

Albus Potter and the Silver Wizard

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Chapter 1: Necrosteeds

Scraps of newspaper danced across the dusty roads, the only noise in the entire town other than that of signs banging against their shops due to wind. The dust on the dirt roads seemed thicker than usual, as if it had not been tread on for quite some time, and the silence in the air seemed remarkably forced; it was as if the community as a whole was unwilling to make a noise.

A heavy gust of wind blew the front page of a torn newspaper right through the open window of a small, dilapidated shack. A small squeal of terror emerged from the inside, followed by silence again.

Clip-clop.

The little girl of around six or seven smoothed the front page out. She cast a sideways glance towards a mirror, one of the few things in the dirty wooden room, and took in her appearance. She was frail, thin, and covered in soot. Just like the last time she had looked. She continued to smooth the paper out and tried to read the headline on it.

Two Head Aurors?

The girl was right about read what little she could from the actual article when she heard quiet, hurried footsteps just outside the window. Her older sister had told her not to look out the window, no matter what she may hear. But these footsteps seemed anxious. Perhaps this person needed help?

She crawled to the window and lifted her head up slowly, just in time to see a cloaked figure hurry by her, their legs moving as if they were trying to both run and walk at the same time. The cloaked figure had their hood up, but she knew that he was not one of them-the people that had taken over their town- because he was not wearing one of those frightening masks.

She made to call out to the man, but her throat could not complete such a task like yelling. It had been much too long since she'd had something to drink. So she instead crawled back across the dusty and dirty floor and picked up the paper again.

Clip-clop.

She was once more smoothing out the paper when the door at the edge of the room creaked open. She held her breath in fear-

"Shhh, it's me!" her older sister whispered, walking in slowly and then immediately ducking low so that she could not be seen from the window. Her hair too was dirty and matted, the thick blonde locks now resembling ash. Her face, however, appeared to be slightly burned.

"What happened to your face?" her little sister asked her.

"Small fire right around from 's home," she replied sadly. "I went poking around. Couldn't find him."

There was a small, uncomfortable silence before the little sister opened her mouth once more, and asked something in a raspy, quiet voice.

"Any sign of mum?"

The older of the two pursed her lips as if she were trying to think fast. "No," she finally said, and her younger sister hung her head. "But that's a good thing. It just means she found a good hiding place. When those- those things- leave for a bit she'll come ba-"

But she stopped mid-sentence. She had just noticed the scrap of newspaper held tightly in her sister's hand.

"*Marie!*" she hissed. "I told you not to go outside!"

"I didn't!" Marie argued back. "Honest! It just flew in!"

"I don't belie-"

Clip-clop.

Marie's older sister abandoned the sentence in the middle and forced her sister's head down even further. She then pushed her forward so that they were both directly under the window- so that anything peering inside wouldn't be able to see. "Don't make any noise" she told her younger sister through lips that were practically closed.

Marie nodded. She put her head down and closed her eyes tightly. Taking advantage of this, the older sister slowly picked her head up and stole a glance out the window.

It was one of those things. Trotting down the dusty road at a slow, ominous gait was a charcoal black horse, noticeably bigger than a normal one, with milky white eyes and crimson hooves that seemed to glow with every step. Its mane was just as red, giving off the impression that it was walking while ablaze. A disgusting, skeletal being was riding atop it, thin black ropes used as reigns.

Clip-clop.

The horse was walking straight, its eyes focused solely on the road ahead of it. But the slimy, near-skinless monster controlling it was pausing every few seconds to peer at the ruined homes and shops. She knew it to be examining them for signs of life that had escaped its wrath before- for new lives to eradicate.

Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

With each fresh step a new cloud of dust was kicked up, rising high into the air and seeming to hang there until a forceful blast of wind sent it away. Marie moved closer to her older sister, who held her breath as she heard the horse near them. It stopped just outside their window, and she knew that the skeletal fiend was gazing at the empty space on the inside of their home.

She heard the whipping of the wind, and soon enough dust particles had been blown through the window. Marie looked up at the sound, then up at her sister, who gave her a furtive glance as if telling her not to inhale. But she did.

Marie gave the smallest of coughs, just as the horse had taken another step away. Her older sister blinked her eyes in relief. The tiny cough had been masked by the movement-

But then she looked up. The horse had stuck its head through the window, and was now glancing down at them. The beast riding the horse gave a roar, and the horse snorted maliciously, billowing thick black smoke from its nostrils. The two girls screamed just as the milky white eyes of the steed turned dark red. It opened its mouth, and through the smoke they saw a flash of orange-

Fango Wilde stopped and turned on his heel from the sound of matching, childish screams. He watched as a home that he had just passed a few moments ago erupted into flames, the yells of the children inside eventually silenced. He shook his head as he watched the flames dance in the air, then turned back and continued down the road.

He turned at odd intervals, making his way down the cobbled streets and finally finding himself on a pathway that led to the biggest home of the small wizarding town they had invaded. He roughly pushed aside the small fence, an easy task considering it was almost completely off its hinges, and strode briskly to the large wooden door, where paint was peeling. He stepped back and took a good look at the house.

The windows were boarded, and pieces of the roof blown off from the initial takeover. Still, it was of considerable size. He could at least see why it had been selected for a base of operations, at least for the time being. He gently pushed the door open and entered.

The inside could not look more dissimilar from the exterior. The rooms had been magically transformed so that the floors were highly polished in a manor-like way. Brilliant chandeliers hung ostentatiously from the ceiling, and the neat furniture of the sitting room, though entirely unused, was placed just as one would if expecting auspicious visitors. A peculiar sight caught Fango's eye however. Leading into the next room was a straight carpet of brilliant deep purple.

He rolled his eyes and followed the carpet into the next room, where sure enough, he was greeted with a picture of false royalty. Sitting on a golden throne was a man with tangled blonde hair and a steely, malicious smirk. One of his hands was sipping a smoky substance that couldn't have possibly been tea. The other was gripped firmly around a magnificent golden wand with a dark, fanglike handle.

Fango Wilde knocked back his hood, revealing his bored, pale face. Completely void of expression, he ran his hand through his short black hair and allowed his piercing brown eyes to narrow on his new "leader."

"Fango!" Sebastian Darvy crooned sweetly, taking another sip. "Where is your mask?"

"Blew away," Fango lied with a dry expression. "It's windy."

Darvy narrowed his own eyes, but kept his ravenous glare. "Well I do hope you find it," he said. "What information do you have for me?"

"None," Fango replied, striding forward. Without invitation he waved his own wand, and a small chair appeared directly across from the throne. He sat down in it briskly. "Nothing new, anyway."

Darvy kept his gaze, but then shrugged as if not perturbed. "Interesting. I thought for sure you'd have contacts in the Department. Or are you completely disgraced?"

Fango blinked before speaking. "The Department of Magical Transportation has very little to do with the Department of Mysteries. Not that it should matter," he added.

Darvy leaned forward at this. "Excuse me?" he said sourly. "And why should it not matter?"

"You say that the Wand obeys you anyway," Fango said, almost offhandedly- though he wore the tiniest of smirks as he said it. "What could you possibly need?"

Darvy's face went blank, though he recovered quickly. "The Wand does obey me," he said fiercely. "Or have you not seen the ruin outside? All on my orders."

"Strange," Fango said immediately. "I thought that you told them to stop."

Darvy shrugged this statement away. "They are merely enthusiastic. And besides, they are becoming accustomed to their new pets. Far be it from me to not let them experiment a bit. And they've worked hard. Let's let the grunts do the grunt work."

Fango stared blankly now. He had almost forgotten that he, and all the other members of Ares' alliance, were now to be referred to solely as grunts.

"But shouldn't they be magically bound to you?" Fango asked curtly. "Regardless of what they want?"

Darvy's mouth twitched. "I am still adapting to the finer points of the Wand," he said. "It has many mysteries."

"Are the answers not immediately available?" Fango asked, his tone still the same.

"The Russian irks me," Darvy said, looking away. "He seems to think I am unworthy of his creation-"

"I was speaking of your brother," Fango said, and at this he smiled, for a vein had bulged in Darvy's head. "Surely, you have some way of contacting him? He would most likely know the answers that-"

"Reginald Ares knows NOTHING!" Darvy spat before Wilde could even finish his sentence. He rose from his throne, his chest now pounding heavily, his hair looking as though it were close to falling out. "Where was Reginald Ares when I was digging through garbage for scraps of food! Eating at his banquets! Where was Reginald Ares when I stealing my first wand? Purchasing his with a fat pound of gold from his fake mummy and daddy! Where was Reginald Ares before he needed my help! NOT CARING WHETHER I EXIST, THAT'S WHERE!"

Darvy ended his tangent there, his eye now twitching awkwardly. Wilde said nothing, but kept his slight smile. It was as if he'd purposefully provoked him. At the mention of contacting the dead, however, Fango allowed his eyes to scan the room. In the corner he saw it; the Foulest Book. It was laying on the floor uselessly, a sharp contrast to the pedestal it had been placed on under Ares' care.

"Perhaps it would be wise to at least discover what progress he made with the boy-" Wilde pressed.

Darvy batted this away, still fuming. "My brother went soft. Made no progress. I saw the situation. He had the opportunity. Got cold feet I expect. I will kill the boy on sight. No...for now, I will focus on more important things. Like my army."

Even as he said it, light trotting could be heard outside of the large house. Both men stopped the conversation to listen. The noise stopped for a single moment, before a loud scream followed it. The sounds of crackling flames were heard a little way off, and then the trotting continued.

Darvy smiled maliciously as if the noise of destruction was beautiful music, but Wilde looked faint. Darvy noticed.

"What's wrong Fango?" he said, and he sounded as if he were in a better mood now. "You don't like the Necrosteeds, do you?"

Wilde didn't comment, he simply tried to backtrack. "You mentioned your army. Is the Wand not a sufficient tool for manufacturing?"

"The Wand has limits," Darvy said. "I will need a more powerful object to truly control the dead. I was rather hoping you could have supplied me with answers, but alas, it seems to you've failed me." He did not attempt to mask the displeasure in his voice.

"The Veil was moved months ago," Fango said. "We know that much. To learn who has it now will require more than interrogating a few Ministry representatives. It will take time to pinpoint its location."

Darvy heaved a sigh. He then resumed sitting in his throne. "Away with you," he said, flapping his hand. "Return when you have actual information."

Wilde made no acknowledgement of his dismissal other than turning on his heel and beginning his stride out. Darvy stopped him with an icy question however.

"You don't like me, do you Fango?" he said.

Wilde said nothing. He did not turn around however. He was not going to bother making eye contact.

"You are undoubtedly wondering why I've not yet killed you," Darvy continued, giving his widest smile thus far. "I will not keep you in suspense. You're still alive because I know you to be an efficient worker. And because I owe you a great deal."

At this, Wilde could not help but turn around curiously, his eyes once again narrowed.

"Or have you already forgotten?" he added, flipping the Dragonfang Wand in between his fingers. "It was you, after all, who first gave me the location of this wand, was it not? All in exchange for the murder of a single Muggle woman, correct? What was her name? Cynthia, or Sarah-"

"Samantha," Wilde said, speaking for the first time since turning around, and his voice sounded uncharacteristically hoarse. "Her name was Samantha."

"Ah, yes," Darvy said. "I'd forgotten. Well, in any case, I must really thank the both of you. Had it not been for your intense infatuation with her I may have never been able to collect this wand for my dear brother...and its ownership may never have passed to me. Funny how that works isn't it? I do hope they can see us in the afterlife. I'm sure she'd be pleased to know what came from her death..."

It was now Wilde's turn to breathe heavily. His cheeks looked flushed; he appeared to be on the verge of vomiting. Without saying a word he turned back and briskly left the room, and then the house; the cold wind of the mangled village slapping against his face as if it were insulting him.

He peered at the ruins. The flaming buildings, the empty streets. Had he done this? Was there anyone that could stop this?

Chapter 2: The Campaign For Justice And Unity

"James open up!" Albus screeched, pounding once more on the bathroom door. "C'mon, I got to take a-"

"Albus!" his mother yelled from downstairs. "There is more than one bathroom in this house! You can walk the flight of stairs!"

Albus groaned and leaned his forehead against the bathroom door. There was indeed more than one bathroom in the house, but this one was the closest to his room, and more importantly, James had already been in there for an hour. Deciding that giving up now would be conceding defeat to James, he gave the door one more pound and pressed his lips up to the crack in the door.

"James, what are you even doing in-"

The door flew open, smacking him in the face and causing him to stagger back. There, in the midst of so much steam it could have been a sauna, stood James. He was wearing nothing but boxers, his arms held in a flexing position.

"Seventh year" he said, kissing the muscle on his right arm. "Need my physique to be at its best." He flexed once more in a different position, this time making his rather muscular chest stick out. A straight, visible scar became immediately prominent on his chest.

"Cool" Albus said crisply, not really caring. He tried pushing passed his brother into the foggy room, but James, still just a little bit bigger than him, stopped him.

"I'm not done!" he grinned. "Check out the squat thrusts-"

And he proceeded to crouch down. Albus watched as his boxers slid up his thighs-

He covered his mouth, for he had just gotten the sudden urge to vomit. Knowing full well that James was still going to block his entrance to the bathroom, he turned on his heel and hurried down the stairs, nearly colliding with a small red headed figure that paid him no mind. Hugo had been indifferent to him all summer.

He leapt down the final four stairs and turned abruptly, his mouth still covered. He screeched to a halt outside of the kitchen however, where a most delectable smelling dish was being cooked. He opened his mouth and inhaled; the urge to be on all fours immediately taken away.

He entered the kitchen, expecting food to be on the table, but it was not. His mother had left skillet cooking on the stove, but the entire room was empty. Stretched across the kitchen table was an edition of the *Morning Prophet*.

His urge to go to the bathroom now gone as well, he slid into a chair and immediately began rolling his eyes.

Waddlesworth Adds Finishing Touches To Hogsmeade, Campaigns for Ministry-Renegade Unity

Warren Waddlesworth, philanthropist, entrepreneur, and associate of the renegade organization "Wands and Redemption" has today announced that Hogsmeade is in its final stretches of being rebuilt. The famed wizarding village, subject to the Hogsmeade Massacre of but a few months ago, has been in the process of being rebuilt for some time.

"It is with very great pleasure that I can say today that the glorious village of Hogsmeade is up and running," says Waddlesworth. "Though the memories of such a tragedy remain fresh in our minds, we can take pride in knowing that we have done all that we can to rebuild."

Waddlesworth spent an estimated twenty eight thousand galleons in rebuilding the village, including supplying the shops with start up money. On his great expenses, Waddlesworth batted the question of debt away.

"Repayment would be dishonorable. I have been blessed with great fortune. Is there any other reason for riches, if not to help those in need? I myself hold responsibility for the damage...I failed in single handedly protecting those who were in danger of the onslaught led by Ares and Darvy...and though I am almost sure that the death of the former is a great step by the hands of Wands and Redemption, I still know that there is work to be done. I can only hope that the citizens of the Wizarding World can forgive me for being unable to have thus far stopped this threat, and also believe me when I say that I am doing everything in my power."

On the topic of fighting the terrorism brought about by Sebastian Darvy (seen at Hogsmeade, but on the run from law enforcement and Renegades alike since), Waddlesworth has also extended his hand to the Ministry of Magic, in what he calls 'The Campaign for Justice and Unity'.

"The Campaign for Justice and Unity is meant to show that Wands and Redemption still views the Ministry of Magic as vital in the effort to stop Sebastian Darvy and his army of filth. The recent, drastic moves that the Ministry has made have only proven that they are worried, and are in need of help. Wands and Redemption does not laugh at this, we applaud the truth and we acknowledge no single person or group can conquer this threat alone. We all seek justice here. We are now asking for the cooperation of the Ministry. If any members of the Ministry of Magic feel that their government is not doing enough, we here at Wands and Redemption will not turn you away. We will embrace you."

Waddlesworth plans on further elucidating his plans for Ministry-Renegade inter-relations next week, while giving a speech during the grand opening of the new "Quality Quidditch Supplies" in Hogsmeade.

Albus snorted and pushed the paper away. Waddlesworth was up to his old antics. Crap about unity and caring for people. Just a few weeks ago Waddlesworth had sought to murder him,

though, of course, the public was never going to go for that. He skimmed the article again, cringing at a certain sentence.

The recent, drastic moves that the Ministry has made have only proven that they are worried, and are in need of help.

Just a few days after his father had been reinstated as Head Auror, it was announced that he would be sharing the position with his predecessor, Janine Fischer. Albus knew very little of Fischer however; only that Uncle Ron had taken to insulting her whenever he was over for meals.

"Albus! Mail!"

His younger sister's voice echoed from upstairs, though when he turned around, he was greeted by a different family member.

"Morning, Albus."

"Morning dad" Albus replied. "The *Mo*-"

"I know, I saw it" his father replied, yawning and pouring himself some coffee. "Where's your mother?"

Albus came very close to saying "siding with James", but stopped himself. "She's upstairs" he said.

