enough to get lost in the battle, away from the target of the creature, but he has wounds on his body from the beast. Magizoologist Herbert Keen, member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, has attempted to confirm the identity of these dangerous fiends based off of the remains seen above and eyewitness accounts, but has thus far only been able to debunk possible solutions.*

*"The obvious answer is Inferi" Keen says. "But this is impossible. Inferi are reanimated corpses, and have similar appearances, but act in a more controlled matter. Battle cries and organized movement- as described by some- indicate a more intellectual beast. Primitive in its offensive capabilities, but sophisticated in its possibilities."*

*Keen batted away the idea of uncloaked Dementors as well. "The intense cold that some have acknowledged is the product of genuine fear and surprise, not magical means. Dementors fight a more psychological battle, and are largely magic based. These creatures, though certainly not a muggle concoction, tend to rely more on physical attributes and seem generally unconcerned with sustenance. They are a very bloodthirsty enemy."*

*Though the terrifying creatures appeared scarcely throughout the battle and miseriously vanished shortly before it's end, the Ministry is urging anyone with information regarding this additonal threat to safety to come forward-*

Albus tossed the paper down, frustrated. He laid back on the hospital wing bed, the relief that he'd felt earlier now replaced with a very uncomfortable feeling indeed. His dream- which as he had expected, had vanished from his mind- had given him a jolt, or a second wind of sorts. But his body itself still felt tired and sick.

"All done reading?" Morrison asked.

"I skimmed" Albus grunted. "What time is it?" he asked.

"No clue. It's definitely morning" Morrison said solemnly.

The yells and sobs and cries of the people outside of his curtain seemd to subside for a moment as Albus closed his eyes in thought. What he was thinking about he was not sure; it was mostly flashes. Eating ice cream with Mirra. Then people being levitated. Lucius Malfoy, of who's fate Albus did know, smacking him across the face. Blackwood, who's fate he also didn't know, sobbing and tossing him Fairhart's ring. Eckley, laying on the ground moaning. Being chased, and then picked up and carried. Having a wand pointed at hs face. And finally, a bloody body sprawled out in front of him...

"Any sign of Eckley?" he asked suddenly.

"Yeah, they found him" Morrison replied.

Albus pounded his pillow. "Had he not slowed me down," he said angrily, "I could have found you and gotten us out of there before those things came!"

He knew it was stupid to sporadically blame someone now, and someone most undeserving for that matter, but he was used to laying blame on Eckley- it just felt right.

"I wouldn't be so anti-Charles Eckley" Morrison said. "From what I gathered, he called out to your dad and uncle as they passed. Told them where you'd gone. Even insisted that he lead them to you after they'd healed him up a bit, but he got sent back here."

Albus frowned, feeling slightly guilty now. Wanting to quickly change his demeanor, he asked a rather pressing question. "Did anyone mention my Cloak?"

"I think your uncle said it was recovered" Morrison answered him.

Albus gave a breathless sigh and laid back down, fixing his pillow. There was a moment of silence, one where he came very close to seeing flashes again, but Scorpius broke it. It was the first words that he'd said since Albus had woken up.

"This is the part where everything changes, isn't it?" he said, not breaking his gaze from Rose and Lance.

Albus and Morrison exchanged a look; it felt weird to be part of such a thing.

"Some things" Morrison said, and he stopped there, not knowing how to finish his sentence. Albus had things to say however.

"Look guys," he said, his voice cracking slightly, "I'm sor-"

"Forget it" Scorpius cut him off, giving his head the slightest of shakes. "Just forget it. What happened happened. We're not sure of any other way it could have happened, and there's no point playing out stupid scenarios about what would have or should have- or even could have- been. For all we know you being there did a lot to help."

Albus fell silent. He knew full well that Scorpius had not meant these words to sting, but they actually had. The fact he was willing to not rub it in- not mention his warnings of the last few weeks, meant a great deal. Albus noticed however, that even as he'd said it all, his stare had remained where it was.

He realized that he, Scorpius, and Morrison were the only ones that could hear their discussion. It was just like being in the Common Room, and Albus used the privacy.

"So are they-" he started, looking over at Rose and Lance.

"Probably" Scorpius said bitterly. "Tough times bring people together, right? Helps you realize what you care about. What you're willing to do" he added, and Albus saw that he almost subconsciously touched the bandages on his face.

"What happened to your face?" Albus asked him suddenly.

"He got hit by a curse" Morrison threw out smartly.

"Very astute" Scorpius said, his tone dry.

"No I mean-" Albus was not sure how to word it, but he had the strange suspicion that he was correct in his assumptions. Scorpius looked as though he'd put up little resistance against whatever was fired at him, strange, as Albus knew that even at fourteen he was still a very capable wizard. It was almost like he hadn't had the time to defend it. "Who was it fired at?"

Scorpius said nothing, though Morrison looked at him curiously. When he continued to not speak, Albus simply blurted his question out.

"Does she know?" he asked. "Like, did she see you take it?"

Scorpius winced, and for a second it looked like his bandages would become unraveled. He cleared his throat.

"No."

"You should tell her" Albus said seriously.

For the first time, Scorpius turned his head and looked right at him. "If I did," he started sadly, and a frown stretched out on his face, "How much difference...Could it really make?"

Morrison frowned now. "All the difference in the world mate!" he said breathlessly, sounding for the first time like he did not want the mood to be cheery.

Scorpius said nothing, but merely turned back to what he'd been looking at. Albus suddenly felt like he was intruding; he longed to stretch his legs at this point, regardless of what he might see.

"I'm going to go check on Hugo" he said, afraid that if he stayed he'd only be pressuring Scorpius to give a more direct statement.

They both nodded as he carefully and quietly removed himself from his bed, making sure to not disturb Lily. He calmly threw the blanket over her once she had the bed all to herself, and without another word, exiting the curtains.

It was a vastly different scene. Albus could tell, as he walked through the hall, that things were not half as hectic as they'd been the night before. It was indeed the grieving the period now. The hall was mostly cleared, but not everyone had their curtains up. Some curtains he noticed however, were more than just drawn, but rather looked ruffled like they'd been squeezed at. Behind these he could hear sobs, and he knew that was where the most serious injuries were. Probably where those deceased were as well.

Madam Clearwater was not patrolling anymore, Albus suspected that she was now staying with the more severe cases. People did bustle by him, but they all seemed too busy with finding their loved ones to pay him much mind. He wondered if he'd even be able to tell where Hugo was, as a curtain may be drawn around him, but after only a few minutes of walking he heard a familiar voice coming from behind pink hangings.

"I just don't understand Hugo!" Aunt Hermione was saying, sounding flustered. Albus stood still, listening intently.

"I'm sorry..." he heard Hugo mutter.

"Don't be sorry kiddo" Uncle Ron said. "We're not angry with you-"

"-Oh yes we are!" his more stern wife cut in.

"Well I mean, what's most important is that you're okay..."

Aunt Hermione made a sound like she was tearing at her hair. "I knew that passageway was bad news!" she said, and Albus felt his heart drop. "Remember Ronald? Remember when we were at Hogwarts, and Harry snuck in!"

"You were more against the Map-"

"I was against it all!"

There was a shuffling noise, as if Uncle Ron had turned his attention away from her. "How did you say you found out about it again?"

Albus' palms started to go sweaty...he was in trouble now.

"*I told you*" he heard Hugo whine. "I overheard a seventh year mention it. I don't even know the name of the guy!"

"Well that's not what I want to know most" Aunt Hermione said, and Albus heard Rose in her voice. "What were you doing in there in the first place?"

"I just wanted to see the village" Hugo mumbled. "I didn't want to have to wait another year."

Albus stepped through the curtain at this point, clearing his throat loudly as he did so. All eyes turned to him, but Aunt Hermione was the first to embrace him, her tone changing to a watery one.

"Oh Al! We're so glad you're okay!"

"Erm-"

He knew that she knew he hadn't been allowed in Hogsmeade either, but he supposed his painful looking appearance was cutting him some slack here. She simply continued to squeeze him tight, her brown, bushy hair scratching at his face.

"Mum, could you get me a drink?" Hugo asked politely.

Aunt Hermione turned around at once. She gave a watery smile, no longer looking or sounding angry- girls were strange. Or perhaps it was just mothers.

"Of course" she said, and she walked through the curtains at once, completely out of sight. Uncle Ron, sensing that a moment of privacy was apparently needed, gave his son a shifty grin before turning on his heel.

"I'd better help her with that drink" he said. He gave Albus a clap on the shoulder however.  
"Glad you're okay Al. What happened to your face though? You look like a damn dalmation..."

Albus felt the side of his face with his hand, where James had hit him. "Oh. Erm- Ares" he said quickly.

"Ahh. Didn't notice it before..."