"Ahh. Okay well, if you see her tell her I'm home. I'm going to help myself to some breakfast."

Albus nodded before turning around on the spot and walking away. There had been a time- about an entire year actually- when Albus had been unable to look his father in the eye. They had patched things up just a few weeks ago, though Albus still found it hard to talk to him, and his appearance was responsible for this. When his father had been unemployed he had taken the fight to the streets, outside of the government, and he had looked the worse for wear. He looked cleaner now, but at the same time, more exhausted. And though he did not mention it in the same way that Uncle Ron did, Albus knew that his father was not pleased with his new co-position.

He hurried up the stairs and passed Hugo once more, again being ignored. Albus didn't care much right now however; he was much too keen on reading the mail. He had been writing back and forth with someone all summer...

Another red headed figure moved in front of him.

"I need to borrow Marauder" Rose said.

"Not now" Albus replied quickly, trying to move his way around her. What was it with people standing in his way this morning?

"Yes, now. Lance-

Albus rolled his eyes once more. Lance Disona was Rose's boyfriend. A very good looking, intelligent, and nice seventh year Hufflepuff, Albus truly did have no problems with him. That being said however, Rose had taken to borrowing every available owl in the house at different intervals in order to write back and forth and send him things.

"Well I'm pretty sure Mirra wrote back" Albus said. "So...yeah. Marauder's going to be busy."

Rose threw her hands on her hips, of which Albus didn't care for. He recalled last year, when Rose had first started writing to Lance. She had been secretive then, and thus had scarcely borrowed Marauder. Now however, she seemed to think that she was entitled to using him.

Albus continued his fierce gaze, unwilling to submit once more today. Rose narrowed her eyes before turning on her heel and marching off. Satisfied, Albus bolted to his room and closed the door. To his immense surprise, there were three letters and two owls on his bed.

Albus stepped over his belonging to near the envelopes. Something strange had occurred this summer. Typically, his things would be slightly strewn about, but mostly secured or stowed away. For some strange reason however, all of his worldly possessions were loitering his floor, so much so that on more than one occasion he'd injured his foot in the morning. He almost tripped over his broomstick as he went to sit down on his bed, and even then he had to sit up almost immediately; he had sat on a silver ring. He stowed the ring away in his pocket and looked at the letters.

The first made him beam. There, in neat handwriting in green ink, was his name. Mirra had gotten back to him especially fast this time. He set the envelope aside and saw another tidy scrawl, which he recognized to be Scorpius'. A handsome eagle owl had delivered it. The final envelope was the most official looking of the three, and Albus knew it to be from Hogwarts. The second he'd touched the letter the curt looking tawny owl had flown off.

Deciding he would read them in order of that which was least important first, he dug into the Hogwarts envelope. The typical letter about his fifth year at Hogwarts greeted him. Albus scanned over it all dutifully, knowing what it all said but still feeling obliged to read it in case he missed anything. A second sheet of paper held a list of his course books. Here, something peculiar occurred. Many of his books remained the same, only a grade up, but something caught his attention near the bottom.

Potions coursework books: To Be Determined

Albus tilted his head to the side. What did that mean? Had their Potions professor not yet decided what they would be doing, or had they not even found a Potions teacher yet? Albus had had a rather strange affinity with this subject since he first joined Hogwarts; however none of his

teachers had proven themselves to be worth much. Indeed, their only professor to last more than a year was the very man that the Ministry was still hunting.

With a pang, he thought of his most recent Potions teacher. Ida Blackwood had been a bitter enemy of his friend Scorpius, and a downright unpleasant person to boot. But still, there was more to her that only Albus knew about. She had saved his life last year, and Albus knew that it was out of respect to another former teacher of his- Sancticus Fairhart. With a frown, Albus reached his hand into his pocket and gripped the silver ring. Fairhart was dead, that ring the only remaining remnant of his existence.

Albus sighed and pushed the letter aside, hoping that his new Potions professor had no connection to him whatsoever. He picked up Scorpius' letter next and tore into it.

Al,

Glad your birthday went well. Hopefully my card got there on time, I sent it out a bit later than I wanted to, but I've been a bit busy. My mum's been taking me shopping for robes and neat little gifts. Curious as to why, I suspect? Well, I got Prefect.

Albus smirked at the way that Scorpius had casually mentioned his new responsibilities. Whatever Scorpius may say, Albus knew that he was thrilled to be given such a position. And though it seemed odd that his mother would be taking him shopping in such dark times, Albus couldn't help but feel that it made a great deal of sense. He could think of few parents as interested in the success of their children as Mrs. Malfoy.

My granddad is okay, by the way, thanks for asking. He really hasn't done much, stayed in side like usual. Were you expecting something else? Also, have you talked to Morrison recently? I haven't heard from him in about two weeks. He was complaining about something going on at his house, but I suppose we won't find out until the first.

Anyway, I apologize for my brevity but my mother insists that my responsibilities as a prefect include keeping up with my studies even during the holidays. Looking forward to seeing you soon however-

Scorpius

PS. Tell Rose I said hello.

Albus smirked once more, though he traced the letter back through and eyed the portion regarding Lucius Malfoy intently. Scorpius still had no idea of the operation that his grandfather had been involved in, and Albus was not going to tell him. Still, he found ways to cleverly inquire about him whenever he could. Though his face still stung slightly, he owed him a great deal.

His expression turned to a hungry one when he picked up his final letter, Mirra's handwriting elegantly dancing across it. He opened the letter carefully (he enjoyed saving the envelopes) and read his response.

Albus,

I'm so pleased to hear that your birthday went well! And yes, my grandparents are fine, thank you. In fact, I recently had a brief discussion with them and they're quite eager to meet you. You'll try and do something with your hair on the first, won't you?

Yes, I've been reading the newspaper and I've heard about these problems with the Ministry. Your father is getting a very raw deal, if I may say so myself. It must be extremely frustrating to have to share authority with someone. Hopefully it all works out for the best however. I'm very pleased to say that I've heard very little bad news however. Perhaps we can finally get some rest. How's Lily, by the way? And Hugo?

I miss you terribly. I've taken to reading a few of the Quidditch books that you sent me, and I admit that they've captured my intention. I'm really looking forward to seeing you to play now that I have a better grasp of the game, unless it's against Gryffindor of course.

To answer your question, no, I haven't been in contact with anyone but you recently. I keep meaning to write Rose, though I admit I've been postponing it slightly- keeping in contact all of the time detracts from that first initial meeting on the train.

Also, have you received your letter from Hogwarts yet? I noticed that our Potions coursework seems to be a little off. Any ideas as to why? I was rather hoping you'd have a potential conspiracy behind such a matter.

I can't wait to see you again! Realistically I know that there's little chance of us meeting up in Diagon Alley, but I'm still hoping for it anyway. If not, I'll see you on the first! But please do write back before then...I really want to hear that theory.

Love, Mirra

PS. I got Prefect.

Albus grinned at her jab about conspiracies, and then re-read through the letter, counting the question marks. He loved it when she asked him things; it gave him plenty to write back about. This had been one of their shorter letters, though he didn't mind in the slightest. He immediately pulled a quill and some ink towards him, before paying more mind to the final words.

Prefect. He grinned at knowing that two of his friends had made prefect, and was immensely proud of Mirra for it as well; he knew that she had not anticipated such a thing when she'd first arrived at Hogwarts. He could say with perfect honesty that he himself missing the badge didn't deter him in the slightest. Though ambition may be a common Slytherin trait, he thought that he

had enough on his plate, and also knew that Scorpius was much more deserving. Strangely however, he had never considered the possibility of Mirra being a Prefect. Why was that?

He was answered by the sound of thundering footsteps, followed by his door being rudely blasted open. Rose marched in, her face red, looking as if she had never been more irate.

"Give me my letter Albus!" she barked.

"Huh?" he replied, glancing at all three of the letters on his desk in confusion.

"My Hogwarts letter! They must have mixed them up!"

"I don't think that they really have different content in them-"

"Albus!" she said, hands returning to her hips. "I'm serious! I didn't get my badge!"

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but could not muster the words. Grinning slightly, he handed over his letter from Mirra, pointing at the post signature.

Rose scanned it, her mouth falling open, no words leaving them.

Chapter 3: The Glance And The Goblin

A week into summer break Rose had given a long, drawn out speech about how she understood her few notable vices and was willing to better herself. Prominent among them, she admitted, had been her tendency to over-react, and her general immaturity towards seemingly trivial things. The night that she'd learned she hadn't made Prefect however, Albus witnessed it fly out the window along with his return owl to Mirra.

"Mum and dad are going to kill me" she'd said, laying face down on his bed.

As it turned out, however, Rose's parents seemed to think much less of it than she did.

"Conspiracy" Uncle Ron joked, chewing his meatloaf at the dinner table the next night. "Me and 'Mione were both prefects. Only reason they kept it from you is so that we wouldn't have a dynasty, cupcake" he added, winking at his daughter. "Minerva made the right decision giving it to someone less deserving."

Albus gave him an annoyed look.

"Still deserving though!" his uncle said, grinning.

Aunt Hermione had gone in an entirely different direction however.

"I'm sorry to hear about that Rose. But that's just the way things work" she said, folding laundry later in the night.

Albus, who had just happened to be walking by, had almost laughed at the blank expression on her face.

And still, the arrival of Hogwarts letters had stirred something else within his family. There were now officially things to shop for, and thus, there was a reason to go to Diagon Alley. Albus' mother had pursed her lips at the mention of it- last time her children had all foolishly ran into the middle of a riot.

"Mum that was one time" James whined when it was mentioned at dinner. "All the other times we were safe!"

"There's only been one riot!" she argued back. "And eat your carrots!"

James mumbled something about being a "grown man" as he shoveled carrots into his mouth. Albus, however, looked over at his father.

"Gin, we bring them along and we're out of there twice as fast. Less chance of anyone getting hurt."

"Less than if they didn't go at all?" she asked, a look of mock inquisition on her face.

Albus watched as his father sighed, though his mother's face then softened. "They can go" she said. "But bring Hagrid!"

After the plates had all been cleared however, their father still kept them at the table.

"There's still a few things we have to go over before tomorrow" he said.

James groaned. "No running off alone, no starting fights..."

"Hear me out" their father answered them quietly. "There's more than that."

Albus' ears perked up; Lily and James seemed to be paying little attention however.

"It's not going to be like last time- no riots anyway. Waddlesworth is giving a speech in Hogsmeade tomorrow. But I want all of you to stay with me and avoid talking to strangers. Tomorrow's going to be very crowded."

"Why?" Albus asked. "Aren't most people afraid that Darvy will randomly attack?"

Saying his old professor's voice stung his tongue; only two months ago he'd seen him commit murder. Still, Albus had been generally surprised at the lack of news surrounding him. Ever since the initial articles about the "Dark Alliance", as Darvy called them, there'd been little about him. Ministry pamphlets were handed out on self defense, but Albus had considered them laughable at best. Apart from that the papers had been flooded with news of Waddlesworth rebuilding Hogsmeade.

"No, they're not" his father said quaintly. "People are going to feel very well protected tomorrow. But be that as it may...I'd still rather you stay close."

"Protected? Why?"

"You'll see tomorrow" their father said. "Up to bed now, we've got a big day ahead of us."

Albus awoke bright and early the next day. After a good long thought about how much the excitement of Diagon Alley visits had deteriorated over time however, he had went back to bed and awoke just in time to catch up with everyone else.

"Did you eat Albus?" his mother said hurriedly, lining the children up.

"Yes mum" Albus grunted, though she had already turned away.

"And everyone has their lists?"

"We'll all be fine Gin" Albus' father said. "No one is going to get separated or anything. Just in and out, get the books we need, and nothing else to it."

As they all lined up near the fireplace, Albus watched his father reach out for the bag of Floo Powder. Strangely however, he pulled out a bag of different size and color from behind it.

"Is that Floo Powder dad?" Albus asked.

"Kind of" he replied, holding out the bag and showing everyone. Albus noticed that the powder was murky yellow, though appeared to be the same consistency as typical Floo Powder.

"What is that stuff?" Lily asked, as she and Hugo peered into it from behind Uncle Ron.

"Brand new state of the art stuff" Uncle Ron said smugly.

"It's Insta-Floo" Albus' father said, his tone more serious.

"Where do you get it?" James asked.

"It's not sold in stores" his father replied. "It's specially designed to break through most Anti-Intruder charms placed around fireplaces. It's only Ministry authorized, and for good reason. You can essentially go anywhere you want with it, provided that there's a fireplace."

"Cool!" James said, his voice sounding five years younger as he made a grab for the bag. His mother batted his hand away however.

"Didn't you hear your father!" she snapped tensely. "It's only authorized for Ministry use!"

"Then why's he showing it off..."

"Because we are taking it" his father said. "It's the only way to floo directly into Diagon Alley. I've already arranged for Hagrid to meet us at a shop I'm familiar with" he added, catching his wife's eye. "Now...I'll dole out the pinches..."

"Where exactly are we going dad?" Albus asked as the canary powder was dumped into his hand.

"A place called 'Ollivanders'" his father replied. "And make sure you all say it clearly. Ron'll go first."

Albus recalled the name from his childhood, though he had never actually entered the famous shop. His wand had been specially crafted by the famed wandmaker, not bought.

Uncle Ron was followed by Hugo and Rose, and then his wife. Of the Potters, Albus was first to go.

"Remember Al, nice and clear" his father said.

Albus gave him a blank, lazy stare before tossing the powder into the fire. It immediately turned the same dull color of the powder, a strange sight considering the flickering of the flames. Albus said the name of the shop and then walked right through. The next moment he was twirling, his

elbows tucked in as he shifted through space, an experience identical to that of regular Floo Powder-

He landed firmly on his feet, just in time to catch a conversation between his uncle and Hugo.

"Why didn't we just floo into the Leaky Cauldron?" Hugo had asked.

"Because your Uncle Harry and I aren't too fond of the crowd in there anymore" he said shortly.

"Step away now, Al" he added, giving Albus a quick tug the second that he'd noticed him.

James appeared next. "Blimey," he started, looking around, "this place is a big pile of garbage isn't it?"

Aunt Hermione gave him a look, but Albus couldn't help but silently agree. One look around the dingy shop told him that Ollivander had most likely retired long before he'd ever made Albus his wand. The shelves were cleared out of wizarding instruments, the windows boarded up in a manner similar to other closed shops that Albus had seen, and alone in the corner sat a dilapidated chair that looked to be thick with dust.

Lily came through next, and then his father and mother. Taking little time to marvel at the old shop, they were all led to the door and then outside into Diagon Alley.

A most peculiar noise entered Albus' ears at once; that of laughter. A year ago the trip into Diagon Alley had ended with a riot of mass proportions, but had begun with silence. There had been few shoppers, no one had stopped to talk, and his father had been given hateful glares. The Diagon Alley of today made Albus forget for a moment that Hogsmeade was in the process of being rebuilt, or even that they were in the midst of a war. There were shoppers talking adamantly and enthusiastically, children among them walking in circles. Shopkeepers were calling out exuberantly, looking to rip off fresh customers. It even looked more colorful.

"What happened to this place?" James said as a young girl walked by him with a group of giggling friends and winked. "Last time I had to rough some punk up!"

"Big difference huh?" his father said. "The people feel safe nowadays."

"Are they?" Hugo asked, and Albus made a small note of his tone. His younger cousin had not sounded worried or anxious in months. Indeed, since a near fatal injury in which he gained some popularity, his voice had become a cool and collected one.

"They are now that I'm here!" Uncle Ron said, patting his son on the shoulder. Aunt Hermione smiled.

"And even without him" she said smartly, pointing.

Hagrid was bounding down the street. He waved to them jovially, almost knocking over an elderly woman as he did so, and then flashed them a large grin once in talking distance.

"Harry!" he said, taking both of Albus' father's hands in one of his own and shaking them up and down. He shook Uncle Ron's next, and then gave both of their wives bushy kisses on the cheek before crouching down to talk to the younger ones.

"All 'cited fer yer nex' year!" he asked them collectively.

"I'm taking Care for Magical Creatures this year!" Hugo said.

"Me too!" Lily chimed in.

"Well then you'd best buy some swords an' shields then, eh? Got some big things planned fer you in my class..."

"Well we have the whole day to shop" Uncle Ron grinned.

"But we'd best split up and get it over with quick" Aunt Hermione said.

Albus' father spoke up next. "Right, let's say Ron and I take the older ones, and then Hagrid and you two can take Hugo and Lily?" he said to Aunt Hermione and his wife.

"I'm fine on my own" James spoke up, but he was entirely ignored.

"We'll all meet back here in about two hours then to see how much we've done" Aunt Hermione said, and they all nodded.

Within minutes they were all broken apart. Lily was taking Arithmancy and needed some very advanced textbooks from Flourish & Blotts, but both Albus and Rose needed to refill on Potions ingredients- especially since they weren't exactly sure what it is they'd need.

"To the Apothecary then" Uncle Ron said lazily as they walked passed busy shoppers.

"Can I go off on my own?" James said loudly. "I'm of age now!"

"That's great James" his father said, smiling. "Now stick close..."

James groaned, but Albus had to admit that he would have preferred it if he continued talking. It would have drowned out Rose's ramblings about fifth year.

"I've heard that O.W.L year is one of the hardest, isn't it dad? Could we maybe pop into *Obscurus Book Shop*? For a bit of extra reading?"

"We'll see if we have time later" her father said. "Right now, let's focus on the necessities."

"Well speaking of necessities," Rose started up almost at once, "Lance's birthday is at the end of September and I was thinking that maybe we could pop in somewhere..."

Albus rolled his eyes, but Uncle Ron gave her a stony look. Over the summer Rose had talked up her boyfriend a great deal, and despite the insistence by all who knew him that Lance was a great guy (even by Albus, nervously as he felt almost betraying of Scorpius), her father was still weary of her dating. Especially as she was dating someone two years older than her.

"We'll see if we have time for that too" he eventually said. "But it's very, very unlikely" he added.

They reached the Apothecary, which was flourishing, and went to restock on ingredients.

"What do you think we'll need?" Albus asked his cousin.

Surprisingly, it was his father who answered him. "Not much."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Why's that?"

His father sighed in preparation of what Albus knew was going to be an in-depth explanation, but before he could do so, the shopkeeper, a frail, wispy man with an elderly rasp of a voice, had spoke.

"Are you going to be paying for all of that?" he asked.

Albus turned and saw that Rose was piling up various items into a small basket, so much so that a tower of precariously stacked jars were on the verge of spilling over.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, swiftly moving towards her and grabbing a jar from the top. He tried reading the label but saw that it was written in advanced symbols. "Really? We need this? It doesn't even have a name!"

Rose snatched the jar from his hand. "I didn't get Prefect!" she hissed, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "Do you know why that is?"

Albus came very close to praising Mirra right then and there, but decided not to in fear of a row. He simply shrugged.

"It's because I only do *enough*" she said. "Never *more than enough*."

They left the Apothecary ten minutes later, Uncle Ron carrying two full bags of slimy and needless items.

"Don't recall using half of this stuff in my day..."

They shimmied their way through an extremely crowded street (there must have been a sale on something that was normally expensive) and turned their way towards a more shabby street which held Universal Wanderers in it, a newly opened Astronomy shop; Rose had complained that she needed a new telescope.

"Look I have no business here" James said truthfully. "I don't even take this subject anymore. And we're going to be here all day if we wait around to get my stuff. I need to stop by Whizzhard Books..."

His father sighed. "Ron, would you mind going with James? It would make things quicker..."

"Oh come on!" James said, this clearly was not his intention.

"Alright kiddo, let's go get your books" Uncle Ron joked. "Keep tight hold of my hand..."

James protested, but was eventually whisked away, leaving Albus with just his cousin and father. They continued down the street to Universal Wanderers, something odd catching Albus' eye. The oddity turned to fear once Albus realized what it was however.

Two men were standing straight, leaning against a shabby junk shop. Both of them wore dark robes, and from the angle Albus could see an emblem on one of them. It showed a sword like figure with a wand for a blade.

Albus tugged at his father's robes. "Dad...dad."

His father spun around. "What's wrong?"

Albus pointed over at the two men, though it was hard to aim at them directly. People were walking back and forth ahead of them as if no one was there.

"Oh..."

"Dad those are *Waddlesworth's men!* Wands and Redemption! Rene-"

"I know what they are Albus" he said, and Rose was now looking at them too. "But they belong there."

"Huh? A couple months ago they-" he broke off there. There had once been a bounty on his head, one that his father surely knew about. He had even told Albus to stay clear of all Renegades. Why was he ignoring them here? He knew how they operated. Shouldn't he be arresting them?

"Don't be afraid, Albus" he said. "They're not here to hurt anyone."

"I doubt that!" he said, a little louder than he had intended. He peered over at them. They were turning their heads slowly, examining the passerby, arms folded.

"Don't" his father told him. "I don't like WAR, but the peace you see here is because of them. Waddlesworth has branched out and placed bodyguards in every wizarding dwelling in Britain, Diagon Alley and the rebuilt Hogsmeade among them. People feel safe walking these streets now because there are Renegades guarding them."

"But that's-"

"My job" his father finished for him. "I know. And so does Warren. He's been pressing for increased relations between the Ministry of Magic and his own people ever since the Hogsmeade Massacre."

"Does he really want to work together?" Albus asked, curiously. Every article that he'd read about Waddlesworth since the summer had begun had alluded to this, but Albus had always thought an ulterior motive behind it.

"Oh yes, he certainly wants unity" his father replied, nodding his head. "I've said it before about Warren Waddlesworth; he is not an evil man. He wants to be rid of terrorism, and with Ares gone, his new goal is Darvy and whatever he brings to the table. His methods are arguable, but his goal is noble. That being said however, he wants unity for different reasons. All he has with Wands and Redemption is manpower, people willing to get their hands dirty. What he really needs is resources. What the Ministry can offer. Imagine what Warren Waddlesworth could do with something like Insta-Floo."

Albus had the sudden image of The Hammer, a beefy and violent Renegade that he knew of, flooring into an unsuspecting house and grabbing a child by the throat. He shuddered.

"Scary thought, isn't it?"

Albus nodded, and then entered the shop. As he was more than content with his stargazing tools, he simply waited by the door as Rose meandered around looking for what to buy. Albus noticed his father tapping his feet absentmindedly as she shopped. He knew that his father wasn't concerned with money in the slightest-at worst his brother in law would simply pay him back-but also knew that he wanted Rose to hurry up. Something told Albus that seeing Renegades had made his father uneasy.

They left the shop with Rose carrying her own ruby and gold colored telescope, something so pricy that the shopkeeper, a weedy looking man with high cheekbones, was counting his considerable amount of gold eagerly as they left. Next on the list was the Stationary Shop, where Albus truly did need more supplies (he'd used a rather large amount of ink and paper writing to Mirra over the summer) and then to Flourish & Blotts to get the necessary reading material throughout the year.

By the time that they'd entered the shop, Lily and Hugo had already finished and were nowhere to be seen with their chaperones. Albus looked around at some superfluous reading material

while his father piled the necessary textbooks up at the register, Rose adding a few more every time the pile grew too small. He couldn't help but notice that what he was seeking most looked brand new and, more importantly, catered towards self-defense. There was an entire shelf dedicated to *Curse or be Cursed: The Ultimate Guide to Offense* and a new shipment of *Jinxes, Jinxes, and more Jinxes!* appeared to have just arrived. Albus curiously picked up a copy and turned to a random page, where he saw an incantation entitled "*Acuelabium*", along with a lengthy description of the spell. Before he could begin reading however, he heard the bell of the front door ring and had turned his head.

Entering the shop were two more black robed wizards- Renegades. He felt his heart skip a beat and then looked to the counter to see his father, though he was disappointed by the result. He was merely fiddling with his bag of coins.

Both men glanced at him but walked by as if he had not been on their murder list months ago. Albus breathed a quick sigh of relief, unable to explain his fear. His father had said that they weren't here to hurt anyone, only to protect. Why then did he go cold when he saw them?

"Al, are you okay?"

He turned and saw Rose looking at him. "Hu-what?"

"You're staring at that pile of books like it's done you some wrong" she said. She had obviously paid little mind to the Renegades, and seemed to think that his cold expression had been directed at their new coursework.

"Oh-erm-"

She patted him on the shoulder. "I'm worried about O.W.L year too" she said, in a soothing voice not like her usual one. "If it makes you feel any better though, I'm always willing to give some extra help. I'll always let you know when I'm available for studying. I'm sure Lance won't mind chipping in either, I mean, he did do fantastic on his tests..."

Albus nodded his head, grinning, and a few minutes later they had exited the shop, all of them now carrying heavy bags full of knowledge.

"That should be most of it" his father said, a large brown bag dangling from each hand. "I suppose we can meet up with the others now-"

"Wait" Rose interrupted. "Uncle Harry can we *please* look around for a present! Nowhere far, maybe just a pop into a used shop or something, it doesn't have to be anything big..."

Albus saw his father heave a sigh, before a thoughtful expression crossed his face. "You kids up for a trip to Gringotts?"

Albus exchanged a glance with Rose, both of their eyebrows raised.

"Where did that come from?" he asked his father.

"There's a few neat magical equipment shops right around there, and I planned on stopping by anyway at some point...need to check an account."

"I'm up for it" Albus said quickly, his old interest in Diagon Alley returning. In fifteen years he had never entered the famed wizarding bank before.

Rose agreed as well, and soon enough all three of them had turned back towards the main streets, the hustle and bustle of shoppers now hindering them once more. Albus caught the eye of a few more Renegades on the way, patrolling solemnly, but grew accustomed to having them march by him after the fourth or fifth time. His father, he noticed, paid them no mind at all.

They took a sharp turn near an intersection of Knockturn Alley, and Albus was given his first true glimpse of the magnificent building. Unlike the dingy shops and pubs around it, Gringotts Bank had an air of superiority to it, so much so that merely standing in its presence gave Albus shivers. He imagined the inside as looking a bit like the headquarters of Wands and Redemption- that of fine furniture and light, ambient music- but the exterior seemed to show something even great. A majestic white building, it looked older and more kept than any simple gathering place.

"Stick close" his father said. "We'll only be a moment; I'm not going down to the vaults."

They walked up the marble white stairs and straight towards the giant bronze doors. There appeared to be lax security at this point; Albus could only assume that the real dangers of the place were inside. His father pushed the doors open, and what greeted them next was another hall, this one ending in silver doors. Flanking them were two goblins.

Menacing and constantly leering, the rather small creatures eyed them warily as they walked towards the doors. Albus saw that they were dressed in a stunning mixture of scarlet and gold, and though their gaze remained transfixed, they said nothing until they had all met at the doors.

"Dozak" Albus' father said, nodding his head towards the goblin on the right, who nodded curtly back. Albus glanced up at the silver doors before they opened. On the left one was a withered but still legible inscription:

Enter stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

Next to the ominous warning, on the right door, was a newer looking and shorter message.

Yes, we really do have dragons! Remember that before you stick your nose in a vault that isn't yours!

Albus swallowed before passing through the silver doors. What he encountered next was enough to make both he and his cousin utter words of amazement. They were now at the beginning of a vast marble hall, filled with what could have been hundreds of more snarky and ill-tempered looking goblins, all either walking around or sitting behind counters. Albus noticed that there were several wizards in the bank as well, none of whom were making simple conversation and were all solely focused on getting down to business. Gringotts, it seemed, was not a place for socializing.

In between each counter sat a long glass window which showed the alleys on either side of the massive bank, and as Albus attempted to peer through them, a strange realization dawned upon him. There were no Renegades in this building. He was right about to ask his father the reason for this when they were marched to an open counter.

"Name?" the goblin said to his father as they approached, small spectacles perched on his crooked nose.

"Harry Potter" he replied, and the goblin made a quick note of it on a scrap of paper. "But I'm not here for me" he added quickly, and the goblin narrowed its eyes.

"Then what are you here for?" he croaked.

"I'm interested in seeing the account information of someone else" his father replied curtly. Albus too looked at his father at this point.

"You'll need their signature and key to start with" the goblin said. "But even from there, it's a harrowing process."

Albus watched as his father removed a slip of paper and slid it over to the goblin. He scanned it quickly, once again narrowing his eyes before nodding his head.

Albus' father turned to him and his cousin, completely catching them off guard.

"You kids mind waiting over there while I talk this over?" he said calmly, jerking his head towards a rather occupied corner.

Albus opened his mouth to protest, but he was cut off.

"Won't be long at all" he said quickly, and Albus took his tone to mean that it was a command.

Albus marched over to the corner with Rose, his mind buzzing as he tried imagining what his father was up to. Rose slinked herself up against one of the tall glass windows while Albus stood still, trying not to bump into any passerby goblins.

"So who's Prefect for Slytherin?" she asked him out of the blue.

"Huh? Oh...not sure on the girl, but Scorpius got it."

Rose heaved a sigh. "*Really*. Scorpius got it and I didn't?"

Albus rolled his eyes at her, offended for two reasons. Firstly because Scorpius was one of his best friends, and secondly because he knew it would crush him to hear what Rose had just said.

"I mean don't get me wrong," she continued, "he's not stupid or anything it's just I've never really seen him apply himself all that much."

Albus smirked. "Well if he deserved the badge when he *doesn't* apply himself, can you imagine what'd happen with a bit of effort?"

Rose said nothing, but her question had raised one of his own.

"Any idea who Mirra's partner is?"

"Charlie, most likely" she replied, staring blankly ahead.

Albus frowned. His long standing enmity with Charles Eckley had stopped towards the end of the previous year, though he still felt uncomfortable at the thought of him and Mirra walking down hallways together at night...

It was now his turn to stare off into space, though just as he was wondering when his father would be finished with his business, a strange sight caught his eye. A few windows down from Rose a cloaked figure was hurrying down the alley on the side of Gringotts, looking very much like it didn't want to be disturbed.

"Rose, duck down" he said quickly.

"Huh?"

"Just duck!"

Looking highly offended, she ducked down without another word. Albus watched as the cloaked person walked by the window she'd been blocking, and he caught a glance of the face just as it turned to look into the window.

The first thing he noticed was chalk white skin and straggly red hair, almost entirely obscured by the cloak. The more subtle features included the upturned nose and beady, piercing eyes, which quickly darted away as soon as Albus had made eye contact with them. It was Waddlesworth.

"What the-"

Waddlesworth darted passed more windows and out of sight, Albus watching him as he went, fists clenched with frustration and confusion. What was Waddlesworth doing in Diagon Alley? Was he not supposed to be giving a speech in Hogsmeade at this very moment? Eager for answers and forgetting his orders to stay put, he turned to run out of the bank.

"Albus stop!" Rose called. "What do you think you're doing!"

Albus bolted through the hall, dropping the bags of books he was holding and knocking a goblin over as he did so. He heard the muttering around him, followed by a raspy voice calling out "Seize him!"

But he was quick, and had traffic to block whatever was going on. In the back of his head he knew what he was doing to be foolish; he had ran head long into trouble before. But the situation had changed this time. His father had assured him that Renegades were no danger to him, and he was burning with too much curiosity as to what Waddlesworth was doing to think much further ahead.

He collided with the silver doors and sped by the two goblins flanking them, one of whom ran after him.

"Stop! Thief! Thief!"

Albus next went through the bronze doors, then took a sharp turn and entered the alley where he had seen Waddlesworth bolt through. He started to run down it, but then tripped over something invisible. Turning back he saw the goblin chasing him with its long, sickly fingers raised, some kind of goblin magic having just been used.

"Thief!" it crooned again.

"I didn't steal anything" Albus battled back, pulling himself to his feet and now extremely annoyed. Waddlesworth was long gone by this point.

"Running for exercise then!" the goblin snarled, and he snapped his fingers. Albus felt something invisible strike him in the stomach. He fell over gasping while the goblin rounded on him menacingly.

He heard more footsteps, but paid them no mind; at this point, he officially felt threatened. Leaping to his feet once again he withdrew his wand.

"*Reducto!*" he bellowed, as the blast hit the goblin square in the face, causing it to spin in the air before landing on its belly.

Albus kept his wand raised, but then heard a human voice coming from the corner in which he'd turned.

"Stop! You're under arrest!"

Albus lowered his wand from shock. Turning the corner was a middle aged woman with large circular spectacles and straggly mouse colored hair. Her wand was raised.

"Drop your wand!" she said.

"Huh?" Albus replied, caught off guard. "Who the hell are-"

"I said drop it!" she said, raising her wand high. "Drop it or I'll take you in by force!"

Chapter 4: Janine Fischer

Albus stared blankly at the woman, his wand still in his hand, unsure of what to do.

"This is your last chance!" the woman squawked, her grip tightening. "Drop it!"

"*Who are you?*" Albus replied dumbly, still unsure as to why this woman had any right to boss him around. Apart from being rather unkempt and, to be honest, unattractive, there was nothing of note about her.

The curly haired woman reached her free hand into the pocket of her robes and removed a small, silver 'M'. She held it up higher than necessary before addressing it.

"Janine Fischer" she said, and Albus, recognizing the name, dropped his wand at once. "Auror for the Ministry of Magic, and one person you should have listened to from the start."

"I didn't know who you-"

"You like assaulting goblins?" she cut him off, jerking her head towards the motionless goblin on the ground. "You're good at it" she added with a snarl.

"I didn't assault anyone!" Albus said ferociously, slightly frightened now by the ramifications of his actions, though still utterly confused as to how things had escalated this far. "He attacked me first!"

"The Ministry of Magic Thief's Discretion Act of 1824 gives any employee of Gringotts Wizarding bank the right to attack a culprit of thievery so long as it is not done fatally. This goblin has committed no crime" she said matter-of-factly.