And he left as well. Albus immediately pulled up a chair and sat down, looking at his cousin with a vague expression on his face. Hugo looked for the most part okay, if not a little peaky.

"How do you feel?" Albus asked him.

"Dizzy" Hugo said. "But fine"

Albus noticed that he was tucked in very roughly, almost as if he couldn't move. His mother had tucked him in the same way when he was younger. Indeed, he had just been thinking such a thing not so long ago...

Albus clapped his hands together, unsure as to what was left to say. He finally asked it. "What were you really doing in Hogsmeade?"

Hugo looked down. "Trying to stop you" he said. "Sorry."

Albus sighed. "Hugo don't apologize!" he said restlessly. "You didn't do anything wrong. I was- I was an idiot" he finished. "It's my fault you're in here! I should be apologizing to you. And I am. I'm sorry..."

Hugo said nothing, but a very peculiar look crossed his face. He seemed to be in deep thought. It was as though as much as he struggled to believe that his older cousin was a fool...he could not deny it. Nor could he deny why he was laying in the Hospital Wing. Albus waited for him to accept the apology, but most unusually, he continued to hold his silence.

Albus gave him a weak smile. "Maybe- maybe when you get a little better we can go flying for a bit" he said. "All day even!" he added enthusiastically, not wanting to put so little effort into it. He knew that Hugo wanted nothing more than to go flying with him. This was sure to cheer him up...

"I don't know" Hugo said calmly. "I'm not really into flying like that. Tried it, didn't really like it."

Albus felt his insides shrivel up. "You- you don't want to?" he asked stupidly.

Hugo gave a slight shrug. "No, not really" he said, avoiding his gaze. Albus did his best to conceal a frown. Hugo continued speaking however. "Could you find my mom though? Tell her I'm not that thirsty after all?" he asked politely.

Albus stared at him for a moment, almost in disbelief. All of his words hit him at once. "Huh? Ye-ye-yeah I can" he said, and he stood up.

"Thanks" Hugo said, still looking away from him. Albus approached the curtain sadly. Hugo was not looking at his idol anymore, and Albus knew why. Because he no longer had one. Albus had lost that recognition. That honor.

He wiped a single, inexplicable tear from his eye as he stepped through the pink curtains, surprised at how suddenly disheartened he felt. Scorpius had been quite correct. Things were already changing.



## Chapter 24: To End It All

The Quidditch Final was cancelled. Exams were postponed briefly, and then finally taken, but only due to academic necessity. Headmistress McGonagall heavily hinted at a powerful curve for their results, which the students thought nearly nothing of anyway. Classes continued, but Albus found that they ended up as little more than optional. All absences were automatically excused, attributed to grieving students, and teachers seemed to care very little about marking papers or assigning work. Albus had expected a full blown revolt- entire classes to be empty- but instead, they stayed mostly full. He even went. It seemed that the school as a whole needed something to help clear it's head, even if only for a few hours a day.

The official death count came in almost a week after the massacre, at a total of seventy nine. Some were identified as members of Darvy's new Dark Alliance, others as Renegades. The vast majority however, were regular people. Just innocent people, in the worst place at the worst time.

Thirteen had been Hogwarts students. Of them, eight had been seventh years who had stayed behind to fight, the other five having simply been incapable of escaping. Albus had considered himself relieved at first, relieved to have known none of them, before becoming sick with himself. All that meant was that there were thirteen people dead, probably because of him...whose names he had never bothered to learn.

Every house was represented in their deaths, except for Slytherin. No inter-house antagonism arose from this however; no accusations of cowardice or anything of the sort. Albus supposed that this had to do with the fact that though no Slytherin had died, all four houses had their fair share of people laying in Hospital Wing beds. The Hall had slowly trimmed down over time, as more and more people had gotten healthier, but when someone walked by in the halls with their arm in a sling and their face barely recognizeable, no one cared much to examine the color of their ties. Albus had thought for sure that the school itself would shrink- that parents would rip their injured children from the school the second that they could move, but proved horribly incorrect. On the contrary, parents seemed to be dreading the day when their kids were forced to leave. Hogwarts had shown itself to be exactly what his father had always told him it was. The safest place in the world.

"Stinging hex" Scorpius said suddenly, as another person passed by them, their arm dangling loosely to reveal bubbles of skin. "And it looks like it hurt too."

Albus spent a considerable amount of time in the Hospital Wing now, though his hand barely bothered him outside of when he stupidly grabbed things, and his leg felt quite fine as well. Scorpius had gotten his banadges off about a week ago however, and his face looked fine, if not unusually pale- which was saying something considering the tone of his skin already.

"Bad burns, one o' clock" Morrison said, jerking his head in the direction of a sixth year student who had a rather dark face compared to his neck.

Pointing out the ailments of others had become common place, but it was not done to insult or deprecate. Indeed, such a thing was done primarily to point out inspiring situations. Seeing other people walk out of the Hospital Wing on their own was even occasionally accompanied by applause from those still in it. And Albus found that watching the progress of others made him feel something strangely similar to hope.

"Blimey, that kid's a soldier, he is" Scorpius said, pointing at a third year who looked almost hunchbacked as two of his friends helped him out- something had damaged his spine, it would seem.

"Mail's here" came a calm voice that still gave Albus butterflies. Mirra had arrived with the *Morning Prophet*.

She smiled at him and sat down on the floor next to him, handing it over.

"Anything interesting?" he asked dryly, not sure why he still asked such a thing. It was the very same every day now. Front page story about the steps that the Ministry was taking, an interview with Waddlesworth about why those steps would fail, and a single article about how someone else's perception of his father had changed.

There was little news about Darvy however. Everything surrounded rebuilding rather than imminent destruction, and Albus wasn't sure how he felt about this. On one end, it seemed like a break was necessary, but on the other, Albus felt that more information should have trickled out by now. The last thing that the Ministry had reported about the massacre itself was that there were now rumors that it had been a member of WAR that had killed Ares. Albus had almost laughed when the thought of The Hammer raising his arms in glory had popped into his head.

"Same old, same old" she said. "Just another person saying that the Ministry was wrong all along in removing your dad from his post. And now just a petition to get him back."

"That all?" Albus said bluntly, having long since expected such a thing to occur. The very day after the attack numerous people had written in to say what they'd seen him do during the last hours of the battle, and all of them had been quite positive.

"Well, that and the Ministry has promised to hand out pamphlets on self defence this summer."

Scorpius stifled a laugh. "I think everyone knows how to run, to be honest."

They chuckled, but fell silent as a girl hobbled passed them to a smatter of applause from the other residents of the Wing.

Mirra rose up from her feet. "Well I dropped off the paper" she said. "So my job's done. I'm going to go meet Rose and...erm, some friends."

It was quite strange. Normally, she would conceal the fact that it was Eckley and Hornsbrook she was meeting, but now they all knew it was Lance. A few days after the terrible Hogsmeade visit had passed, the term "official" had been used to refer to Lance and Rose, and though Scorpius shrugged it off, they all knew the damage it had done.

"Tell your friends I said hi" Scorpius said, disgruntled.

Mirra gave him a weak smile before turning to leave. Albus hopped up. "I'll walk you" he said, and the next moment they were both exiting the Hospital Wing at the same time. Two things happened. First, their hands instinctively reached together. And next, Mirra had begun giving him a hurried explanation.

"Lance *really* isn't that bad a guy" she said quickly. "I mean, obviously, I know you'd prefer it if Sc-

"You don't have to explain anything to me" Albus said with a shrug. "I've got nothing against him."

"Yeah but- I know- I know that you were pretty intent on helping Scorpius-"

"Scorpius is a big boy" Albus said. "He can take a hit, believe me."

The truth was, however, that Albus had decided to not let his friend end up as some sympathy rack. He knew that Scorpius would not want pity, or anything of the sort. He'd only want to take action, and Albus was going to leave him be.

"And- erm, I know you're not very protective of your cousin, but I just thought you should know-"  
"Mirra started again.

Albus shook his head. "Look, I'm cool with Lance" he said sternly. "Promise" he added, holding up the hand that wasn't holding hers.

They turned the corner of a hallway, and were right about to walk down the stairs when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Albus turned and saw that it was James.

There was an uncommonly tense moment before anyone spoke.

"A word?" James asked, his expression incapable of being read.

"Uh...yeah sure" Albus said. He felt Mirra let go of his hand. "I'll just catch up with you later" he told her. She smiled at him and continued down the stairs on her own.

Albus stepped aside slightly so that both he and his brother were on even footing. James once again spoke first.

"Sorry I...you know. Gave you a shiner."

Albus gave a lop sided frown. "It's okay" he said. "It's was just my face" he added, practically under his breath.

"Yeah well...yeah" James finished lowly. There was a very tense moment here, and Albus noted that it could not have been more dissimilar from the end of last year, when his brother had joked with him and given him the Marauder's Map.

James gave him a clap on the shoulder, apparently to substitute all of things that he still wanted to say. He shrugged his next words away and opted for a more cheerful approach.

"So...Are you and Mirra- you know-"

Albus looked over his shoulder, as if expecting her to be eavesdropping, though she obviously wasn't. It was, he had to admit, a good question.

"I don't know" he answered. "We're just- no. It's nothing official or anything" he said, hating the word, as he knew it was used to describe Rose and Lance. "We're both just- I don't know. Happy where we are" he finished quietly.

James gave him his familiar smirk. He squeezed his shoulder tightly, then walked away.

Albus watched him go feeling as though their moment was too anti-climatic for their own good, but realized that drama was the last thing that he needed right now. James had apologized, asked him a question, and departed. That was really all that it was supposed to be.

Albus wished a great deal that his relationship with some of his other family members would end up this way however. Just days after Hugo left the Hospital Wing, Albus had seen him surrounded by second year students, never looking more popular. Sneaking into Hogsmeade it seemed, as well as surviving the onslaught, brought you considerable merit when you weren't even a teenager yet. Albus had attempted to approach him and introduce himself, but Hugo had given him a very surreptitious, very fervent shake of the head, as if not wanting to be embarrassed by his older cousin. Albus had worn his cringe for the remainder of the day.

And so, with half of the relationships in his life completely fine and the other half downright shameful, Albus found himself meandering around the gloomy castle just as he'd always done. It was a very sunny Thursday when Albus decided to visit Hagrid. As there was no Potions class to go to ( Blackwood was still missing) Albus had no class to keep himself occupied. With Morrison visiting Scorpius in the Hospital Wing to play Exploding Snap, it was just Albus and the gamekeeper in the warm cabin.

"Care to open a window in here Hagrid?" Albus asked, tugging at his collar.

Hagrid gave a chuckle and lifted a window of the hut slightly. "Don't wan' too much air" he said. "Tea'll get col'."

He sat back down, and Albus took in his appearance. He seemed a bit drained, and his hair was even more wild than before, if such a thing were possible.

"You look tired" Albus said bluntly, taking a very light sip of his tea and taking a single bite of a rock cake that Hagrid had laid out for him. He thought that he felt his tooth chip and immediately set it back down, pretending to chew.

"I reckon we're all a lil' tired Al" Hagrid said, heaving a large sigh. "Not one of the other professors, as far as I know, has been gettin' much sleep."

Albus looked down at the table. "You guys shouldn't blame yourselves for what happened" he said seriously. "You didn't do anything to cause it."

Hagrid gave him a weak smile. "You don't have to cause summin' to be sorry it happened, Al. It's like when it rains on yer friend's birthday. Yeh can't control the weather. But yer sorry it happened."

Albus kept his glance down at the table however. Hagrid leaned in a bit before continuing.

"Maybe you shouldn't be lecturin' me on blame though" he said lowly. "You look like yer puttin' a fair amount on yourself."

Albus turned away, but still took a sip of tea so as to have something to do with his lips other than talk. He did not even want to respond to this, but he still felt obligated to say something—anything really, that was on his mind.

"Hogwarts won't go back to normal, will it Hagrid?"

Hagrid leaned back in his chair, running his enormous hand through his bushy beard as he did so. "Of course it will Al. Things seem like they'll never be the same again, I know. But this isn't the first time the world's been a mess. But we all move forward, don't we? We certainly can't go backwards..."

"Is this how it was last time?" Albus said, dreading the answer. "Newspaper articles and rumours and- and- politicians and attacks and-"

"Al it's all the same" Hagrid said, his beetle black eyes glittering. "Yeh know, fourth year seems to be a tough year for you Potters."

Albus looked up at this unexpected piece of information. "How's that?" he asked.

Hagrid pointed at him. "Yer dad's fourth year. Almos' to the very day, he sat right where you are, right now. Righ' after Voldemort came back. I reckon I've been here before. And we talked, jus' like me an' you are now."

"What did you say?" Albus asked.

"I told him 'What'll come will come, and we'll face it when it does'. And I stan' by that, even here. We're always gonna' have summin' to deal with Al. We just have to brace ourselves and overcome it."

Albus returned to looking down at the table, feeling uncomfortable. This answer may have satisfied his father more than twenty years ago, but he himself wasn't too fond of it. Why should they have to prepare themselves for anything? This whole fiasco could have been avoided...Couldn't it have?

"I reckon we'll be fine though" Hagrid's booming voice echoed from a great distance. Albus looked up at him. "We're even more prepared than we were last time. Each time, yeh get a lil' bit better. And we got yer dad again. As long as we got him, I'm not too worried. Great man, yer dad..."

Albus left Hagrid's cabin feeling only slightly comforted, though he had to admit, he hadn't even been expecting that. The rays of sunshine brought about by the end of May seemed strikingly out of place in the scene as he walked back to the castle with his head down, examining his sneakers. Not a lot of people were out and about on the grounds- mostly it was just those who'd had been cooped up in the Hospital Wing too long and needed fresh air. He saw a handful of Slytherins, Morrison's friend Melonie among them, sitting by the lake and chatting as if clinging to normalcy. Then he heard far less welcome voices.

Eckley was striding out of the entrance to the castle, surrounded by his usual gaggle of friends. Mirra and Rose were not there, obviously, but Hornsbrook still walked at his side, with the rest of his nameless subordinates laughing behind him as well.

Albus had not really gotten a good look at Eckley since throwing the Cloak over him. He had been in the Hospital Wing for a while, and when he had gotten out, Albus hadn't exactly went out of his way to approach him. Seeing him now, he noted that looked a bit like Scorpius in his weakness. No real visible signs of attack, but rather just extremely pale skin and a peaky disposition to accompany his slow gait.

Albus approached them almost cautiously; he could hardly avoid them, as they were in his way. He was not frightened of them however. He had been in far more dangerous situations recently to feel anything towards them that resembled fear. But still, he was not in the mood to take part in anything besides merely walking.

As they approached each other he and Eckley alone seemed to slow down and make eye contact. From beside him Hornsbrook turned his head away as if in shame. Albus knew that Hornsbrook had no idea that he was aware of his participation in the massacre- or more accurately, his fathers. But Albus did remember the lack of comfort on his face, and the unwillingness to reveal his whereabouts, and thus he had no problem with him that extended passed any animosity from previous encounters.

They all continued talking and laughing as if he wasn't there, but then one of them- one of the bigger ones- bumped his shoulder nonchalantly. Albus felt his cheeks go red. He was right about to turn around when he heard a growl.

"Hey!"

Albus looked and saw that it was Eckley. He was facing the stupid looking friend that had bumped into him. "Chill out" he said coldly. And without another word, they had all turned and continued walking, leaving Albus to stare at the back of their heads as they kept their conversation going, apart from the one who'd been silenced.

The weeks trudged by in a series of new firsts ; Albus heard things like genuine laughter, normal discussion about Quidditch, and legitimate conversations about summer plans. It was as if everyone was trying, not to block the pain of the events that had transpired, but to overcome them with optimism. As Albus entered the Great Hall on the last day of term however, prepared for the exquisite feast that was always prepared, it became very apparent that the melancholy attitude would indeed linger until they had all departed from the train.

There were no house colors up to celebrate anything. Albus had expected this, as since Hogsmeade he had not heard a single teacher issue or dock points, but it was a strange sight regardless, to see black hangings behind the high table.

Albus surveyed all of the teachers, his eyes first falling on Headmistress McGonagall, whose mouth looked even thinner than normal. They then slid across to Hagrid and Neville, and then Bellinger and Handit. Blackwood normally sat at the end of the table, and Albus had grown used to seeing her seat vacant by now. It wasn't however.

At the very end of the line, there sat his father. He looked gaunt and exhausted, but simultaneously intimidating; powerful. He was eyeing the tables with interest, and Albus saw that he also threw an almost welcoming glance to the black hangings. It was as if he'd seen the very same ones before.

He wondered, very vaguely, what his father was doing there. It wasn't out of dislike or lack of appreciation or anything of the sort, but merely general curiosity. He supposed that he must be there to give a speech, or something along those lines. Albus dreaded his name being mentioned, though he couldn't think of a possible scenario where this would occur.

He took his seat next to Scorpius and Morrison, who were looking very grim as they stared up at the black curtains. Before the feast there was always an end of the year speech, but this time, Albus had the feeling that no one was waiting to dig in- everyone wanted to hear what would be said. Everyone wanted that closure.

"See the familiar face mate?" Scorpius said, nodding his head towards his father.

"Yeah" Albus said. "Probably just here to give a speech or something. Since everyone appreciates him again and all."