"I didn't steal-"

He heard footsteps and breathed a sigh of relief. His father must be on his way. Soon he'd come around the corner and straighten things out-

Someone else turned the corner however. Tall and thin, with a tuft of combed over black hair and circular glasses identical to Fischer's, he skidded to a halt holding a small notepad in one hand and a quill in the other.

"Did you get him Ms. Fischer!"

"Caught in the act Wendell" she said smugly. "Jot this down: Adolescent with bad temper-attempts thievery-assaults a magical creature with Ministry authorized rights-resists arrest-aims wand at Ministry official-"

"That last one isn't even true!" Albus roared stupidly. "I didn't do anything wrong, I just ran after someone. I wasn't stealing!"

"Bad manners as well Ms. Fischer!" the man known as Wendell said sycophantically, writing so fast that he had to turn the page in his notepad. "He cut off his elder in the middle of a sentence!"

"Not a crime, but still relevant" she commented.

Albus could only stand, mouth wide open as Fischer slowly walked towards him. The goblin on the ground was stirring now. Albus heard more footsteps, and was relieved to see that this presence was more welcome than what was obviously the assistant of the Head Auror. His father had bolted around the corner, wand drawn, Rose standing behind him.

"What's going on here?" he said, his voice quivering. "Albus why did-Jan!"

Fischer turned to him, stowing her badge away and knocking a strand of her wild hair out from her face. "This your boy!" she asked, her wand raised. Albus' father, however, stowed his away.

"Yes" he said firmly. "This is my son Albus."

Albus could hear Wendell muttering to himself as he scribbled on his notepad. "Most likely...cahoots...father of equal criminal status..."

Albus watched his father roll his eyes before speaking. "Lower your wand, Jan" he said dismissively. "You've got the wrong idea of what's going on here."

Janine Fischer spun around once more, so that her wand was pointed at Albus again. "He must be apprehended Potter-"

Albus watched his father withdraw his own wand with an unnatural amount of agility. In a heartbeat it was pointed at Fischer.

"Don't you point that thing at him!" he barked, and his nonchalant voice had been replaced with an agitated one. "You've got no business doing that! Me and you both know he did nothing wrong!"

Wendell was still scribbling. Albus waited with bated breath as Fischer backed up and slowly lowered her wand.

"You have no authority over me Potter" she said casually, turning to him. She stowed her wand away. "I'll let your son slide this time" she said slyly, "and I'll leave you to deal with his criminal activities."

"I didn't-" Albus started to protest.

"Albus" his father said, lowly but sharply, indicated this was not the time to interrupt the conversation.

Janine Fischer turned on her heel and swept away from the alleyway, her note taker following after her, unusually close to her shoulders as they strode off. Once they were completely out of sight and most likely from earshot, Albus bent down and picked up his wand. At the same time, his father bent down to assist the goblin.

"I'm terribly sorry" he said, raising the goblin to its feet. "It's Grazer, isn't it?"

The goblin made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a snort. It then nodded its head.

"Well let me assure you Grazer, no theft has occurred. It was all a misunderstanding, and you have my word on that. I've already cleared the matter with some superiors inside the bank. If you'd like me to assist you in walking b-"

The goblin gave another grunt and huddled off, turning the corner itself and muttering violently. Albus was now alone with his father and cousin in the alleyway. He was feeling very angry indeed, mostly at the situation, but also at himself. Why did he do these things?

"Alright" his father said complacently, "let's get out of this alley."

They walked back to the streets, where any ruckus around Gringotts had died down by now. They quickly assimilated themselves back into normalcy, and it was Albus who spoke first, intent on drawing the conversation away from what had just happened.

"So did-did you check on that account?" he asked.

"Yes I did" his father replied calmly, stepping aside to let an elderly man walk by him.

"Whose was it?"

"No one of importance really. I've taken it upon myself to check the account information of co-workers."

"Why?"

"To see if Waddlesworth has been funneling gold to anyone in the Ministry" he replied dryly.

Before Albus could reply to that however, Rose had butted in, and predictably, it was about a topic more intent on getting Albus in trouble than ignoring the situation.

"I told Albus not to go running Uncle Harry! I yelled at him to stop, I really did, I knew it was a stupid idea, but you know him, he can be so bullheaded sometim-"

"Thank you Rose" his father cut her off, his voice expressionless.

"Dad I really didn't do anything!" Albus exclaimed, walking slightly ahead of his father so that he could make eye contact as he turned to face him. "I wouldn't-"

"I know you didn't Albus" he replied simply, keeping his pace. "I am not angry with you."

"I really didn't!" Albus continued to protest, not believing him.

"I know" his father repeated, this time giving him a knowing stare. "And believe it or not Al, Ms. Fischer knows that you did not as well."

"She-what?"

Albus slowed down a bit and began walking the correct way once more. Rose was now looking up curiously.

His father sighed. "I was rather hoping that it would not come to this, though I'm afraid that Ms. Fischer is going to very great lengths to oppose me."

"O-oppose?" Albus asked, unsure if he had heard right. He knew that Uncle Ron did not particularly like Janine Fischer, and assumed the same of his father, but they were all Aurors...

"Yes, oppose. Jan knew full well that you didn't do anything wrong. Obviously you committed no thievery; you're a fifteen year old boy and Gringotts is among the most heavily fortified places in the world. Likewise, anyone smart enough to break into it wouldn't have been foolish enough to run out and prove their guilt. As for the goblin, they are known to attack first. And you were completely right in defending yourself. She had no intention of arresting you."

"She didn't?" both Albus and Rose said together.

"No, she did not. Only have you in custody for a brief period of time."

"Isn't it the same thing?" Albus asked.

"Not necessarily. As I mentioned, Jan knew full well you'd done nothing wrong. She jumped at the opportunity to exert legal force over you simply to have an excuse to interrogate you."

"*What?*" Albus breathed, so taken aback that he nearly collided with a young boy who was walking around, playing with a toy absentmindedly. "Why would she want to do that?"

"To get information on me. Don't be fooled Albus, she knew that you were my son, and that makes you an invaluable tool in her goal to learn more about me. Janine Fischer is as little enthusiastic about sharing the Head Auror position as I am, mostly because we have very different opinions on what the greatest threat that we face is."

"And how's that?" Albus replied, surprised at how much information he was getting.

His father sighed again. "I will not tell you right now Albus, not because I don't want to, but because it would take an absurd amount of time to flesh it out correctly. I can only apologize for the inconvenience; I did not think that Jan would sink so low in her attempt to discredit me."

Albus fell silent here, he content with this answer, though still burning with curiosity. Either way however, he did feel that he already knew what it pertained to. His father frequently commented on how he was not sure what the bigger threat was in these difficult times: The Dark Alliance or Wands and Redemption.

Almost on cue, his father asked him a question next.

"Incidentally Albus, what had you running out of Gringotts in the first place? Goblins can be strict, but they wouldn't have denied you use of a lavatory..."

"He saw something through the window" Rose chimed in.

Albus narrowed his eyes at her, while his father did the same to him.

"And what was that?" he commented.

Albus hesitated for a moment. A year ago, or even a couple of months, he would have found some ridiculous, moral reason to lie through his teeth like a child. Now however, he felt that telling his father exactly what he knew was the responsible thing to do. And besides, had his father not just been truthful with him?

"I saw Waddlesworth going down that alley" Albus said, avoiding the gaze of his father. "I was curious as to what he was up to...so I went after him."

He heard Rose give the slightest of tuts, but his father looked at him with interest.

"Waddlesworth? Strange. He's supposed to be in Hogsmeade right now giving a speech..."

"I know! That's why I went after him!"

"Are you sure it was him? Was he hooded, or-"

"It was definitely him!" Albus said. "I'd recognize his slimy face anywhere" he continued, though he lowered his voice; they'd just walked right by two surly looking members of WAR.

His father frowned slightly. "That is interesting" he said. "I'll have to ask around tomorrow and see if anyone at work was in Hogsmeade. It would be very strange indeed if Waddlesworth gave his speech while taking a tour of Diagon Alley simultaneously..."

"You don't believe me, do you dad?" Albus muttered, sensing the placation in his father's voice.

"I do Albus" his father said at once. "I can assure you I'll look into the matter later. For now, we have to show your mother all of your new books..."

They had arrived back at the dilapidated shop, and sure enough, the rest of the family was there as well as Hagrid. Hugo and Lily were looking pleased at whatever supplies they had gotten,

though James was looking a bit ticked at having been chaperoned by his uncle for the vast majority of the day.

"How'd you guys make out?" Uncle Ron asked them as they approached.

"Not bad" Albus' father replied. "Oh and by the way, you owe me about ten billion galleons" he added under his breath, and Uncle Ron smiled.

Rose immediately began showing Lily and Hugo her new telescope and Albus could see Hagrid standing a little way off from the shop, apparently pleased with his duty as a guardian and intent on looking professional. Aunt Hermione, however, moved swiftly towards them.

"What took you guys so long?" she asked, as Albus' mother approached as well.

"Got into some legal trouble" Albus' father replied.

"How so?" his wife asked, her cheeks going red.

"Albus almost got himself thrown in Azkaban" he replied, smiling slightly and playfully nudging his shoulder.

"What!" his mother said, taken aback. James exclaimed the same thing from a few feet away.

"Way to go Al!" he chimed in.

Albus made to defend himself, though his mother continued at once.

"Harry what are you talking about?"

"It's nothing serious Gin. Wasn't his fault at all. It was Fischer, Ron" he added, turning to him.

Albus watched as Uncle Ron rolled his eyes. "Was *he* there? What's his name?"

"Puckerd?" his father said.

"Pukerd?" Uncle Ron replied incorrectly.

"Puckerd" his father repeated.

"Suckered. Whatever. Was he there?"

"Yeah he was."

Albus saw his father grimace before nodding, and Uncle Ron raised his arms in frustration.

"Wait is that the guy with the little notepad?" Albus asked.

"Yes" he father replied. "That's Wendell Puckerd."

"And who is he?"

But it was his uncle who answered. "Not a really a person. More of an object. A detachable mole from the rear end of Janine Fischer."

Everyone laughed, including Aunt Hermione, though she did throw her husband a small stern look before he spoke again.

"No, but seriously, he's my least favorite person in the Ministry" Uncle Ron continued bitterly.

"Even more than that elderly lady who works in the Centaur Rights Department?" Albus' father asked.

"Ehh, she's not too bad if I can't smell her..."

Albus slinked away from the rest of them at this point, pondering what he'd just heard. A person of authority with a servant running around sounded a bit like Waddlesworth and The Hammer. For some reason, he anxiously looked around to see if any more Renegades were in the vicinity.

"I think we're ready to head out now" Albus heard his father say aloud.

"But I still haven't gotten Lance a present!" Rose screeched.

Albus watched a five minute debate between Rose and her mother before they finally marched back into the shop, all of them holding bags and Rose quite present-less for her boyfriend. They waved good-bye to Hagrid, and with another quick pinch of Insta-Floo each, they were safe and secure in the confines of the Potter Mansion.

"I'll get started on dinner" Albus' mother said immediately. "Sort out your things, go on!"

Aunt Hermione headed upstairs to go turn in a bundle of laundry, leaving the children with only Albus' parents and his uncle. They were all ushered into the kitchen, where James took the liberty of handing out supplies.

"*Standard Book of Spells: Grade 3*, that's you right Al?"

Albus rolled his eyes as a giggling Lily took it from him. Hugo was handed his next while Rose dug through the other bags suspiciously. It was James, however, who seemed to have found whatever book she was looking for.

"*101 Easy Ways to Make a Witch Wink-Worthy-*"

Rose snatched the book from his grip and gave a quick look around to make sure no adults had heard it, then hurried upstairs. Albus, now with a clear understanding of why she'd probably placed so many books on the counter to be rung up, smirked before eyeing the corner of the

room. Behind the blabbering James, his father and uncle were muttering to one another clandestinely. Curious, Albus approached them.

They both turned to him as he took a seat across from them. "Got your things all sorted out?" his father asked him.

"Yes" Albus said. "What are you guys talking about?"

Uncle Ron smiled. "We were actually just discussing what color blouse you'd look best in. Your dad reckons green, 'cause of your eyes, but something tells me a bright pink..."

Albus chortled before eyeing them both again, watching as his father folded his hands seriously.

"Actually Albus, your Uncle Ron and I were discussing what you brought to my attention in Diagon Alley."

Albus raised his eyebrows, and surprisingly, so did his uncle.

"You were?"

His father nodded, and Uncle Ron, now aware that there were no secrets to be kept, nodded as well.

"So you reckon you saw old Warren sneaking around? Expected. Though like your dad mentioned, we have to check to see if he cancelled his Hogsmeade speech and the like."

"But you believe me too?" Albus asked.

"Course I do. You say it happened, and I believe you. I just admit it's unusual. Not like Warren to *dislike* attention."

"Yeah but I figured he was up to something..." Albus said to defend himself.

"Hey I'm not saying he wasn't" Uncle Ron said, raising his arms innocently. "I'm just saying if that really was him you saw, then it's unusual."

Albus nodded, though he noticed that his mother, frying potatoes in a pan over at the stove, had her ears perked up. When his father noticed that Albus had caught this, he smiled.

"Your mother would rather you have no idea what's going on about anything" he whispered.

"*Introduction to Muggle Studies*" James called. "Albus! Where's Albus at! Albu- oh there he is."

Hugo laughed as he took the book from James, who dropped the empty sack and moved on to the next one, this one full of potions ingredients.

"Alright I'm not handing this stuff out" James announced. "A lot of it's pretty disgusting..."

Uncle Ron snorted. "Not going to be using it anyway" he said, and Albus looked at him curiously.

"How do you know that?" he asked. "Do you know who our new professor is?"

"Yup" he said shortly, and Albus saw his father frown as well. "And so do you."

Albus looked between them. "Who-"

"Wendell Puckerd" his father cut him off, and Albus gave him a horrified look.

"What! Why!"

At this Albus heard his mother shift a pan away and spin around.

"Oh why don't you just tell him everything Harry! You're going to anyway"

The noise of James, Lily, and Hugo ceased at once, and they all immediately crowded around. Albus saw his father smile weakly at his wife.

"Tell who what dad?" Lily asked.

"Just filling Albus in on who your new professor will be" he answered her. "Not really important. I work with him."

The three of them promptly spun around, uninterested, and the noise resumed. Albus still had questions however.

"Why him? Can he even make potions?"

"Probably, to some degree" Uncle Ron breathed. "But he's clearly there on Fischer's orders. Wouldn't be the first time the Ministry has interfered at Hogwarts."

"We are the Ministry Ron!" his brother-in-law hissed.

"You know what I mean Harry..."

"But wait, why have him at Hogwarts?"

They exchanged a look, and Albus felt his temper rise. He'd gotten sick of that look over the years...

"There's no point in lying to you Albus" his father said after a moment. "The Ministry of Magic wants to keep an eye on Hogwarts, but Janine Fischer picked her personal pet for a very personal reason."

"And why's that?"

"Well...most likely to interrogate you."

"Just like Fischer wanted to do with me today" Albus said, throwing his arms up and slouching in his chair.

"Precisely."

"And that means" Uncle Ron took over, "that you have to do everything you can to disobey this guy. Talk loudly in his class, prank him in hallways, you're probably better with potions than he is, slip something lethal in his morning pumpkin juice-"

"Don't give him any ideas Ron" Albus' father cut him off, before turning back to his son. "But seriously Albus, this is important. When I was at Hogwarts...I wasn't given the information I wanted, and I recall very bad ramifications due to the miscommunications and confusion. What I tell you here I now tell you not as a father trying to shelter his son; I say it as one person giving caution to another person. I personally wanted one of my advocates to take the potions role, but my return to popularity with the public only takes me so far. Janine Fischer is still very much in control at the Ministry, and she got her way. Puckerd will be out to extract information from you. Heed caution to what you say aloud, even to your closest of friends; he may try and get to them as well."

"But what could I even have to say?" Albus inquired. "You're not doing anything wrong!"

"Jan would give anything to have incriminating evidence against me. She believed, like many others did a few years ago, that I was a poor Head Auror, and what's more, she feels that my reputation alone has gotten me back in the good graces of both the public and the government. If she knew anything about me that could be spun, she'd immediately do so."

"And then we'd all be out of luck" Uncle Ron added. "Because your dad's pretty much the only person who really has any idea what's going on with Darv-"

But he stopped there, as if he'd gone too far. Albus narrowed his eyes eagerly. "Oh come on...you said you were going to treat me like a regular person!"

His father sighed. He looked over at his wife, who still had her back turned and was now humming, as if irate over what her son was hearing but still in no particular hurry to interfere.

"Do you really want to know what's going on, Albus?"

"Yes" he breathed.

"And do you understand that once I tell you this, you have just as much information as the Ministry of Magic does? That asking questions will get you nowhere?"

"Yes" he repeated.

"And you mustn't repeat-"

"Yes!"