"That include you?" Morrison asked, but before Albus could retort the Headmistress had cleared her throat and stood up.

All eyes turned to her as silence filled the hall completely. She gazed down at them all from behind her spectacles, looking very cat like as she seemed to soak in every detail of the room.

"And another year goes by" she said. Albus heard a whimper and saw that his Muggle Studies professor, the elderly and kind Professor Verage, had made the noise. Professor McGonagall dabbed at her own eyes before continuing. "A year of learning. Of experiences. Of loss."

The students all continued to gaze up at her. Albus thought that he may be the only one looking down.

"To pretend that the tragedy of a few weeks ago did not happen would be a dishonour to both those who survived and to those who perished. The black hangings on the walls are not a symbol of broken unity, but a symbol of remembrance. We sit here as one school ; one people, united in our loss. In all that we feel. All of the pain, all of the fear...and all of hope.

"As the world slips into the darkness, we can only hope to pierce it as a single light. I have a man here with me today who will discuss with you the nature of the events that may soon transpire. Of the changes that may occur. Of what makes our unity, now more than ever, not useful, but a necessity."

Albus watched as she briefly flung her hand towards his father, who inclined his head. The speech that she was referring to however- the one in which his father would most likely recount the troubles he'd encountered- seemed to be reserved for after her own words, as she cleared her throat and continued speaking.

"I'd like to let it be known that the onus of these times falls on to no one in this hall. No one deserves what may happen. No one can change what has occurred; such a thing is not our nature."

Albus felt his fist clench slightly. There it was again, that idea of being unable to control. That idea of fate that men like Ares had clung to. For some reason he felt his stomach bubble up with something that felt uncannily like anger. He instinctively looked up at his father, but he was peering down at the Gryffindor table, probably at James and Lily. Professor McGonagall continued seamlessly.

"It may be hard for you to find truth in my words; to accept that what has happened could not have been prevented. I say this not to calm you or placate you, but to remind you that we must look ahead, for what we leave behind is what has shaped us. What we do now, will help us shape the world. What occurred in Hogsmeade- what the Ministry of Magic, and indeed the Wizarding



World, has dubbed a massacre- is not the fault of any of you. No one is to blame except for those who-

Albus saw it. At the word "Blame" his father's eyes had shot from the Gryffindor table to the Slytherin, and rested on him for a fraction of a second. Suddenly, Professor McGonagall was interrupted. Someone had obnoxiously risen from their seat, the clanging of silverware echoing throughout the hall. It was Albus.

He turned his back on the Hall as a whole. Scorpius looked at him in shock, Morrison with curiosity. All other heads had turned to him. Albus knew that he was being immature. Knew that he was probably the first person in the history of Hogwarts to stand up and walk away during an end of term feast; the first student to be audacious and stupid enough to blatantly interrupt the Head of the school. But he simply could not take it any more. All of the facades. He was not going to sit here and listen to how this was "No one's fault". He was not going to sit hear and listen, and eat, in remembrance for people who did not know, but who had died because of *him*. He was not going to pretend like he wasn't the one person in the Hall who truly had brought about this destruction, who truly had made mistakes. *That* would be the true dishonour...

He strode away in silence, not even bothering to look back and see the stunned faces on all of the students and professors, or the probably patronizing look on his father's face as well. He left the silent Hall and turned at once towards the staircase, knowing exactly where he was going. The lake was not an option. Such a place had too good of memories for this situation...

He reached the seventh floor, just now wondering if anyone was coming after him. Or if McGonagall had simply continued her speech. If his father was just now starting to talk. He paced back and forth in front of a blank stretch of wall, not even knowing what is what he wanted. The Room didn't seem to need any particular reason to appear however, as at once a magnificent door appeared.

Albus barged into it and saw an entirely empty room, bar a single silver chair sitting right in the middle. Perhaps that was what he needed. A place to sit and bury his head in his hands. Albus took a seat in the chair with a slight feeling of nostalgia, the last time he had seen a chair like this one, his father had been throwing it at Ares' cell in a memory.

He did indeed bury his head in his hands, letting the silence around him absorb his thoughts. No one's fault...ridiculous. How could he not argue that? Ares had been in Hogsmeade to kill him. Albus knew that it was not because he was Harry Potter's son. It had to do with *him*.

How much could have been avoided, by simply choosing not to act? Where did it all go back to? He had went to Hogsmeade despite being told not to. Chased Fango Wilde the previous year and gotten his friends kidnapped. Why...if he hadn't stuck his nose into Ares' business in his second year, he never would have went on the run! He wouldn't have ended up dead, after having taken more than seventy people with him...

When was someone going to grab him by his shoulders and shake him, and tell him to take responsibility for his actions? Morrison and Scorpius...Mirra...his father. They had all tried comforting him. Maybe that's not what he needed. Maybe what he needed most was just a good smack in the face. Lucius Malfoy had certainly thought so...

He heard the door to the Room of Requirement open. He spun his head around, bewildered, and felt something smooth collide with his face. He grabbed the Invisibility Cloak as it slid down his body, then saw his father close the door behind him.

"Had I known you were going to make a scene," he started, "I would have given you that back days ago. Sadly, I've been busy."

"How did you get in here?" Albus asked. "Doesn't the Room-"

"The Room of Requirement" his father cut him off, "Gives you what you require. What you need. Typically, most people need privacy in here. It would seem however, by how the entrance was quite visible...that what you *really need* right now, is to not be alone."

Even as he said it, an identical silver chair appeared next him out of thin air. He watched as his father sat down in it, looking almost childlike in how he hunched forward, his hands folded. Albus took in his close appearance. He looked identical to how he normally did; disheveled, tired, and broken. But the one difference here was his expression. It was not a sad one. It was a calm, knowing one.

Albus turned his head away from his father, who continued speaking.

"I remember telling you about this room" he said, glancing around at the burnt walls. "I remember thinking that you'd need it to get away from James. Or homework. Not the whole world."

"Ever think that maybe I'm letting other people get away from me?" Albus asked, half sarcastically.

"That...needs to stop" his father said harshly. Albus turned to him. "I know what you're thinking Albus. You're thinking that no one knows what it is you're going through, that you and you alone carry this burden...that everything, every mistake falls on you. Your ability to feel this way is not a weakness; it is a strength. But only if used correctly."

Albus turned away again- it was getting increasingly harder to look at his father in his bloodshot eyes, though at the same time, it felt wrong to not stare them down. "Hagrid said that- that you've- you- you've been here before. When you were my age."

His father nodded. "Not precisely the same, but accurate enough to know how you're feeling. I too watched the world start to slip."

"So then what happens next?" Albus asked, his voice pitiful.

His father heaved a sigh. "Disappearances. Threats. Attacks. Loss."

Albus felt a single tear drop from his eye. Perhaps it was from how casually his father had said it; as if it were natural.

"So that's it then?" he moaned. "Just that? Another war? And nobody cares? Just- just deal with it? Prepare?"

"Albus the world will never have complete peace. You can not eradicate evil. It's in our nature to destroy each other; to destroy ourselves."

"You sound like Ares!" Albus barked angrily, feeling the tears dry on his scorching face.

"Ever think that maybe Ares sounded a bit like me?"

Albus felt his heart skip as his father gave him a frown. "But Albus, the difference between people like us and people like Ares is that we see the beauty in what we destroy...and we work to fix it. We don't just toss it away. I'm not going to lie to you Albus, with the exception of a few extremely powerful wizards missing, we're in a very similar position to where we were twenty years ago."

"Then why fight?" Albus said, wiping at his eyes. "If it's all just going to happen again? What was the point?"

"The point? Albus I got to watch you grow up. Don't you see that? "

"No!" Albus admitted stupidly.

"Albus people fought and died to have a chance to *live*. That in itself is worth the battle! That's what you don't understand yet- what you can't- that some things are worth dying for! What if I'd never fought back? And given up? I wouldn't have what I have now. You make it sound like only a few years of peace isn't enough. Albus I got to play with my children. Spend time with my wife. What was I fighting for, if not you, and James, and Lily? All before you were even born. Perhaps Darvy dies tomorrow. And perhaps in twenty years, this happens again. An endless cycle. But we mustn't focus on the times of terror. We must cling to the time in between. I'd do anything to have another few years with my family. Even fight a war."

Albus looked down. He wished that he could understand what his father was saying- and part of him truly did- but at the same time, he did not think that his father completely understood his sadness. His father had not been directly responsible for the destruction of his time. He had stopped it, yes- but he had not been rectifying anything.

"I understand Albus. I understand that you've never had these thoughts or heard these things. I never wanted this life for you, I never wanted you to experience these things...I never wanted this. But I can't stop it now. I can't just make it go all away with a wave of my wand; I'm not that strong. We're both going to feel loss. We already have, even."