"Very well" his father said, lowering his voice and looking over into the dining room, where James had moved the younger ones and was letting them take turns in trying to wrestle their way passed him and up the stairs.

"Well Albus, we think that Darvy wants to destroy the world."

Albus paused for a moment to let these almost humorous words sink in. His father had said them so blunt-dripping with so much boredom-that Albus was sure that there was more to it than that.

"Or at least, make it unrecognizable from what we know today."

"That's it! I could've figured that out."

"No Al, think about it" Uncle Ron commented. "What do you think Voldemort wanted? What have you learned about him? Was he after world domination? Or is that a motive reserved for a child's comic books villains?"

"He- something with blood purity, right? To get rid of muggles..."

"That was a big part of it, yes" his father said. "And Ares- about how many times did he attack before his death? How many towns or cities did he needlessly destroy?"

"He-well-he planned on-"

"We may never know what it is Ares was truly after, but we at least know that he wanted some degree of order- a twisted paradise of sorts-but still a far cry from total destruction."

"But Darvy..." Uncle Ron veered off, scratching his chin. "Okay, how do I word this? There are murderers, maniacs, psychopaths, and then there's Sebastian Darvy. Every report we have on this guy indicates that he has no conscience whatsoever. The act he put up for two years may even be the product of a different personality..."

Albus looked back and forth between them. "Yeah I know, he's a nutcase."

His father spoke next.

"A nutcase who has inherited an army of the dead. A man with that much power and that little conscience has next to nothing to work towards. We believe that Darvy simply wants to cement his name in history. And with the help of his Silhouettes-"

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Albus asked.

"Huh? Oh right, sorry. Silhouettes. Ministry term for those skeletal creatures you saw."

"Where'd that come from?" Albus asked.

"Supposedly because they're soulless. Just shells. All body, nothing inside. It's just a term to separate them from a few other things however. They're certainly not Inferi or Dementors. And that also leans towards what we're getting at. Ares wanted to exhibit some kind of control of these creatures, but we've been tracking Darvy's path of ruin and it seems like he's giving these monsters free reign. The people you saw dancing around in masks have become little more than servants, their sole purpose to do more formal or intellectual tasks."

"Truth is Al," Uncle Ron said, "nowhere is really that safe, because we don't know the degree of control that Darvy has over these things or how powerful they are. We even have doubts on powerful magical places like Hogwarts. Your Aunt Fleur even enrolled Louis at Beauxbatons...he was supposed to be sorted this September..."

"And you think that-that Darvy wants to use these-erm-'Silhouettes' to just wreak havoc?" Albus asked, disregarding this last part.

"It's certainly the quickest way to notoriety" Uncle Ron said. "If you want your name in the history books, you'd better be sure you're the only thing that there is to write about."

Albus heard Darvy's maniacal voice ring in his ears, even from years ago.

They will know that Sebastian Darvy was a greater man by far than any hero or villain, no, he was in a class all his own..."

His father's words recaptured him.

"And likewise Albus, we believe that Darvy's main course of action is to expand his army. Thus, we are trying to stop every available method of this happening. At the same time however, we have to be cautious. Janine Fischer's revised Ministry is focused very much on direct offense."

"What about Kingsley?" Albus asked. He knew that his father had a great amount of respect for the Minister of Magic. Surely he would make all of the proper decisions.

"Kingsley is a good man, but a man of power is only as good as his supplier. With Waddlesworth feeding the public, the only people who have an inkling of respect for the Ministry are all more likely to side with Jan's more direct route. And the sad truth is, Albus, it's a dying one. If we tried to take on Darvy and his army head on, we'd lose."

Albus let these particular words flow through him.

"Then why-then why hasn't Darvy just attacked yet?"

"He has. But mostly small places, places where he can test the extent of his control. Remember, Darvy knows very little about the Dragonfang Wand. Our greatest weapon here is his ignorance."

"But he has the book too, doesn't he!" Albus said, turning cold. "He could-"

"Precisely why I didn't want you telling him these things!" his mother butted in, spinning around and holding a spatula. "Look at him, he's terrified!"

"I am not!" Albus said. "I've seen things..."

His father held up his hand. "Gin," he started calmly, "I don't want Albus to feel neglected or out of the loop. He has asked questions and I will do what I can to supply him with answers."

She sighed and spun back around, muttering to herself.

"Darvy most likely isn't a big fan of the Book" he said simply. "It requires contact with the sentient dead; he much prefers mindless drones. We think that his army-built primarily from brands of necromancy, which is magic pertaining to the dead if you did not know- will require a much more sinister touch to it. Certain...items of value."

"Like the Wand or the Book?" Albus asked.

"Kind of" Uncle Ron said. "But a little different."

"So like what particular item?" Albus asked, his heart pounding quickly.

"Dinner!" his mother called, and he heard shuffling on the stairs.

"A rather large one. Its name and use are irrelevant" his father said.

"You said you'd treat me like a person!" Albus battled. "Not a child!"

"And we wouldn't disclose that information to a regular person either" Uncle Ron spoke up.

"Well can you at least tell me that the Ministry has it!" Albus said.

Both his father and uncle stared blankly.

"Does...does Darvy have it?" Albus asked weakly as the rest of his family entered the kitchen to be served, signaling the end of the conversation.

"That's just the thing, Al" his father said, a wry smile on his face. "We don't know who has it."

Chapter 5: The Bride To Be

Albus knew that he had exhausted his father for information the day that they had went to Diagon Alley, and try as he might to put more pieces together, he was forced to focus on his impending return to Hogwarts instead. The last week of the summer holidays drifted by with heavy packing and constant reminders about the importance of his fifth year, sometimes even at the same time.

"And remember, whatever classes you legitimately feel will be a part of your future, you have to ace. It's the only way to get into N.E.W.T."

"Yes mum" Albus mumbled as he took perfectly folded clothes from her and threw them into his trunk, ruining them immediately.

"And you should also be sure to ask your brother for help whenever necessary-lazy facade aside, he did excellent on his O.W.L's"

"I will mum" Albus lied casually, taking the books that had been organized alphabetically and tossing them in randomly.

"And most important-Albus why are you taking *that!*"

"Huh?" Albus said, looking up with his Invisibility Cloak in his hands. "It's my cloak..."

"Planning on sneaking yourself into danger again?"

Albus had no response for this, though thankfully he was saved by his passing father.

"Cloak seems imperative to me Gin. Isn't he safer with it?"

Albus saw his mother turn to rebuttal with what probably would have been a finely crafted argument, but her husband had already winked at his son and hurried down the stairs.

Albus chortled while his mother went to track down James and see how his packing was going (he was a notorious procrastinator), then threw two more objects into his trunk: The Marauder's Map and Fairhart's silver ring. These three items-the Cloak, Map, and ring- all bore some significance to him, though of course only the former two had proven to be useful. The ring would only come in handy when he didn't have his wandlight to shine on a book at night.

He sat down on his bed and smiled almost serenely at his trunk, the thought of Hogwarts welcoming him. Soon he'd see all of his friends again. He'd be able to hold Mirra and laugh with Scorpius and Morrison, be able to visit Hagrid not for protection, but simply to have some tea...

"No word on Waddlesworth, kid" said a voice from the door.

Albus looked up and saw that his uncle had just passed by. He frowned slightly. The day after the Diagon Alley visit Albus had learned from his father that Waddlesworth had indeed been in Hogsmeade at his scheduled time. Perplexed, he'd asked his father to look into the matter further- he knew that there were several ways to make such a thing happen by magic- but he'd gotten no confirmation on any of them.

And thus, it was with a murky head that Albus awoke on the morning of the first, intent on seeing his friends again but slightly disappointed at not having cracked the mystery before he was sent off to the confines of the castle.

As usual, the morning was hectic for some and relatively easy for others. Albus had already packed his things, as had Lily and Rose. James it seemed had attempted to redo everything that his mother had sorted for him and ended up with a complete mess hours before he was to board the train. Hugo was somewhere in between; organized with clothes but not supplies. Albus had offered to help but was shooed away, and he had not seen Hugo since.

"Hurry up, hurry up" his mother ushered him as he chewed a piece of bacon slowly. He saw her buttoning up her shirt as she fussed.

"You're not going with us?" Albus asked.

"I'm afraid that today is an uncannily busy day" she said. "I've been called in to edit my own article, and your father-

"I know, he and Uncle Ron are both busy" Albus said. "So it's just Aunt Hermione then?"

"You'll meet with Uncle George; he should be there with Fred around the same time."

Albus nodded and continued munching on his bacon while James rushed through the kitchen asking for things.

"Really James?" his mother asked rhetorically. "In seven years you've failed to pack properly every single time. I'm really starting to think that you're actually incapable."

"I told you that back when I was eleven!"

There was a sudden knock at the door, and Albus knew that at least two surly looking Ministry of Magic employees were waiting to accompany them on the ride.

"Wait just a second!" his mother called, but Albus could already hear Aunt Hermione heading towards the door to let them in.

"Come in, sit down" he heard her say pleasantly. "We'll only be a few more minutes."

It turned out to be more than just a few minutes however. James was still bustling around for almost half an hour, and by the time they'd finally hit the road the two men with dark sunglasses

were wearing identical anxious looks as they loaded the luggage into the magically expanded car. Once they'd shuffled themselves in neatly, it was only a matter of letting the ministry members do what they were being told to do.

Albus stayed quiet most of the journey, his head occupied with all of the things that he was planning on telling his friends once he reached the station. He almost smacked himself when he realized that he'd forgotten to do something with his hair however; after all, he was meeting Mirra's grandparents.

They pulled up to the station with a surprisingly large amount of time to spare, despite the late start and not having magically sped the trip up. They all immediately left to stretch themselves out, but before any of them could get far Aunt Hermione had called them to a halt.

"Through the barrier now, one at a time. James you go first..."

They were all told to line up by the solid column of concrete that would lead them to the platform with the famed scarlet train. Albus rolled his eyes at this-he was too used to it to need an explanation of how to do it surreptitiously- though he still followed orders and casually worked his way through the barrier after James had went through.

Greeted by the Hogwarts Express, he allowed a grin to escape him at the noise generated by his fellow students. He looked around immediately; hoping to catch familiar faces, and was rewarded by the sight of Bartleby Bing, a fellow Slytherin who waved jovially. Keen on finding an even more familiar face however, he progressed through the crowds and to the heart of the platform.

"Get back here Al!" he heard, as James pulled him by the scruff of his neck. "Aunt Hermione says stick together."

"Really?" Albus said, annoyed. "*On the platform?* What does she expect us to be attacked by now? Darvy's just going to march through the barrier and start jinxing?"

"Hey I don't make the rules..."

Albus was forced back to the beginning of the platform, where they'd already gathered around Aunt Hermione.

"Just a quick status check and the like, then you can go and find your friends" she said simply. Albus sat through ten minutes of Hugo running through a mental checklist before he was finally allowed to scour the platform for his friends. It did not take long for him to be greeted however. Within five minutes a blonde haired boy with a pointed face and pompous smile had begun bounding towards him.

"Oy! Al!" he called out, his silver badge gleaming on his chest in the sunlight.

Albus grinned and pushed his trunk ahead of him. The second he was in physical contact distance he had slapped Scorpius' hand.

"Whoa not too hard" Scorpius said sternly. "May have to give you detention" he joked.

Albus gave another grin. "I've got loads to tell you" he said.

"Well let's wait around for Morrison first" Scorpius said, turning wildly in his attempts to find him. Albus knew that it would not take long-Morrison was absurdly tall for his age-and thus he looked around for a more petite figure. Mirra, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Come on you giant bag of dirt" Scorpius muttered. "Where are you...?"

It was Albus who caught sight of him however. Looking around for someone small and pretty, it was the waving arms of someone tall and goofy looking that caught his attention. Over the heads of a few other fifth years he could see Morrison motioning to them, his face unreadable.

"Over there" Albus said pointing, and he and Scorpius started walking towards him. They fought their way through gagging crowds until they were in arms length of the third of their trio, both smacking Morrison's hand.

"How've you been mate-" Scorpius started, though Morrison cut him off eagerly.

"Wait, real quick," he said shortly. "This is my mum" he said, stepping aside.

Mrs. Vincent was a stout woman with the same light brown hair as her son and a pleasant, warming smile on her face. When Albus shook her hand he noticed that her fingers were slender and dainty, and her "hello" had a very warm, teenage tone to it. Albus noticed that she looked motherly, but was still youthful in appearance. Had Albus not known her to be Morrison's mother, he would not have assumed her as already having children.

After Scorpius had shaken her hand as well, Morrison exhaled deeply as if preparing them for something.

"And this," he said, tapping his mother to have her move aside, "is my sister, Lisa."

Albus leaned forward to shake this hand too, but it dropped halfway, along with his jaw. Scorpius almost fell over and collided with him, leaving them both to stand stooped over, blank expressions on their faces.

Lisa Vincent was-there was no other word for- *hot*. She had a heart shaped face and piercing brown eyes, with flowing long hair of a matching color thrown over her shoulders. Her attire was perhaps most enticing however. Despite it being a rather cool start to September, she was adorned in a rather revealing black tank top and low cut jeans that showed off lean legs. Her

hands were placed on her curvaceous hips as she was introduced, and Albus noticed (somehow) that she was chewing gum.

Albus looked over at Scorpius, whose mouth seemed to be incapable of closing, and then at Morrison, who had placed his palm to his face at their reactions.

"H-hello" Albus managed to stammer out.

Lisa Vincent rolled her eyes obnoxiously, apparently not bothered by how rude she was being.

"Lisa!" her mother said, staring straight at her, for they were the same height. "Morrison's friend greeted you-"

She was cut off by something loud however. Music had begun blaring egregiously from Lisa's pocket, and at the next moment she had whipped out a mobile phone and placed it firmly against her ear, her finger plugging the other one.

"Yeah I can talk" she said, marching away.

Her mother blushed. "You'll have to forgive her" she said quietly. "She has quite a bit on her mind..."

Albus swallowed and nodded, then glanced over at Scorpius to see if he'd recovered yet. He looked injured, but capable of proceeding. He was simply blinking more than usual. Albus spared another glance over at Lisa Vincent before jamming his hands in his pockets. He could not quite explain his attraction to her. He could only comment that it was a very different attraction than the one he had for Mirra.

Morrison allowed his mother to give him a slight kiss on the cheek before he began pushing his trunk away along side his friends, and Albus noticed that he had not given a formal goodbye to his sister at all.

They walked silently for a moment, and surprisingly, it was Scorpius who spoke first.

"So she seems nice-"

"What's that supposed to mean!" Morrison roared.

Scorpius held up his hands defensively. "Your mum seems nice!"

Morrison narrowed his eyes as they resumed walking, and it wasn't until another distraction came across their way that they were relieved from the awkward moment with Morrison's family. Albus felt Scorpius crouch beside him, and then, looking around, he saw his cousin holding hands with her boyfriend.

Lance Disona had cut his hair over the summer holidays, though the absence of his impeccable wavy locks of golden hair only served to heighten his shapely and clean face. He waved to the three of them jovially as he passed, Rose blabbering away and ignoring them.

Albus and Morrison returned waves, though Scorpius stayed shrunken down.

"So that's still going on then, eh?" he said after a moment.

Albus nodded. "Sorry mate. But hey, he'll be gone by the end of this year anyway..."

This did little to comfort his friend, so much so that Scorpius was even preoccupied in the presence of Albus' family moments later, when he returned to say a final good-bye to Aunt Hermione as well as his Uncle George, who had shown up with Fred.

His aunt pulled him into a swift hug while smoke billowed from the majestic engine.

"Good-bye Aunt Hermione" he said, holding his mouth away from her bushy hair.

"Good-bye Al, have a good semester. I'll see you around Christmas. And also-" she pulled him in close- "your father wanted me to tell you something."

Albus pulled away and looked at her curiously. What message had his father left for him?

Aunt Hermione whispered her next words into his ear. "He said to be wary, but not to fret. And also, not to dwell, but to hold your head up high."

Albus stared. "That's-well-what does that mean?" he asked.

His aunt gave him a smile. "I assumed that you'd know. It must be between you two. Hello Scorpius!" she added quickly, turning her head to the young Malfoy.

"Lo Mrs. Weasley" he murmured, trying to wear a smile for her as Rose returned-with Lance-to say her farewells as well.

Albus stood back while final good-byes were said, eagerly looking around for when he could say his first hello. Where was Mirra? He was just turning around one way when something collided with him from the other.

Nearly falling back, he tilted his head down slightly. He saw clear, beautiful eyes meet his own.

"Al!" Mirra exclaimed, letting go of her trunk completely and squeezing him tightly. He allowed an enormous smile to twist on his face while James, standing a few feet away and introducing his girlfriend to Aunt Hermione, gave a loud whistle that made Morrison chuckle.

"How've you been?" Albus asked, breathing in her hair. She smelled identical to how she did last year.

"Come quick," she ignored him, "I want you to meet them..."

She drug Albus along through a crowd of people, leaving their trunks stranded and at the mercy of fellow students. She pulled at his arm until he found himself face to face with elderly people that he knew to be Mirra's grandparents.

He had only seen them from a distance before, and had always assumed them to be pleasant people. Now however, he could finally soak in their appearance. Unlike Morrison's mother, they looked their age. Grandfather Tunnels looked thin and was of average height, with a thin mouth and wrinkly skin surrounding it all the way up to his almost bald head. He wore thick glasses and a quaint smile on his face; he had the look of a man interested in meeting his granddaughter's significant other, but at the same time eager to just get it out of the way so that he could go back to reading a good book. Mirra's grandmother was actually around the same height and slightly more motherly in her thickness. She had curly hair the same color as Mirra, though it was much shorter. Her expression seemed surly but somehow still welcoming, as if of a person generally unconcerned with what was going on but still willing to sit through it.

Albus shook both of their hands quickly, smiling and feeling his face grow hot.

"You must be Albus" Mirra's grandmother said, her voice a little rough but by no means intimidating. Albus simply thought of it as an old persons tone. Her grandfather mumbled and smiled, then looked up at the big train excitedly, as if it was much more worthy of examining.

"Yes" he said, swallowing. "How do you d-how are you?" he switched his sentence in the middle, not sure if the formality of it would make it comical.

She made to answer, but Mirra stopped her.

"Gran we really should be going I just wanted to introduce-"

But her grandmother batted this away. "I'm very fine, thank you." She then looked at his robes curiously.

"Ah, humble" she said smiling. "Mirra's not putting on her badge until she boards the train either."

"I-what?"

"So you're in Slytherin?" her grandmother asked. "That's simply a different house correct? Just different living quarters?"

"Yes" Albus. "Erm-real quick, what about my badg-"

But Mirra jerked his arm away. "We *really* should be going gran" she said quickly, and Albus watched as she threw her sheet of black hair out of her face as she delivered a swift kiss to her

cheek. Albus watched as she did the same to her grandfather, witnessed a quick collection of good-bye's, and then they were off.

"Nice meeting you!" Albus waved as Mirra pulled him away, though no sooner were they out of sight had Albus rounded on her.

"You told *them* I was a prefect?"

"You didn't comb your hair!" she lashed out, smiling. "We're even..."

"How is that-no!" Albus said. "Mirra, I'm serious, why did you-Scorpius got it-"

"It was an accident!" she said. "Honest! I got my badge and I was explaining it to my grandparents and I said that you probably got one for Slytherin as well."

"Why! Why would you think that? I'm not smart..."

"You're very smart Albus" she said seriously, touching her hand to his face. "When you apply yourself. And besides, it's not all about smarts. But apart from that...yeah I completely forget about Scorpius at the time. After I said it I realized that he probably got it."

Albus rolled his eyes as they worked their way back to their trunks, which were still waiting for them, strangely untouched. Albus took them over to the train and hoisted the luggage up, grinning to himself. He remembered a time when he had struggled embarrassingly in front of her. He'd gotten stronger over the years.

Smoke began billowing at an alarming rate just as they stepped onto the train, and within moments of when they began walking down the aisles the door had been shut.

"Up for sitting with me and-" Albus started, right when he felt the train start to slowly move.

"Al, I have to go meet with the other prefects" she said sweetly, removing her silver badge from a pocket from her robes and pinning it to herself. "I'll stop by later okay?" she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I also should stop by and see Rose..."

Albus nodded, then stupidly gave her a kiss on the cheek in turn. As she walked ahead of him he realized that Scorpius too would not be joining him until later. He poked his head into compartments, hoping to find his lonely friend Morrison, and saw that Morrison was not lonely. Near the end of the train he was sitting in a compartment with Melonie Grue, a slightly rotund but far from unattractive blonde Slytherin in their year. Albus was fine with her, but he knew that Morrison was a bit more than that.

"Hello" he said, walking into the compartment and immediately feeling uncomfortable. Melonie smiled at him and said it in return, but Morrison flashed him a toothy grin.

"Sup Al" he said. "Have a seat..."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Thanks for the permission" he joked, before sitting down across from the two of them. There was a moment of deafening silence before Melonie stood up and dusted off her robes.

"I should actually go and join with the other Prefects" she said quickly, and Albus saw, to his surprise and unsure of how he hadn't noticed it prior, a badge like Mirra's on her chest. "I'll catch up with you later" she said to Morrison, smiling, before departing. As the compartment door slid shut Morrison gave an almighty stretch.

"Life is good, isn't it Al?" he said stupidly.

"Oh is that what you've gotten out of all newspaper articles of fear and rumors of attack?" Albus said, shaking his head but also smiling.

Morrison chortled. "You haven't changed a bit" he said. "Not in looks or anything" he further added.

"None of us have, as far as I can tell" Albus responded. "Well, Scorpius maybe grew an inch..."

"Not so fast!" Morrison said, gleefully pointing to his upper lip.

Albus squinted. "Is that a single hair?" he said in mock amazement; he'd expected it anyway. Morrison had grown taller and had his voice deepen way before anyone else in their year.

"It's a couple!" Morrison said. "Started growing in a couple of days ago. And it's real this time! No charm or anything."

Albus smiled before putting his feet up and lying down in the compartment. Choosing to change the subject, he mentioned something prominent.

"What do you think that they're all doing? All the Prefects?" he asked.

"They're supposed to be doing rounds eventually" Morrison answered, putting his own feet up, though his legs were so long that he had to press them up against the window. "For now I think they're all sitting around and discussing their superiority to the common under-achievers that are taking up space on their train" he said.

"Are you disappointed then? That you didn't get the badge?" Albus asked.

Morrison chuckled. "Mate I would be *horrified* with our school's reward system if I got the badge. No, Scorpius definitely deserved it. Which I'm fine with. Scorpius and Melonie as Prefects? I'll take that" he added, winking and throwing two thumbs way up.

Albus smiled as well, and then wondered to himself. Did Mirra being Prefect change anything? He hoped not. He liked the way that she treated him now...

His thoughts were interrupted by the lady with the food trolley, and as they tended to do in boredom, he and Morrison quickly began to cash in on a plethora of sweets, despite knowing full well that a magnificent feast awaited them later in the day. They made small talk as they stuffed their faces, guessing the flavors of Bertie Botts's Beans and attempting to catch a rogue Chocolate Frog among their activities.

It was strange how comfortable Albus felt during what would have been an otherwise boring train ride, but with Scorpius gone, he was gladder than ever to have Morrison laughing alongside him. It was a testament to the strength of their friendship when, after an hour laughing, Morrison asked him something serious.

"So?" he said, sitting back down across from him and placing the balled up Pumpkin Pasties that he'd been trying to juggle on the ground. "Any more...you know. Thoughts?"

Albus breathed slowly. He then stood up and opened and re-closed the compartment door to check for complete privacy. For the first few weeks of summer Albus had written to Morrison about unusual thoughts and feelings he'd encountered. At the end of the last semester, Albus had boarded the train irate, angry, and with an inexplicable feeling of malice. And though he'd hid it well, his correspondence with Morrison served as a reminder that he'd been very intrigued by his fluctuated emotions. Strangely however, at a certain point in the summer, it had all stopped.

"Just like that?" Morrison asked. "No more scary thoughts? No more crazy dreams?"

"Just stopped" Albus said. "I can't explain it, it's like it all left me."

"Even the...?" Morrison trailed off, pointing to his eyes.

Albus nodded. "Nothing. It's like I'm entirely different then I was for most of last year. But I don't *feel* different. It's just...all of that stuff is gone, so I know that I am" he finished, and Morrison gave him a nonplussed look.

"Al that makes no sense whatsoever" he said, frowning.

"I know" Albus admitted. "I know. I just, I don't know, I feel better now" he finished weakly.

Morrison shrugged. "Maybe you were just doing it to yourself the whole time. And now you feel better about yourself and...I don't know. You were in control all along."

"Maybe" Albus said, though he didn't believe it for a second. He did not know what had changed in the last few months, but what he did know was that his willpower had nothing to do with it.

The compartment door slid open immediately after he said this however, and a flustered Scorpius entered.

"Rose isn't Prefect!" he said, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Yeah I know" Albus said simply. "And so did you, you saw her on the platform, she wasn't wearing a badge."

"I thought that she was just waiting until she got on the train to put it on..."

Albus snorted. "Mate, me and you both know that had she gotten that badge she'd have had it pinned to her robes while it was still in the envelope. And besides, you wouldn't have been patrolling with her anyway. Different houses. You're paired up with Melonie."

"I know" Scorpius pouted, collapsing and crossing his arms. "I just thought-ah never mind" as he threw himself downgrumpily.

"So who are the other Prefects?" Morrison asked.

"Well Mirra's the Gryffindor girl" Scorpius said, throwing Albus a dark look, as if it was his fault. "And Eckley's the guy."

"Ah dammit" Albus said, snapping his fingers.

"I thought you guys were on good terms now?" Morrison said.

"We are, but he's still a prat..."

"For Hufflepuff the girl is that nice one, Anastasia Anifur or whatever. And the boy is some bloke I've only seen a couple of times, his name is like Kyle or something."

"Ravenclaw?" Morrison asked.

"Winona Soreeno?" Scorpius said, as if struggling to remember her name. "Kind of dorky looking? And the boy is that Milton Parish kid."

Albus sighed, remembering both of them as active participants in his Defence Against the Dark Arts class two years ago.

"Not a bad haul at all" Morrison said, rearranging his body so that Scorpius could now sit down comfortably.

"Are all of the Prefects back in their compartments, then?" Albus asked Scorpius.

He nodded. "Well, some of them may already be patrolling. Think I could get away with giving Lance a detention?" he added, as if the fantastic idea had just suddenly struck him.

Before anyone could answer however, the sliding class door opened. Mirra poked her head in, smiling widely.

"Just patrolling" she said sweetly. "Taking the first day off Scorpius?" she asked him, seeing the way he was slouched over.

"I'll get around to it" he replied.

"Okay well, I'm going to pop in later okay?" she said, now turning her head to Albus. "We're just going to go up and down the train a few times..."

The plural made Albus crane his neck, where he could see a familiar face behind his sort of-but not really-yet also taken girlfriend. Charles Eckley stood at her shoulder, a little taller than he was the previous year but still for the most part identical. He gave a half hearted wave, which Albus reluctantly returned. Mirra gave them all a beaming wave as well before closing the compartment door.

"Did you notice that she didn't give me a kiss good-bye?" Albus said at once.

Morrison made a noise of mock contempt. "To the gallows with her!" he said in a powerful and clear voice.

Scorpius chuckled, looking cheered up for the first time since his arrival to their compartment, before turning to Albus. "You said you had loads to tell me?" he asked.

Albus jumped up, surprised that he himself had not mentioned it yet.

"I almost got carted off to Azkaban this summer!" he grinned.

It took only about ten minutes to tell the actual story of what had occurred just outside of Gringotts, but the questions and laughs in between ended up extending it to a full half hour. When Albus had finished Morrison and Scorpius both looked eager to ask loads of questions, but their main came out at the same time.

"And the guy who with the notepad is our new Potions Professor?"

Albus nodded, frowning. "Apparently he's only there to be a prat too."

"Sounds like a great job" Morrison commented quickly.

"My gosh, why can't Hogwarts get a teacher that actually knows their stuff?" Scorpius lashed out, taking a more offensive approach. "Blackwood was only here last year on Waddlesworth's orders remember?"

"That's not fair" Morrison said. "Fairhart was a legit professor, even if it wasn't for Pot-"

He trailed off there however, seeing the grim look on Albus' face. The news of their former professor's untimely death had shaken them all the previous year, but it was only Albus who had truly dwelt on it. Fairhart had been, after all, both a friend and protector to him, whatever thoughts Albus may have had towards him at different intervals.

This uncomfortable moment of eerie silence was penetrated by a startling exclamation however.

"You lot ever been to a wedding before?" Morrison asked.

Albus nodded, though he knew it was a difficult question to answer. He'd been to a few weddings when he was younger but he scarcely remembered them. Scorpius however shook his head completely.

"Oh. Well," Morrison started, heaving a deep sigh, "You're both invited to my sister's."

Both Albus and Scorpius widened their eyes at this news, and it was Albus who spoke first.

"No way" he said. "Your sister? The girl we just met? But she- she- she doesn't look-"

"Pure, I know" Morrison finished for him sadly.

"No, I mean, she-she doesn't look quite... ready for marriage."

"Well I told you she was dating that muggle last year" Morrison said. "And he's been living with us and...the idiot finally proposed. Did it as a magic trick" he added, rolling his eyes.

"Does he know?" Scorpius said. "About...you know. Wizards and the like."

Morrison laughed. "Nope. My sister's a squib, she has no place mentioning me, my mum or my dad, who should be coming out for the wedding now that I think on it. You'll get to meet him too, if you're up for it I mean. Should be in December."

"Of course we're up for it!" Albus blurted out. "I'll have to talk to my parents though."

"Well they can come by too" Morrison said. "Really, feel free to invite any close family or friends, we're hoping for a big turn out. But only if you want to" he added again.

"Sure thing mate" Scorpius said, his speech returning to him. "Can't say the same about my family, but I'm game. Can't wait to see your sister in a dress..."

Morrison gave Scorpius a hard but playful thump on the shoulder, and soon all three of them were laughing, the cheery mood infectious. Albus placed his cheek against the window of the train however, not to let the news of the wedding soak in, but to ponder on what Morrison had said about Fairhart having been a good teacher. And indeed, like Scorpius had said, Blackwood had really not been designed as a professor. It was strange how the two were connected. Both once puppets of Waddlesworth...

Waddlesworth's name seemed to stir something in Albus' head. "Real quick," he started, "back on Waddlesworth. What do you guys think about me seeing him in Diagon Alley? Right by Gringotts...near Knockturn Alley actually. Seems even dodgy for him, eh?"

"I dunno Al, what day did you say all this was?" Scorpius said, rubbing his shoulder; apparently the dying down of the laughter made him able to process Morrison's strength. "Because I know that Waddlesworth gave a speech-"

"The same day" Albus finished for him, and Scorpius gave a bemused look. "I know. But I know what I saw. And how do you know what he was up to?"

"I was there" Scorpius said plainly.

"What?" Albus and Morrison both said.

"Mhm. Hogsmeade's re-opening is doing wonders for people looking for work. And my dad- well- you know. Our name isn't worth much anymore. He's been trying to get hired down there since they started rebuilding."

"Did he find work?" Morrison chimed in.

Scorpius shrugged. "He's sweeping floors at some pub where a lot of vampires hang out. But he'll take it. I was there with him the whole time, and the place was flooded to hear Waddlesworth speak. Some bloke even tried selling me a WAR T-shirt..."

"How'd it go over?" Albus said, preparing for the worst. Knowing how oily WAR's leader and spokesperson was, Albus expected an outrageous amount of government slandering.

"Actually...it wasn't anything special" Scorpius said with a shrug. "You know how you always mentioned him as this really convincing, eloquent bloke? I didn't really get much from it, and you could tell that the crowd was only half into it anyway. His voice just kind of served as a backdrop for all of the shops..."

Albus rubbed at his chin. "Maybe he's losing his touch. Or maybe he just has more on his mind. I wonder if he knows that there's a fake Warren running around-"

"Say what?" Scorpius said.

"Well I saw him in Diagon Alley the same day that you saw him in Hogsmeade. Obviously there aren't two of them. I wonder why Waddlesworth has an imposter running around into shabby corners. Unless he doesn't know that he has an imposter-"

"Or maybe it wasn't the real Waddlesworth giving that speech?" Scorpius suggested. "And the real one is the one you saw in Diagon Alley? He'd have to be doing some really advanced concealing magic to pull that off though-"

"Okay stop!" said a sudden voice from within the compartment, which Albus recognized as Morrions. It was strange how little he'd contributed thus far.

"What's up?" Albus asked him.

"Just stop!" Morrison said swiftly. "Stop stop stop! Don't do this! Not this year!"

"Do wh-"

"Every year!" Morrison exclaimed, waving his hands demonstratively. "Every year there's always some mystery to solve! And every year something goes bad, I either end up choking on some deadly gas-"

"-That was actually a mist" Scorpius cut in.

"-Or I end up kidnapped and thrown in some hospital looking room-"

"-That was the Department of Mysteries" Albus corrected him.

"-Or I almost get my head taken off by some giant bag of bones-"

"-I've actually read a few articles, and apparently they're not skeletons at all, but some kind of unidentified-" Scorpius made to say, but Morrison gave a yell.

"I don't care!" he said, exasperated. "Just stop! Can't we just have a year where we don't have to do anything but what normal students do!"

And he refused to say another word about Waddlesworth after that. Albus wished that Morrison would budge on this matter, as he was eager to also discuss what he'd learned about Darvy, but it seemed highly unlikely. He merely sat there; arms crossed obstinately, so against contributing to any potential theory or opinion that discussions about it quickly disappeared. On normal conversations pertaining to simple things, however, he was more than willing to talk, and it was these conversations that carried them through the train ride.