Albus wiped at his eyes again, realizing that his father was referring to Fairhart. Or was he? Someone else close to him had just died, after all...

Whatever his father had always said, he and Ares had been friends. Or accomplices at least. Some kind of mutual respect. Was his father grieving, even as they spoke, for his fallen partner in battle? Not for Ares, but for Red War?

"Dad are you- are you- are you sad? That Ares- that Ares is dead?"

He watched as his father peered at him from behind his glasses, a look of shock on his face; he had clearly not been expecting such a question. Or perhaps he thought the answer too obvious.

"Albus, Reginald Ares wanted to hurt my son" he said, sounding almost appalled by the thought of having to answer such a thing. "I am very, very glad he is dead."

Albus nodded, but looked down at the ground. He thought of the Dragonfang Wand shaking in front of his face. Of Ares' indecision. He had indeed wanted to hurt him. Kill him, even. But he had also had the perfect chance, and seemed to have struggled with it a great deal. Albus could not say this to his father however; could not reveal to him this truth.

His father gave a slight chuckle, which distracted Albus from his thoughts. He wondered what was so funny, before seeing that his father seemed to have gotten lost in a memory himself.

"It's weird thinking about it all now, isn't it?" he said, his chuckle a watery one. "I still remember the day I let him out of Azkaban. Or the day we agreed on it, at least. I remember his hand twitching, like he wanted to snatch his wand and make a run for it..."

Albus felt his breathing quicken. He too remembered this, though his father did not know that he had seen such a memory.

"I still remember what I thought that day, as I left Azkaban" he continued. "I remember thinking...that maybe a second chance would do him some real good. Teaching at Hogwarts could change him. Maybe it would end up being a good choice. I remember thinking, down to the word...maybe one day he'll help my children."

He wiped a silent tear from his eye at his terrible miscalculation. But Albus was still very curious about something. He supposed that now was as good a time as any to ask it.

"Dad...Ares said that- he said- he told me-"

His father looked at him in surprise.

"I mean, he didn't talk much" Albus said quickly. "Didn't really say- he just said one thing. He- he- he mentioned that- that you asked him for a favor? Or something? That he owed you a favor, and he did it..."

"Mhm" his father said simply, his tired face once again clear of tears. It almost looked like one had never been there at all.

"What- what was it?"

His father raised his eyebrows at him. "You really don't remember? You were sitting right there..."

Now it was Albus' turn to raise his eyebrows. When had Albus ever been with both his father and Ares at the same time, apart from when they were firing spells at one another? It would have had to have been back when Ares was the Headmaster. First year, even...

And then he remembered it. Remembered sitting in Ares' office at the end of his first year, his clothes dirty from having just climbed out of Hagrid's vegetable patch...

*"I have no right to claim what becomes of your students Reginald, but I ask a favor of you. Please do not let this student suffer for her parent's mistakes."*

*Albus thought that his father may be pushing his luck. He couldn't possibly imagine a reason why the headmaster would do him a favor, especially when he had made him look like a fool the entire conversation.*

*He was quite wrong however. The headmaster's expression did not soften, but he said, in a slightly lighter voice, "Fine. As a favor, she will go unpunished."*

"Mirra!" Albus blurted out, and his father gave him a weak smile.

"Knew it was somewhere in the back of your head" he said.

"But- but why?" Albus said, completely lost. His father had held a favor over Ares' head for years...why had he suddenly cashed it in over a girl that he didn't even know?

"Why? Albus please" his father said with a slight snort. "You ventured into a dungeon so dangerous it's whereabouts were previously unknown to even the greatest of wizards, all to pull this girl away from certain death. I know you're a good friend, but between me and you, I had a hunch that she was more than that, even if you didn't see it at the time. And if the letter that James sent me a few weeks ago is right," he continued with a sly grin, "I was right, wasn't I?"

Albus merely stared, dumbfounded. His father had really planned for everything, hadn't he? Had always looked out for him. Whether it was saving his life, or explaining something that he did

not understand or could not grasp, or even making sure that a simple crush wasn't broken, his father had always done everything in his power to be there for him.

And it was at this moment that it all hit him at once. His father's mistakes were just that—mistakes. He had always had the best of intentions, always made the biggest of sacrifices. Albus had given credit to Fairhart for the state of his relationship with Mirra earlier in the year, and rightfully so. But it went deeper than that. No one knew him better than his father did. And if it weren't for him, Mirra wouldn't even be allowed to set foot in Hogwarts. If it weren't for his father, the one slice of happiness that he'd clung to this year wouldn't even exist...

"Dad I'm so sorry!" he said, and he felt fresh tears once more, but these were much more satisfactory than all the others. He had not cried like this in front of Ares, or expressed himself like this in front of Mirra even. All he knew was that he was now crying on his father's shoulder, apologizing profously, unable to control himself.

"Dad I'm so sorry!" he repeated into his shoulder.

"Albus it's okay—"

"No it's not! You're a hero! And everyone knows it, even me, but I just cut you out, got rid of you, and regretted you, and blamed you, and then all you did was save me again! Again! Like you've been doing! Everyone turned against you, even though you're a hero! Even me—"

But his father moved away from him, so that he now had to keep his own head up. His father moved his head lower, so that his dark and quiet words were now spoken directly into his son's face.

"Albus, it doesn't matter what I am. Or what they think of me. Call me a hero if you will...but it's not from what I've done or endured. From any accomplishment. Sometimes there's more to being a hero than getting the girl and saving the day. Sometimes it's about being the person who keeps fighting. No matter what they say or do to make it stop, what makes you heroic is getting back up when you know you're doing something for the right reasons. Sometimes it's not about winning, sometimes it's about fighting, even if it seems like it's a losing battle."

"A-losing battle?" Albus asked, wiping at his eyes.

His father nodded.

"What is it going to take dad?" Albus said, feeling angry once more. "To end it? All of it? What's it going to take to end it all?"

His father heaved a sigh. "Sometimes it only takes one person Albus. Sometimes it only takes that one hero."

"Are you him?" Albus asked stupidly. "Are you going to stop Darvy?"

"I don't know" his father replied. "Maybe. Maybe someone will do it before me. Maybe someone will do it after I try and fail. But it *will* happen Albus. It's in our nature, remember? There is a hero out there, who is going to end it all. And maybe get to watch their kids grow up. Maybe they don't even know it yet, but they are out there. They'll realize who they are."

Albus sniffed and wiped the last of his tears from his eyes. He thought they were all gone now; he was done for a very long time. He suddenly felt embarrassed. What if James had been listening to him cry through the door?

"I hope they realize it soon" he admitted.

His father gave him another light smile. "Me too, Al. But for now, all that we can do is brace ourselves and keep fighting. And I actually have a speech to give" he added. "Just a small one though. Why don't you wait it out, then return in a bit? Blend in when everyone is eating?"

Albus nodded. "Okay. But dad- this- this *will* all stop...right? Eventually?"

His father smiled at him as he stood to leave. "Of course it will. I don't know when exactly, but it will."

"Promise?" he asked childishly. He knew that his father would never break a promise.

"Promise..."

It was with the strangest of feelings that Albus packed up his things that night, his Invisibility Cloak and his Map stuffed away neatly and securely; Fairhart's ring stowed away in his pocket- for some reason it was simultaneously his most valuable and most useless possession.

Packing was nothing compared to departing however. As he and his friends stood waiting outside of the scarlet Hogwarts Express, Albus squinted at his fellow students through the intense sunlight. Things were not quite as loud as usual- it was as though the thirteen missing voices were making things quieter. But there was still a somewhat familiar feeling to it all. Notes had been passed around reminding students not to use magic over the summer holidays, classmates were hugging and crying over the thought of being forced to write letters rather than merely talk in person, and other students, mostly seventh years, were hugging their teachers and apologizing for years of conveniently misplaced homework.

Morrison was in a conversation with Melonie Grue, whose appearance Albus had become accustomed to in recent weeks. They seemed to always have something to talk about, regardless of how trivial. Scorpius was by his side, squinting in the sunlight as well, looking very much like he was trying to conceal his disappointment over how the year had turned out.

They all boarded the train at once and found a cozy compartment near the middle. Mirra joined them for a game of Exploding Snap, and James stopped in briefly with his girlfriend as well.

Hugo had only peeked his head in. Lily too had only stopped by for a bit, but she was of a more cheerful nature.

For most of the ride they merely talked; it was strange how much they had to discuss that didn't pertain to what had happened. Talks of the summer, or of how they may have done on the end of the year tests even. Halfway through the trip however, Mirra stood to leave.

"Going to go meet with Rose and some people" she said casually. "I might pop in later."