Apart from a quick visit from James and a half hour in which Scorpius patrolled the train, the rest of the ride went rather smoothly. There was no sign of Mirra and Eckley however, a thought which bothered Albus slightly as they left the train and into the darkness.

"Firs' years this way!" roared Hagrid's voice as they felt around for one another, the moon acting as a rather pitiful guide on this night in particular.

"Hello Hagrid!" Albus hollered into the sky, though he was hustled along by the rest of the crowd. He heard Hagrid attempt to answer back, but the first years had already crowded around him. Shrugging, Albus made his way towards the carriages.

"Pick a good one" he heard Morrison say, though after that everything went quiet to him.

Albus had always known the carriages of Hogwarts to be pulled by more than a simple invisible force; had always known that there were reptilian creatures lugging them to the castle. His father had told him so, long before he'd even been sorted, and also told him that if he was lucky he'd never have to see them. Never have to stare into the milky eyes of a thestral.

The reptilian looking beast nearest to him gazed at him vaguely, as if unsure whether or not his cold stare was an indication of confusion or ire. It turned its head away soon after however, and Albus noted that a few other people near him were eying the carriages warily as well. He understood at once. Albus had seen Ares die only a few months ago, but he had not been the only death in the Hogsmeade Massacre. How many students could see these creatures now?

"Alright Al?" Scorpius said, nearing him, and a clap on his shoulder told him that Scorpius had avoided witnessing death first hand at the end of last year. Morrison too seemed unperturbed as he neared the carriages.

"Yeah I'm fine" he said, his voice stoic. "Let's just hop in."

The three of them all joined in a carriage, and though Albus had hoped that it would be Mirra who was the fourth to join them, she was nowhere to be seen. It was instead Melonie Grue who hopped in alongside them.

"How'd rounds go?" Morrison asked her as she sat unusually close to him.

"Prefect's going to be easy" she said, and they immediately launched into a conversation.

Albus instead stayed silent next to Scorpius, a thought occurring to him at once. He wished that Mirra had not gotten Prefect, and his friend most likely wished the opposite of Rose. He kept this thought in his head the entire carriage ride however, and by the end of it, he felt rather abashed of himself. So what if he was already spending less time with her? She had accomplished something, and he was proud of her for that.

They stepped down from the carriages in a wobbling fashion, unwilling to fully let go of something solid, lest they be lost in the darkness. Albus in particular side stepped the dragonish creature that was a few feet to his left and allowed a small shiver to escape him that had nothing to do with the chill of the night.

They hurried themselves closer and closer to the great steps of Hogwarts, the lights of the castle finally providing them with some adequate visibility. It was a sixth year who first opened the great doors, and at the next moment the students had all shuffled themselves into the castle excitedly, chatting amongst themselves about their hunger.

Albus walked with Morrison and Scorpius on either side of him as he moved through his peers; Melonie Grue had gone to meet up with another friend following the end of the carriage ride. It was a small hall that led to the Great Hall, where the tremendous feast and sorting would take place, but Albus never got to reach those doors. A few feet before he'd have walked through them, he heard his name called shrilly.

"Albus Potter!"

He turned at once, as did a few students around him. There, standing in the center of a narrow corridor filled with confused students, was Headmistress McGonagall.

Some of the other students made noises of interest, others as if eager to hear someone get yelled at. Albus, completely bewildered as to why the Headmistress of the school was calling his name rather than waiting in the Great Hall to greet them, simply stood still.

"Yes, you" Headmistress McGonagall said, peering at him through her spectacles, her mouth thin.

Morrison and Scorpius exchanged a glance before pushing him towards her, and this momentum kept up as he neared her.

"What-"

"You're not in trouble Mr. Potter" she said at once.

"Okay" Albus said, relieved as his classmates walked passed him.

"I simply need you for a moment, if you could follow me."

Albus nodded, still confused, as the headmistress took him through a door in the side of the corridor which led to an almost shortcut-like passage to the main staircase. Skipping over the Great Hall completely, Albus walked right through the ghost of the Grey Lady on his way to a random classroom on the fourth floor. Headmistress McGonagall stepped aside and allowed him to enter the room first.

He groaned as soon as he entered. Sitting on a randomly placed chair in the boring looking room was a nosy looking man with annoying circular spectacles and combed over, sleek black hair. He sat up straight at once, his expression hungry.

"Albus this is Professor Puckerd. He will be the Head of Slytherin House this year, as well as your Potions Professor."

"Albus!" he said, standing up and extending his hand. Albus could see a small notepad in the other. "So good to *finally* be introduced to you."

Albus shook his hand quickly, but only because his Headmistress was looking. When she wasn't however, he wiped it on his robes in plain view of Puckerd.

"I'm hoping to become good friends this year" he said, and Albus noted that his typically shrewd voice had become a bit of a wheeze. "But, well, I'm sure that Professor McGonagall will explain" he added, turning to her.

She did indeed turn to Albus.

"Professor Puckerd is not familiar with many of the going-ons of Hogwarts school, and as a member of his own house, he's asked to have you act somewhat as a guide; a friendly ear that he can turn to when he has questions or needs help in understanding some of the eccentricities of our school."

"But you needn't worry Albus" Puckerd said abruptly. He chuckled. "This isn't some *plot*, to have you do more work. You're still just a regular student! Our relationship outside of the classroom is strictly for my benefit and, ultimately, the benefit of Slytherin House! In the classroom you'll be treated just the same!"

"Yes, there's nothing to suggest that you will be treated any differently or have any additional responsibilities" Headmistress McGonagall added. "Professor Puckerd selected your name at random from a list of Slytherins."

"I bet" Albus murmured, his teeth bared. He was sickened by the cowardice of the move, but was forced to submit to it; he did not want to cause trouble.

"Professor Puckerd, please do escort Albus down to the feast, I'm sure you can have more formal introductions on the way. I too must prepare..."

Puckerd bowed himself out of Professor McGonagall's office most graciously, Albus following along side him with his hands jammed into his pockets. As soon as they had begun walking through the hall, Puckerd addressed him.

"I really am looking forward to our friendship, you know" he said, and Albus could *still* see the notepad in his hand. "I'm so thankful to have someone escort me and show me the ropes; the mere size of this place is immeasurable!"

Albus came very close to arguing on the usage of the term "escort" but stopped himself. He instead allowed his mind to wander slightly, and a prominent thought in his head was if the Headmistress had any idea what she'd condemned him to. Perhaps she did, and was simply unable to find a way out of it?

Puckerd kept slowing down to examine portraits and comment on them, each time bringing up the history of the castle and how much he knew about it, despite not having attended. Finally, after Albus was forced to backtrack for the fifth time to find him, did he finally say something without having had been asked.

"Professor please, I'm very hungry. I just want to get to the Great Hall and eat-"

Puckerd practically jumped towards him, so close now as they walked that their hips were bumping into one another's uncomfortably.

"Absolutely" he said. "My apologies, I have the entire year to admire the decor."

They walked for another moment before Puckerd said something.

"Very hungry though, you say? Now why's that? Certainly you're being fed at home aren't you? Certainly your father is around enough to put some adequate dinners on the table. Or...?"

Albus sighed. "My dad's always home for dinner" he lied. "And we eat like kings. It was just a long train ride. Trolley lady came a bit early."

"Ah" Puckerd said, and Albus watched as he lowered his notepad; strange, considering he hadn't even seen him raise it. Thankfully they made it through the doors of the Great Hall with no more snags however, and once in its confines he was free to join his friends at the Slytherin table.

Their tardiness was indicated not only by the presence of Professor McGonagall, who had left after them, but also by the fact that the hall was noisy and full of food. As soon as Albus settled himself next to Morrison his thoughts were confirmed.

"Did-"

"You missed the Sorting" Morrison said.

"Ah dammit."

"Nothing too big though" Scorpius said, leaning over the table to speak, as Morrison was in between them. "Same as usual. Most to Gryffindor, other houses got some leftovers."

Albus could see one of the "leftovers" across from him, munching into his food and looking quite pleased to be in Slytherin house.

"Anything else?" Albus asked.

"Sorting Hat song" Morrison said. "Pretty cryptic, as usual."

"Not really" Scorpius argued. "All about unity and personality and stuff" he added, tearing into a drumstick.

Albus, annoyed that he'd missed a Hogwarts tradition, started on his food but found that he could only pick at it. Before he'd gotten far his whereabouts had been mentioned however.

"Where were you at?" Morrison asked him.

"Getting my collar" he said sarcastically. "I am now Professor Puckerd's lapdog."

Morrison choked on his food, but Scorpius laughed. "How'd that turn out? Learn any new tricks?"

"He's the one that's supposed to be learning. Apparently he randomly picked me to have someone tell him more about Hogwarts. All a ruse though; he's already going after my dad."

"Yeah, McGonagall mentioned that he was busy. That's him though, huh?"

They all looked up at the staff table, where Puckerd was nestled between Hagrid and Professor Bellinger. The former was ignoring him thoroughly, much to Albus' pleasure, but Bellinger was making small talk with him. He wondered how many of the professors knew his true purpose of being here. With a pang, he wondered if they'd known the same about Fairhart and Blackwood.

Albus cruised through dinner, picking at random things on the table and eating only to end his hunger, which he had actually not lied about. Once the plates were magically cleared however, Albus' attention turned to the high table.

Headmistress McGonagall called for silence, and it fell at once. "Welcome!" she said. "Welcome to Hogwarts! A true home away from home! To our newer students-"

Albus tuned it out. It was not meant to be disrespectful or an indication of ignorance by any means, but he was instead focused on Puckerd, who was looking up at McGonagall intently, rubbing at his pointy nose with his finger.

"In these troubling times of danger and confusion, I cannot make it clearer that Hogwarts is more than just a castle; more than a school. I use the term home because to be home is to be safe, and away from-"

Puckerd was rolling his fingers on the table, quietly but obnoxiously. Albus studied him for a moment and then saw him take a swig of a goblet which was almost surely empty. He looked like he was doing whatever necessary to keep up the facade of an eager, subservient member of the staff.

"Thus, I would like to introduce Professor Puckerd! Professor Puckerd will serve as both Head of Slytherin House and Potions Master of the school for the duration of the year, and we are very excited to have his talents among us!"

The four tables were synchronized in their unenthusiastic clapping, and Albus knew that he, Morrison, and Scorpius were most likely the only ones not among them. Professor Puckerd stood up and waved jovially, and then, with silence called once more, began speaking.

"Hello students! As your Headmistress has already dutifully informed you, I, Professor Puckerd, will be here for your learning needs! I understand that this is a difficult thing to grasp-I do not expect you to have trust in me or to fully appreciate my talents-I need to *earn* your respect, and that is a task that I am fully willing to do! So if we could please all raise our glasses-yes-just like that-"

They all collectively rose their glasses, Albus again not among them.

"Yes- to a year full of both fun and learning- for the both of us!"

And they all drank. The second he'd placed his cup down however, his voice became more serious and business like.

"I should also inform you all that I am a member of the Ministry of Magic. It is my business to know the business of the outside world" he said darkly and with a hint of superiority in his voice. "I understand the fear that many of you may have this year. I understand that there are things difficult to talk about; things difficult to understand. I advise you all not to dwell on this solitude however. I am here to be your friend as well as your professor. If any of you wish to see me privately to discuss matters that do not pertain specifically to school work, I will be *very happy* to address them as both a member of your loyal Ministry and as a friend with your best interests in mind!"

He sat down abruptly afterwards, leaving a stunned audience of students to smatter applause in a confused manner, unsure whether his speech called for it. Albus rolled his eyes, feeling sick. The silence was broken when Puckerd nodded to Headmistress McGonagall. She immediately clapped her hands and began speaking.

"That is all for the night! I suggest you all get to sleep, a full first day of classes awaits you in the morning!"

Chapter 6: Jotting And Scribbles

Albus had been in such an angry mood over the lies that Puckerd had spewed out at the welcome feast that he'd barely noticed the walk to his dormitory. The absence of Scorpius, who was taking the time to sheppard the first years through the dungeons, was also not noticed. His last thought before bed had been that he and Mirra had never met up as promised. By the time he'd awoken on the first day however, there were more prudent things to worry about.

Rolling out of bed and yawning, he stepped across the strewn about items of random trunks and took a look around. His dormitory and the common room were conspicuously vacant. Five minutes later he found himself rushing through the Great Hall, his appearance disheveled and his demeanor irritating.

"How late am I?" he asked Morrison, who looked as though he'd had a rather good morning thus far. He sipped his orange juice slowly before answering.

"Meh. They handed out schedules, but breakfast isn't over yet. You could eat some toast on the way."

Unconcerned with his food, Albus picked up his schedule and skimmed over it. Mondays looked to be a rather strange day. He had the very difficult Transfiguration to deal with in the morning, followed by the relatively easy Charms. His afternoon class, however, was a double period of Potions. Strangely, he noticed the same thing for Wednesday and Friday.

"Double Potions three days a week!" he exclaimed, baffled. "We've never had it more than once before!"

Morrison shrugged. "I said the same thing."

Albus looked over at Scorpius, who had yet to speak since his arrival, and who had, most interestingly enough, a book propped up against his goblet.

"There's no way you're studying already..." Albus said with a slight shake of his head.

"Prefect duties plus Quidditch practice equals less time to spend on the most important year yet" Scorpius droned out, almost robot like. His eyes did not leave his book. "Thus, meal times are now additional study periods. Can't wait for lunch" he added mundanely.

"What's on the menu?" Morrison asked. "Boring or difficult?"

There was a small giggle, and Albus now took notice to Melonie Grue, who was sitting across from Morrison and beaming at him. Morrison gave a quick smile back.

The sweet moment was interrupted by a chorus of booing however, a strange noise as Albus scarcely heard it anymore outside of the Quidditch Pitch. It had been a very long time since James had made his way over to the Slytherin table...

It was not James however, but another Gryffindor. Mirra was walking towards them, looking determined as Slytherins hissed at her. She flashed them her silver badge however, and it turned to muttering.

"Good morning" she said when she saw him.

"Morning' Albus replied meekly.

"Sorry I didn't catch up with you last night" she said, getting straight to the point.

"Nah, its fine" Albus batted it away.

"Well anyway" she said, holding up her schedule. "I noticed we have Potions three times a week!"

She looked ecstatic at it, which Albus knew had more to do with him and less to do with the subject. Potions was one of the few classes that she did not excel at.

"Any chance of partnering up this year? This Puckerd guy doesn't seem half as bad as Blackwood."

Albus had made no contact with Ida Blackwood since her fleeing at the Hogsmeade Massacre, nor did he plan to. Indeed, he was not even sure if she was alive or not-WAR may have long since caught up with her. Either way however, he took the negative opinion of her somewhat to heart. Whatever she may have been as a teacher, she had indeed saved his life.

Mirra didn't know this however, so instead he compensated by launching into his attack on Puckerd.

"Believe me, he's going to be worse" he said, mustering the ugliest look that he could. "My dad already told me about him."

"Really? Mirra asked, actually sitting down at the Slytherin table. This appeared to be too much for the emerald clad, and the hissing returned. Strangely, it was a different Prefect who stood up however.

"Hey!" Scorpius called out in frustration, the book falling to the ground. "I am a Prefect and I am trying to study! So shut up!"

His voice sounded so irate that even the older students fell silent. A sixth year Prefect almost made to comment, but simply could not bring himself to do it.

"Thanks mate" Albus said swiftly as Scorpius returned to his seat. His friend gave a grunt to indicate that he'd heard him, then promptly picked his book back up and began reading. Albus turned back to Mirra, but at that very moment the bell rang.

"I really need to get going!" Mirra said quickly. "I have Herbology first. I heard that we're going into Greenhouse four-"

"But wait I was going to expl-"

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, so subtle that it was seen by no one in the rushing crowd of green and silver, and disappeared. Albus sighed and grabbed his own things, and then, within minutes, he was sitting in one of his least favorite classrooms.

Professor Bellinger was a great teacher, but Albus had struggled with Transfiguration since day one, and fifth year had been the one year that he was least looking forward to. This was the year where he'd be forced to perform his most difficult magic yet, all the while being tested on four years of near failure.

Predictably, end of the year exams were the first things mentioned, and Professor Bellinger made no attempt to calm or placate them.

"O.W.L's" she said, the second that the last person had gotten settled. "Inarguably the most difficult and important test in your lives up until this point. Sugarcoating and coddling you will do little at this juncture in your tutelage, and I can only make it known that there are those of you who it seems all odds are not in your favor. The only words of comfort I can give are that I have never seen true hard work and practice fail. That being said... anything less has been proven to be unsuccessful."

The class collectively grimaced, though Albus knew that few had to take these words to heart like he did. It seemed that for people of his skill, failure was imminent if Transfiguration did not become the main focus of his life over the course of the next few months.