They all said good bye to her. She gave Albus a single kiss on the cheek- doing anything else in front of people felt a bit uncomfortable- before leaving. Melonie stood to leave as well.

"I'm going to head out now too" she said. "See you all on the platform."

"Ahh come on!" Morrison whined; they'd been having a debate about which kind of cheese was best.

"What!" she smiled. "I promised I'd meet Denise..."

"Traitor!" Morrison called out jokingly as she left the compartment.

The compartment door still slid closed however, leaving, once more, just the three of them. They all sat in silence for a moment, before randomly, inexplicably smiling at each other.

"What's going on there mate?" Albus asked Morrison.

"Going on where?" he said innocuously, picking at his fingers.

"With Melonie, you git."

Morrison shrugged. "Where are you going with Mirra?" he said snarkily.

Albus smirked. "Fair point."

Scorpius rolled his eyes at the two of them, and Albus suddenly felt guilty. He didn't appear to want sympathy however.

"You know you guys are just setting yourselves up, right?" Scorpius said defensively.

"Remember James in our second year?"

Albus frowned slightly, catching on to Scorpius' bitterness at once. "Look mate...don't even worry about this whole Rose thing" he said, and Scorpius merely choked from having been so taken aback.

"Yeah, just let it develop" Morrison said. "Guy's like thirty years old anyway, she'll ditch him and see the truth at some point."



Scorpius shrugged. "Whatever" he said. "It's just...this feels like a waste of a year almost. I didn't win."

Albus clapped him on the back. "Sometimes it's not about winning" he said. "Sometimes it's just about...you know, just fighting. Even if it seems like a losing battle."

Scorpius gave him a strangled look. "Mate, that is *dumbest* thing you have ever said..."

By the time that they'd reached King's Cross station the sunlight had thinned significantly, and the platform was much cooler and more comfortable. Albus gave a mighty stretch as the people bustled by him in a hurry to see their families. He had no idea who would be picking him up- probably his mother however- and thus really had no idea as to what to look for. Instead he walked around with Morrison and Scorpius, waving good bye to others. He even saw Lance introduce Rose to his very attractive, youthful looking mother.

"So basically, just a bunch of sleeping this summer?" Morrison asked them both.

"Basically" they both answered him. "You?" Albus asked.

Morrison shrugged. "Depends on if my sister's stupid magician of a boyfriend is still staying with us. Last letter I got said they were pretty close. We might have another cancelled wedding on our hands" he said with a chuckle.

"My granddad just wrote to me the other day" Scorpius blurted out. "Said that he's looking forward to spending time with me this summer..."

Albus felt his heart skip a beat. Lucius Malfoy must have been very relieved indeed...must've decided that he'd had a close call, and wanted to spend more time with his grandson.

"Well I'm not too sure what's going on with me" Albus said. "Probably just spend a few months with owls tapping at my window for James..."

"There's my folks" Morrison said suddenly, pointing over at his parents. He smacked both of his friends hands. "I will see you gentleman in a manner of weeks" he said, false sophistication in his voice. "Though you might not recognize me...I'll probably have a beard by then..."

They all laughed as he gave them both additional thumps on the back, then turned to leave. He promised he'd write, and then was gone within the crowd.

Scorpius shook his head. "I'll never understand him" he said. "Poor kid really thinks he'll grow one too, I bet."

"You never know" Albus said. "He *did* grow the mustache..."

Scorpius turned to him with a patronizing look on his face. "Albus please" he said, shaking his head again. "That was *clearly* a Hair-Thickening Charm."

Albus' jaw dropped. "You knew?" he asked.

"Of course I knew" Scorpius said pompously. "I just didn't have the heart to tell him. Sometimes I think the kid needs to feel like he outsmarted me. Self-confidence is really important to the gullible ones. And bless him, I'm pretty sure Morrison still thinks he came from a stork."

Albus cracked a smile just as Scorpius had pointed out his own father. Pale and pointed, he gave them both a slight wave.

"Well this is me, mate" Scorpius said, and they smacked hands as well. "See you later."

Albus nodded as he began to walk away. "Make sure to write!" he called after him.

Scorpius turned and inclined his head. "Oh I will. Once I get my Prefect badge" he added arrogantly.

Albus rolled his eyes and watched his friend meet up with his father; soon enough they had disappeared into the crowd of people as well. Albus took a deep breath and stuffed his hands in his pockets while people hurried passed him. He knew that he wasn't going to find anyone by staying still, so he slowly worked his way back to the train, which was still billowing smoke, even with the last of it's passangers gone.

Albus peered into the window of the fiery red engine, not to see anything but his own reflection. He looked no different on the outside, as far as he knew. Maybe a bit taller. And more tired. He held up his hand, as if to see the effect that the glass had on it. There was only a small mark now; not exactly a scar. It would eventually heal up entirely. His leg felt fine as well.

He saw the people hurrying passed him in his own reflection now, and saw a young boy hug his mother, who clung to him looking as though she'd never been happier in her life. Albus suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

Thirteen mothers. Or fathers. Thirteen parents, had dropped their children off at the beginning of the year, and now they were not here. No one to collect. He placed his hand back in his pocket and squeezed Fairhart's ring tightly, and as he did so he saw Fairhart in his reflection, standing behind him, his face half mangled, his black hair wild. Albus knew that if he turned around he would see nothing however...he clung to the reflection. And as he did so, thirteen faceless circles appeared around him. Thirteen people, all but nameless to him, and now, all but nonexistent. He had not known them, and they had not known him. But that didn't change the fact that they had had lives...

*Their bodies, Albus Potter. The bodies of those three children haunt my dreams...even to this day...*

Albus was now holding the ring so tightly that his fingers hurt. No sooner had Ares' words echoed in his head did all of the images in the window disappear completely, leaving him once

again alone on the platform. He once more could see the people walking back and forth behind him. He even thought that he saw Lily say goodbye to one of her friends. Perhaps someone had arrived to get them.

And then it happened; and then he saw it. A flicker of gold in his reflection. He had blinked, and sparks had flown from his eyelids. They'd glown bright for a single moment, and then, suddenly, he felt the familiar feeling of power flood through him...

He could do it. He *could* end it all. He had the power. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and examined them in his reflection, his mind buzzing with incoherent thoughts. Words strung together as if they were not his own- as if they had no business being thought of.

His fingers went numb, but he continued to eye them hungrily. He looked at his reflection in the window again, and saw that his eyes were no longer flickering. They were a permanent shade of gold now, dark enough to not stand out, but noticeable at a close range.

It almost frightened him, what he was feeling. So many times now he'd thought himself uncontrollable, but this was- this was *wonderful*. What was he worried about? What could possibly worry him, with so much power in him? He could definitely end it all. Change everything. Perhaps not in the way that some would like, but he could do it...

He stared into the window and then, without even feeling the muscles on his face stretch, watched a smile formulate. A cold, sadistic smile that he did not understand. He was far from happy, but *something* was. Something had all the power in the world, and it was very, very happy. Elated even. Something could not help but smile...

A hand shot into the reflection and clasped his own, just as he was eyeing it. The smooth touch of the fingers calmed him, and suddenly, his smile broke. His eyes returned to normal. He turned and saw Mirra standing by him, squeezing his hand firmly in hers.

"Waving good bye to the train?" she giggled.

"Huh?" he said, distracted. He turned back to his reflection. Everything was normal- it was as if nothing had happened. Indeed, even rational thoughts were returning. Now, he didn't even know what he had been thinking before. Something about...power?

"C'mon, we'll be the last ones left" Mirra said, and she began steering him away from the train. Her small hand provided him with a warmth that he now accustomed too, but somehow suddenly extremely grateful for. He looked at her as they walked, never having been so transfixed by something in his life. It was like her hand had reached out and saved him from falling into a dark crack in the ground...

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You're quiet."

"I'm- I'm fine" he stammered out as they continued walking, their fingers now completely intertwined.

"What were you doing?"

"Erm- fixing my hair" he said stupidly.

She eyed him with interest. "Well it looks- it looks- well it looks like it usually does, Al" she said with a smile.

Albus returned the smile as they continued walking away from the train. He thought that he heard his uncle's loud voice.

"Wait, where are we going again?" he said, in a state of total confusion- he was still gathering his thoughts. They seemed to have all returned now, however. They simply needed to be sorted.

"I'm walking you to your family" she said plainly, as if she were speaking to a child. "Are you sure you're alright? You seem different."

"I'm stronger" he said, quite suddenly, and he felt his stomach lurch as he said it.

"Huh?" she said, bewildered.

"I mean- I mean- I'm tired" he said, feeling his cheek with his other hand. He was sweating.

Their eyes connected for a moment, but then they both returned their attention to his family, which was now in view. His Uncle Ron was indeed waiting for him from a distance, along with Aunt Hermione and Rose and Hugo. James and Lily were waiting as well.

"Wait- I want to meet your grandparents!" Albus blurted out.

Mirra giggled again. "Maybe next time" she said. "Something tells me it's not a good idea for us to be holding hands the first time they see you."

"We could just let go..."

"No," she said, squeezing his hand even tighter. "We can't."

He smiled at her again, and together, they walked towards his family.

**Hello readers! I know it's been quite some time since book 4 ended, but I promised an author's note and here it is! I'll be answering questions ( not as many as last time for some reason), addressing some criticisms ( not as many of these either, sweet!) and giving some tidbits of information about book 5, including the title.**

**First though, I have something to say. You can completely skip this if you want- as I've definitely said it all before, but I really can not post an author's note without saying it. Thank you, so much, to all of you. I never dreamed that these stories would reach the level of popularity that they have, and I never expected people to be so involved with them; to read and review and theorize and comment and all sorts of things. I started reading fanfiction after the fifth HP book came out, because I'd just found out about them and had never had to wait for a book before. Once I learned it took years, I become obsessed with it entirely. The first stories I ever read were a pair of continuation stories written by an author named Logical Raven ( Weird mentioning it, as I'm pretty sure they don't know I exist, but I still feel obligated to give a shout out) and I remember thinking wow...this person is keeping me interested in Harry Potter. Keeping me alive basically while I crave the sixth book. What an amazing thing to do. And after finishing the epilogue of book 7, I wanted to find that again- that same passion. And I decided to write my own, and told myself that if I get just one reader, one reader to be kept alive like I was, it'll all be worth it. Four stories, more than 500 reviews and 10,000 readers later, I've never been more pleased with myself; I can honestly say that every one of you has contributed to my self confidence, and my overall happiness, immeasurably. The amount of recognition that I've recieved is truly amazing, and I've learned that nothing feels better than knowing that people appreciate your hard work. For the first time ever, I'm telling my friends and family that I write, and aspire to be a writer. I was kind of known as the kid who was really loud in high school; you know the one. He's more concerned with making people laugh than doing work, talks to the teachers like he would a regular person, borrows pencils and never returns them, etc. But having fans that are so interested in my work, and so willing to be with me for every stap of the way, has made me proud of what I do, and proud to say that I do it. You don't get paid for fanfiction, but really, I don't even care. Your readership- all of you, those who review and those who don't- really is priceless. So thank you so much, and I promise I will do everything I can to make sure that you enjoy my writing as much as I enjoy the thought that you guys are reading.**

**Okay, all skipped? Let's get into some questions!**

**1. When will we see the next book?**

**- Can't say for sure, sorry. I can say however, unfortunately, the wait will probably be longer than the wait for 4. Enough of my friends convinced me to file for financial aid and apply for Community College, and I'll be doing so come September. This doesn't mean that my stories are on an indefinite hiatus or anything, it simply means that I'll have to work**

out a schedule for writing, and I don't want to start posting without enough planning beforehand. Book 5 has some big scenes already in my head, but it's not quite as well planned out overall as 3 and 4 were. It's definitely coming though, just have patience : )

**2. What happened to Blackwood and will she play a bigger role?**

- Blackwood is currently on the run from WAR- they consider her a traitor now, because of her willingness to protect Albus and because of her defiance of Waddlesworth. I can't say that the size of her role will increase or decrease, but she's definitely in book 5.

**3. Will Darvy have mastery over the Dragonfang Wand or did Ares transfer full mastery to Albus?**

- Well you'll just have to wait and see : ) But seriously, those of you who want a bit more information on this question, I suggest you re-read the first chapter of book 4, specifically what Vesnovitch says about the way the wand works. It was modeled after the Deathstick, but he also said it was improperly designed...

**4. Will the person engraved in Fairhart's ring play a part?**

- I can't tell you specifically what makes this person important, but I can say that you'll learn more about this person's identity in book 5- rather early on actually.

**5. Will there be a prophecy?**

- I seriously considered it, but then decided against it. As of now, my books are prophecy free. If I realllllly need to fix an error something though, I'll throw one in XD

**6. Will Harry regain his post as Head Auror?**

- Well, as I already debunked one, I'd might as well confirm another. Yes, Harry will regain his post. And expect things to work a bit...differently with his public reception back up.

**7. Does Albus blame himself for everything that happened?**

- An interesting question. To some degree, he acknowledges that the massacre at Hogsmeade was not completely random violence; he was the target. And people did suffer because of it. But at the same time, he's learned to cope. The conversation with his father was meant to let Albus empathize a bit, and realize that whatever happened has already happened; it's time to progress.

**8. Will the Dragonfang Wand's power come out more in Albus in the 5th book?**

- Can't say : )

**9. What ever happened to The Hammer?**

- He's alive, still doing brute work for his master. The Hammer's actually a pretty funny character to me. I designed him to be this really intimidating figure- this hulking monster to run from, and he really is. I mean, you saw how little he cared when he tortured that little girl. But if there's one thing I love in fiction, it's when characters get really hyped up and then get **SMACKED DOWN**. The only actual magical confrontations that you've seen him in were against Ares and Fairhart, arguably the two most powerful OC's in my stories, and the only physical confrontation was against Hagrid, which is unfair any way that you slice it. So he really had no shot against any of them. That being said though, he still is a dangerous character, and you can expect most of the bruises he got from foolishly attacking Ares to be gone by book 5. He'll definitely be in it.

**10. What happened to Waddlesworth?**

- Oh he's still slinking around, giving rousing speeches and telling the public to fight back. WAR isn't going anywhere. That being said though, you may see a bit of his softer side in this next book. I think I inadvertently made Waddlesworth too much of a villain in this book. Yes, he did want Albus dead. But it wasn't out of evil or anything- he truly did believe that killing Albus before Ares got to him would save lives. With Darvy making his plans for destruction known, you can expect Waddlesworth to spend a lot more of his time saving innocent lives than trying to kill a single child. Though of course, his "by any means necessary" approach will remain intact.

**11. Are there any new characters in the next book?**

- There may be a few, but I'd say that most of the main characters in my books have been introduced or mentioned enough. There won't, for instance, be anyone as important as Waddlesworth and Blackwood were in this book, and indeed, to the overall series.

**12. Will Al and Mirra get official and will Rose and Lance break up?**

- Ahh alas, you **KNOW** I can't answer this one. But everything certainly won't just be ignored next book.

**13. Will there be any legends from The Tales of Beedle the Bard incorporated?**

- Probably not, but only because I don't want to get too repetitive with the whole Deathly Hallows situation. I pretty much already ripped off the Wand and Resurrection Stone.

**14. Will Rose have a bigger role/ stop being such a jerk?**

- I think I like her role as it is, honestly. I really tried make Rose an accurate mix of her parents, and I think it does wonders for the story, because whereas Mirra is the soothing voice in Albus' ear, steering him away, Rose is the barking teeth that normally pushes him

over the edge. She'll undoubtedly mature over time, but I wouldn't expect too much development too soon.

**15. What impact will the fact that Hugo lost faith in Al have on him?**

- It pretty much already did. A lot of people wanted me to include more Weasleys, which is hard to do because there's so many and giving them all unique personalities puts a lot of emphasis on them. But Hugo's role had little to do with him being a Weasley, and more to do with his timid nature and idolation for Al. Albus has idolized characters throughout the series...His father, Darvy for a little bit, Fairhart. And they've all disappointed him in different ways. It's reached the point now however where Albus can no longer look up to people; he has to realize that now he's the one that people have to look up to. Hugo was his first test, and he failed. You can expect this to linger, though admittedly, it probably won't directly effect things like climactic battle scenes and such.

**16. Will Al learn to accept his mistakes and stop trying to fix them?**

- To be fair, this is kind of the driving point of the series. Al does finally understand the severe consequences of his actions, but this works two ways. Now not only will he try to be better with the decisions that he makes, but you can now also expect him to put more effort into rectifying them as well. I would expect Al to be more complex than whiny in this next one.

**17. Will we get to see Hermione duel?**

- I hope so XD. I know that sounds terrible, 'cause like "You're the author, you can do anything you want!", but really, it has to fit into the story. Twice now I've wanted to show off Hermione's dueling skills. First time was the Department of Mysteries at the end of book 3, but having her fight would have meant that Albus couldn't really be guided out by Fairhart, whose allegience I really wanted known. And the second time was in the riot at the beginning of this book. She came very close to it, but I decided that it was more of her character to let her husband fight while she made sure their children were safe. There's no actual action scene planned for her in this next book, but you can be sure I'll try and fit one in- it just needs to be natural.

**18. Someone asked if we ever would learn more about Fairhart, like what happened to his face, as well as if there would be things like flashbacks to help flesh out his story. Yes, there will be. Fairhart is one of the most planned out characters I created, and by the end of my series, you'll probably know even more than you wanted to. That being said though, book 5 won't exactly be packed full of information about him.**



I'm sure there were a few more small ones, but I'm really trying to condense this, so sorry if your question wasn't answered. To be honest though, there were more than I thought there were when I started this update XDD

And now, a few criticisms, plus a question that I really want to ask you guys.

1. The main criticism in this book was Al's character over all. He was bitter, whiny, confused, agitated, and probably a lot like that kid in school that you hated. In other words, he was fourteen. I confess that writing characters of younger ages is not my strong suit- I'm turning 19 in a week. But I really wanted to capture the confusion of the book, and I really wanted things like morality to come into focus here. I wanted Albus to endure things that no fourteen year old should, mostly to prepare him for what may happen and also, to make the good moments all the more sweeter. The "Kiss" by the lake in particular I wanted to build up to by putting Albus through the worst few weeks of his life beforehand. I admit that I failed overall in making a morally complex, but likeable protagonist. That being said though, I do think he'll be a bit more enjoyable in Book 5.

2. Slytherins. It's actually pretty funny to me, a lot of people said that my characters weren't Slytherin enough, and then when Scorpius hatched his plan and butchered Rose's date with Lance everyone was all "That's terrible!" XDD Which is exactly what I wanted. My Slytherins can be sneaky, and conniving, and calculated and even power hungry. Some people however seem to want more Slytherin-esque tendencies. We'll see. I kind of like my characters where they are now. But times are getting tough...

3. Spelling errors, poor sentence structure, etc. This is completely my fault, no excuse here. After chapter 15 my beta got into a load of trouble, and I was in such a hurry to write the next few chapters that I decided to do the editing myself. I think I did a little better than last book, but I still probably sucked. I'll be the first to admit that I'm a poor writer when it comes to things like syntax, and I really paid for it here. Believe me, things sound a lot better in my head than they do on paper. The beta situation is still a little iffy right now- I'm going to try and contact my beta soon. If they aren't up for it though, then I'll post a note in chapter 1 of Book 5 asking for help. That won't be for quite some time though, so for now it's a bit of a wash.

4. Mirra. She actually wasn't a criticism in this book, but was a big one last book. Really, I'm just commenting here to ask if she got better or not. I really did try fleshing her out and improving her overall role, but I'm not sure how I did. That's not my question though, my question actually involves-

5. Ares. Only one criticism for him this book, mentioned by one person. But it was one that really made sense to me even as I was writing it. Someone mentioned that he seemed almost James Bond villain-esque during the monologue scene. This is interesting, because I did this on purpose. The thing about Ares is, I imagine him being extremely complex. His long,

drawn out speech wasn't just my excuse in letting Albus live. It was his. I think that Ares knew what he had to do, and subconsciously, did everything in his power to prolong it. Ares is not a murderer. He's never murdered before. You'll undoubtedly raise your eyes at this and try and point out his victims, but I'll call you out on that one. I've been very careful to make him murder free. The wandmaker was killed by Darvy, as were the unspeakables in book 3, as mentioned by Darvy himself savagely. Madam Clearwater said that Ares could have killed James, but didn't- and everyone assumed it was because he was just in a hurry. Ron also mentions that during the Red War era, he was violent, but never killed as far as he knew. In fact, the only killing curse we see Ares fire is against Harry during the fight for the Foulest Book. Albus would have been his first victim. But that being said, Albus' death would have been the first that Ares counted as truly necessary. Which brings me to my big question...

What do you think he would have done? The scene in which Ares' arm shakes up and down violently as he closes his eyes and points his wand at Albus' face has been in my head since book 1. And each time it ends the same way. With Harry arriving and stopping it. Even I don't know what Ares would have done. So what do you think? Ares was going to act when he saw Albus open his eyes. He was either going to raise or lower his wand. Which was it? Ares truly did believe that killing Albus was the first, and only, step to ultimately challenging the Ministry and changing the world. But in the world he wanted, innocent children didn't die. Isn't that what made him hate the Ministry in the first place? Seeing dead children, killed without justification? What was more important to Ares? What's more important to any person? A sense of destiny, and what they perceive as necessary? Or their own morality? Would Ares have slaughtered an innocent child, do the thing that he hated most...to ensure that it couldn't happen again? I really don't know what he would have done. But like I've said earlier in this book, during a different situation, your answer might just say a lot more about you than it does Reginald Ares...

And now that all the booooring stuff is out of the way, it's time for some tidbits of info on book 5! There aren't as many this time, as like I've said this book isn't THAT well planned out apart from the main plot, but there's a few things I can give you.

- The creatures that you saw will be given a proper name, and will be more explained as well. They also aren't all that the Wand is capable of creating.
- You'll get to meet Morrison's family, including his promiscuous, squib sister.
- I will attempt to create a backstory for something from JK's books that wasn't given much detail. I'll stay hush hush on that for now however.
- There will be a new Potions professor, though their role won't be as big as Blackwood's.

**- Here's a big one. Scorpius will, at one point, make his feelings known to Rose in this next book.**

**-Another character will die. I can't say that they're quite as big as Ares, as he's almost the backbone to my entire series, but I admit it will be personally hard for me to write. I'm quite fond of this character.**

**- Some chapter titles I have planned include "Necrosteeds", "The Elusive Warren", and "The Grand Architect".**

**- And finally, the title for book 5 is subject to change, but as of now, it's tentatively titled as "Albus Potter and the Silver Wizard."**

**Well that's it. You know, I've never really looked around, but I'm sure that there's a lot of Albus Potter stories out there. There are probably some more popular, and some better written, and some that really might just be considered canon one day. But the thing about my stories is...that they're mine. I wouldn't trade them for anything, and I wouldn't have them if it weren't for you guys. Anyone reading this right now has shown support in merely being a reader, and having that means the world to me. So once more, thanks for all of the support, and I hope you guys enjoyed Albus Potter and the Rise of the Dark Alliance!**

## Author's Update :

Hello readers! This is Vekin87, just leaving this update to let you all know that Book 5 IS still coming out. I know that Albus Potter and the Silver Wizard was announced quite some time ago, and I apologize for the inconvenience. Book 5 is still planned, but it is simply on a different time frame than previous books. I am now trying to juggle college, an increasingly expanding social life, and fanfiction all at once. Typically I think of a plot outline for my next book immediately after finishing my current one, and then writing it later, but I took about a full month off from everything to assimilate myself into a college lifestyle, and everything's been postponed. Book 5, however, IS STILL COMING OUT. I've got a pretty good idea of all the main points in my book, and I have already started writing it. I don't think I can give an exact date, but as I like to be a little ahead of my readers, I can say that the first post will be as early as December 1st and as late as January 1st. I know that I can't give you guys much to hold you over apart from actual story, but I'm hoping that this should do it. The following is the official "Inside Book Jacket Summary" that I planned on posting before chapter 1 :

"The Wizarding World has split. A combination of both public outcry and approval has caused the Ministry of Magic to make drastic decisions in regards to the leadership of it's defences. For the first time in recorded history, the Head Auror position is being shared. And with Warren Waddlesworth still spewing his propaganda, it appears to be only a matter of time before the revised Renegade movement becomes a full blown rebellion.

Unlike his brother, Sebastian Darvy is taking advantage of the confusion rather than testing it. Having officially declared war on the Wizarding World, his array of loyal servents and army of frightening creatures have already begun terrorizing in a manner not yet forgotten by the survivors of the second war.

This panic and fear sets a backdrop for Albus Potter's fifth year of Hogwarts, where the woes of adolescence collide with the moral ambiguity that should be reserved for adulthood. An increased workload cuts into his social life, a new Potions Professor seems more intent on interrogating him than teaching him, and more than one breakfast is interrupted by strange, cryptic letters that seem to be designed specifically to confuse him. And although Albus rarely finds time to examine the dangers of the outside world, a small beacon of hope has ignited his eagerness to participate in the war. Rumors have begun circulating about the mysterious Silver Wizard, a masked vigilante who's allegiances seem to lie with neither Wands and Redemption or the Ministry..."

Okay, so that's that! Hopefully that held you over a teeny tiny bit and convinced you that Book 5 has certainly not abandoned. I really can't apologize enough for the wait, nor can I thank you enough for the continued support and patience. I'm taking my time here because I really want to give you guys the best that I have to offer, and I can only hope that you understand and still want to read!

Also, to anyone who sent me a private message- I apologize for not answering. I very rarely login when I'm not actually updating, so whether you were offering to be my beta or simply giving me words of thanks, I haven't gotten back to you. I will answer you however, before the fifth book. If you do have any comments however, you can feel free to leave a review or send a message, which I will get back to in time.

Hope you guys are looking forward to book 5!

- Kev