"Today we will be starting something entirely new, though still rather basic. The actual elements themselves. So far you have been given the benefit of transfiguring objects into things of the same chemical make-up; in the real world, this is not always the case. You have a wooden desk in front of you. I expect a solid chunk of iron by the end of class. Page thirty seven in your books. If you need assistance, call for me..."

As it turned out, so many people needed assistance that many of them never received it. Scorpius, almost always the best in the class, struggled so much that he whipped out last year's enormous book of copied notes and began re-reading. Morrison was laughing at his attempt, commenting that the wood seemed to have rotted, and Albus was left with the worst predicament of all. His desk seemed to be virtually untouched, regardless of how many attempts he put forth to it. A passing Professor Bellinger took notice.

"Not even going to give it a whirl, Mr. Potter?"

He gave a quick explanation of the futility of his work, and was rewarded with a few quick comments before his teacher was called over by another hopeless student.

"It's all in the concentration" she said, crouching low and examining his desk.

"I am concentrating" Albus argued earnestly.

"But on what?"

"On the desk!"

"Really?" she said mysteriously, "which part of it? The legs? The top? The sides? The desk was not created as one single object. Channel your efforts to everything individually, and see where that gets you."

Albus nodded, though even as he did so he had the strange feeling that it would get him nowhere. His professor seemed to have read his mind.

"I know that you struggle with this subject" she said with a frown. "But hard work never did anyone wrong. Nor did asking for help when you need it. Both are available to you."

Albus nodded again, this time getting a clap on the shoulder as she hurried away towards a Ravenclaw student whose desk had been reduced to splinters. Albus sighed as he began saying the incantation over and over again, each time nothing happening. By the time that the bell had rung however, he thought, which a glance over his shoulder, that the legs of his desk looked a tad bit shinier.

The second that he left his Transfiguration classroom he was approached by a weedy looking first year Slytherin with a confident smirk on my face.

"I heard you're Quidditch Captain?" the boy said.

"Yes" Albus said quickly, not really paying attention. He wanted to get to Charms class and get it over with; skipping breakfast had caught up to him and he could not wait to consume food.

The boy extended his hand upwards. "Rodney Goode, I've been flying my whol-"

"Okay sounds great" Albus cut him off quickly, shocked by the student's audacity and sparing the kid a handshake. "Need to get to Charms though, talk later."

As he pushed his way passed him, Morrison gave a chuckle. "What's got you all ticked?"

"Nothing, just hungry" he said.

Lack of food seemed to be only a trivial problem however. Though his next class was not far at all from Bellinger's room, it took him quite a bit to get there. Every few moments he was halted by someone asking him about his responsibilities as Quidditch Captain, typically first or second years bobbing up and down anxiously. The problem, he realized, was his lack of pre-meditation. Only now did he realize that picking older and more experienced students to be on the team last year hadn't been the best idea. Apart from him and Scorpius, every other member of the Slytherin Quidditch team had graduated the previous year.

"Please don't quit the team" Scorpius said as they settled themselves into their seats in Charms. "That'll leave me captain, and I've got enough to be going on with..."

"I'm not doing anything like that!" Albus snapped. "I just need to set tryouts a bit earlier, get the full team together..."

Like Bellinger, tiny Professor Flitwick started the year off with a lengthy talk about O.W.L's.

"Now, it is important that you understand the difference between effort and perseverance! Charms can be a devilishly tricky brand of magic-a precise one, but a tricky one no less- and in order to reach N.E.W.T standard you'll have to know this class inside out! Your end of year exams can make or break your remaining time here at Hogwarts, which in turn affects the outcome of your life! Keeping that in mind, let's get cracking on some notes..."

Charms was almost always a combination of both wands and quills, but on this particular day the entire class session had been devoted to copying from the board. Flitwick occasionally called out things to help them remember incantations and the like, but for the most part it ended up being an easy, if not incredibly boring lesson. By the end of class Albus had more than two feet of parchment written in cramped handwriting, and it was with a tremendous sigh of relief that he finally packed up and headed for lunch.

"Leave it to Flitwick to help us feel at home" Morrison said with a yawn as they entered the Great Hall. "Copying from the board, now there's something I can do."

"I don't like it" Scorpius said fiercely. "I already had these definitions copied. Waste of a day really."

"Well we don't all keep our notes from four years ago..."

Albus ignored them both and began digging into his lunch, a very delicious sheppard's pie. As he should have expected however, he was soon swarmed by younger students, all of whom had only one topic in mind.

"There are two Beater spots open, right? Because me and my friend-"

"My dad showed me how to fly this summer-"

"My mum reckons when I get older I could be Seeker for the Wimbourne Wasps-"

"I'm Seeker!" Albus lashed out radically, grabbing his face in his hands while Morrison snorted his way through food. Scorpius once again had his nose buried in a book, this time one on Charms. Albus was right about to ask him for help when the crowd suddenly dispersed. Thankful for this miracle but unsure of why it had happened, he looked around wildly. What he saw made him tug at his hair.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor Puckerd said, beaming at him and holding his arms wide open as if expecting a hug. Did this man truly forget that only weeks ago he'd stood in an alleyway insulting him?

"Lo Professor" Albus said plainly, wishing that the younger students would encompass him again.

"I noticed-just by walking by- that you'd hardly touched your food. If you're not hungry, would you perhaps mind accompanying me to the high towers? I'd really like to get a good scale of the place. I thought that maybe we could start with the Astronomy-"

"I'm kind of-well-"

He could not see his way out of this. He had, after all, been "randomly selected" to be Puckerd's tour guide.

"Why don't you just do it later?" Morrison chimed in. "You have to discuss Quidditch tryouts with him anyway, don't you Al?"

Albus nodded weakly. "Yeah. So maybe tomorrow then? Since I'll be talking to you anyway?"

Puckerd smiled with glee. "Excellent. Tomorrow then, when we discuss Quidditch. I should, however, be seeing you soon anyway! Potions next. Hope you're looking forward to it!"

And without waiting for an answer, he swept away. Albus heaved a sigh and tried once more to dig into his food. Scorpius looked up from his book.

"He doesn't seem so bad" he said.

"Believe me, he is" Albus said. "You should have seen him near Gringotts when I almost got chucked into Azkaban. All about what a disrespectful brat I was. And he thinks my dad is a criminal. It's a cover up, you just wait."

Still, cover up or not, there was no escaping that Wendell Puckerd was his new professor. And so, after having finally scarfed down some food, Albus walked through the familiar labyrinth that was the dungeons.

They met with the Gryffindors at the door, and at once he recognized the clueless muttering of the uninformed.

"So apparently this guy is like an auror undercover, since, you know, the Hogsmeade Massacre-"

"Yeah I heard that too, a bit like the scarred guy who taught us Defence-"

"I dunno I heard he's here to like spy on us. My dad reckons he had something similar happen back when he was at Hogwarts-"

The door opened and they all shuffled in. Amidst the crowd now Albus could see the same four he always did. Eckley and Mirra in the front, Hornsbrook and Rose right behind them. They were all chatting adamantly, but Mira stopped when she turned and saw Albus. She waved to her Gryffindor friends, and then took a seat next to him at a table in the middle.

Their table now comprised of him, Mirra, Scorpius, and Morrison, but Albus was more focused on the professor. Puckerd was standing behind his desk, an empty cauldron on the table. He smiled at them.

"Good afternoon students!" he said, flashing them all a smile.

"Hello" they answered back collectively.

Puckerd wasted no time getting started. He clapped his hands together eagerly.

"As you all know from the welcoming feast, I am Professor Puckerd, the new Head of Slytherin House and the new Potions Master!"

He said the last two words with dramatic effect, but nothing came from it. The class simply stayed motionless, ogling him with interest.

"Right!" he said with another clap. "That being said however, you can also expect to view me as a friend; a confidant. And though my responsibilities are not to be shelved, I believe that the best way to progress through this year-and to accurately prepare you for some very difficult tests- is to have us be comfortable with one another. Which is why I've prepared a bit of a personality test."

Those last two words were not said any differently than the rest of his sentence, and yet, they had a strong effect on the students. Eyebrows were now being raised.

"Now, if you'd all kindly take out a piece of parchment..."

They did as they were told, some of them curiously, others with grumpy expressions, and prepared their quills. Albus stared down at his blank paper, annoyed and preparing for the worst. Morrison yawned and prepared to put his head down, while Mirra was sitting up straight, quill in

her hand. Scorpius was a different ball game altogether. He was shaking with fury, and Albus knew why; he wanted a teacher for his O.W.L year, not a counselor.

Puckerd removed his tiny, evil notepad and prepared to read the questions on it. "I should first say," he started, "that I value the concept of anonymity very highly, and feel that it is a very accurate approach to a greater truth. Thus, you needn't worry about the contents of your answers. I only ask for honesty."

"So we don't put our names at the top?" Donovan Hornsbrook called out from the back.

"Oh no, you do!" Puckerd said quickly, laughing slightly. "Yes, definitely, definitely put your names at the top! How else will I get to know you all better? What I mean to say is, your classmates will not have access to your answers. Feel free to offer your actual opinions and to speak the truth; no one will know."

At these last few words, he made eye contact with Albus and smiled. Albus squeezed his quill so hard that it almost snapped.

"Everyone's name at the top!" he shot out. "Good then, first question! What...is your favorite subject here at Hogwarts!"

There was a sound of scratching. Albus hesitated at this. He did not want to put Potions, his best subject, because he feared that that would give Puckerd too much to work with. He instead thought that he'd give Hagrid a shout out.

Care For Magical Creatures

He looked over at Morrison's paper.

Lunch

He chortled as he turned to his other side at Mirra, who had scribbled *Potions*. He smiled slightly, but soon enough the next question had been asked.

"What...is your favorite color!"

Albus scribbled down *green*, though he did it half-heartedly. This entire test, he knew, was stupid. But favorite color? He couldn't blame Scorpius for being angry.

"Next question!" Puckerd said, turning the page of his notepad. "What...do your parents or legal guardians do as a profession!"

Albus made to lower his quill, before letting the question actually hit him. What did that have to do with personality? Many fellow students were looking around now as well, and he even heard Eckley mutter something about it from the back. Scorpius spoke up.

"Excuse me sir" he said, his voice a menacing whisper. "What does that have to do with personality?"

There was a murmur of agreement at this, even from the Gryffindors.

Puckerd recuperated quickly. "It's a contrast question" he threw into the air. "I want to know if your favorite subject has any correlation to the occupations of those around you-there's no incorrect answer of course- but it's meant to indicate whether you're more of an independent or something of a rebel. Neither is bad of course. Answer truthfully."

He said these last two words more strict than he had anything else, and though he was not as intimidating as his predecessor, the scratching of quills became audible once more. Albus heaved a sigh.

Head Auror

Journalist for Sports Section at the Daily Prophet

He took particular pleasure in writing the first one. Leaving the 'co' prefix out had most certainly been intentional.

For another fifteen minutes the test continued like this; a variety of seemingly innocuous questions pertaining to personal taste, all with a questionable and private inquiry thrown in to catch them off guard. The result was that they all ended up using much more than a single sheet of parchment, and even then, they didn't seem anywhere close to done. It wasn't until right after they'd answered *Favorite Kind of Ice Cream* that he dropped his biggest bombshell on them however.

"Do you...feel that the Ministry of Magic is doing everything that it can to stop both the impending threat of terrorism and the rising dilemma of vigilante inspired activity most commonly attributed to Renegade organizations such as Wands and Redemption, and, do you feel that the Ministry of Magic has been too lenient in allowing certain individuals, possibly even individuals of former public disgrace, to participate in the opposition of said societal threats? Also, if so, name these individuals."

The class stared, mouths agape.

"If you need me to repeat the question simply raise your hand" he said simply. "And remember, be truthful."

After a few moments of no one raising their hand, Albus heard the irksome scratching of quills. Having understood the true purpose of the question and furious at its intended nature, Albus dipped his quill in ink and simply wrote two letters.

No

Puckerd permitted the students to write for a few more moments than usual on this particular question, and Albus noticed that this seemed to be one of those that he was most eager to spit out; he was bobbing up and down on his heels the entire time. As the sounds of writing died down, he continued his survey.

"How often...do you read materials outside of required reading for school?"

And so, it continued. For ten more minutes they scribbled tediously, every couple minutes or so stopping to truly ponder on what had been asked. At around the half hour mark of the period, they were given their final question.

"Okay, last one! Have you...met or heard of anyone participating in activities that could be considered typical of the Renegade movement? If so, list those individuals!"

A most curious noise followed this question. Whereas the front, more Slytherin rows dipped their quills and immediately began writing, Albus noticed little noise from the back rows filled with scarlet and gold. Albus thought he knew the reason for this. Puckerd was asking for the names of Renegades, and a few students-mostly Gryffindors-had family in that bunch. Donovan Hornsbrook, he knew for a fact, had a father who was.

After they had all rolled up their parchment and cracked their knuckles, Puckerd had them hand in their answers and return to their seats to begin the next part of the lesson. Albus collapsed into his seat, allowing his head to loll onto Mirra's shoulder. He could already tell that Potions was going to be very arduous this year...and he hadn't even finished his first lesson.

"Well, I'm glad that's out of the way!" Puckerd said politely. "Terribly sorry about the length of that, but you know how complicated people are! Can't very well know them after only one or two questions, can we!"

Most of the class smiled weakly, though a few didn't even do that. Scorpius was digging his nails into his palms.

"We still have quite a bit of time left!" Puckerd announced, clapping his hands together once more. "And I thought that we'd get working on a potion!"

Albus' ears perked up at this, as did a few other people who had been resting their heads in their arms. Surely, this man could not actually be a teacher as well?

Puckerd waved his wand-which Albus noticed was short and wiry looking- and words appeared on the blackboard behind him. Albus stared in shock, while a few people towards the back gasped.

"I said that we would be doing work in this class, did I not?" he said coyly. "Instructions are on the board. Ingredients, as I've been told, can all be found in the cupboards."

Albus did not even rise from his seat to approach the cupboards. He instead stared at Puckerd, perplexed. When he noticed nothing unusual, however, he spared a glance at the blackboard. It was something of a simple potion-a little tricky with its timing, but was by no means a difficult concoction- and the steps were given clearly and precisely.

Mirra brought back enough components for both of them, and within moments, the two had partnered up. Albus did most of the work, asking her to contribute only when he needed an extra pair of hands, but still found himself eyeing Puckerd every couple of minutes. He was merely sitting there at his desk, going over the personality tests.

But he was going through them awfully fast. For so many questions having been asked, he was only looking at a few for each student. Albus had what he believed to be a very accurate suspicion that the answers he was looking at had less to do with their favorite kinds of pie and more to do with their opinions on both the Ministry and WAR.

"Al...isn't that a bit too much Tebo skin?"

"Huh? Oh sorry!" he said quickly, stopping himself from tossing in bits of leathery skin. "Don't worry we can fix that..."

Albus did manage to make the potion as good as new, but it was at the cost of not being able to watch Puckerd further. Near the end of class however, he didn't have to. He could hear him.

Jot jot jot. Jot jot jot.

Albus looked up. Puckerd was no longer reading their answers; he was copying them. He had his menacing little notepad out, and ink was splattering all over his glasses as he copied either names or answers-possibly both- onto its pages.

Albus stared, curious as to its actual contents. Was he listing those who seemed to know Renegades? Or perhaps, those who had listed his father as an individual who shouldn't be in the Ministry?

He could not ponder on it however, he had a job to do and he was not going to let Mirra down. Morrison and Scorpius were working on their own potion, which was turning out rather well, but Albus' was precisely as the directions indicated it should be by the finishing touches. His batch of *Demulcathite*- meant to soothe swollen knuckles- was the bubbly pink it was intended to be, and it had just the amount of thickness intended as well. It was almost lotion like.

They filled their flasks five minutes before the bell was to ring; Puckerd stashing away their papers into his bag and stuffing his notepad into his pocket. He wiped his glasses with a magically conjured handkerchief, and at the next moment he was standing by the door, looking eager to dismiss them.

"Well *done* today, students!" he said with much more emphasis than necessary. "Relax and enjoy the rest of the day; I daresay you all have little to worry about with your potions!"

They shuffled out of class the moment that the bell had rung, and soon enough the students were in talks of their first taste of Wendell Puckerd.

"Better than the hag from last year-"

"Anyone else surprised we actually ended up making a potion-"

They all went to go their separate ways, but Mirra stayed behind for a bit before accompanying her fellow Gryffindors.

"He wasn't so bad" she said. "A little quirky, but I'll take it."

"Did you notice what he was throwing in there?" Albus said. "More than one of those questions was meant for a lot more than getting a good grasp of someone. One in particular was definitely directed at my dad."

Mirra shrugged. "But it shouldn't matter" she said. "Because everyone is a fan of your dad now, right? I know I didn't say anything."

Albus smiled at her, but he glanced ahead at some of the Gryffindors. Most of them were not his friends. Would they have put something?

"Well I gave one word answers for everything" Morrison straight up admitted. "Even that one where we had to describe our ideal morning in seven words."

"The test at the beginning was stupid" Scorpius blurted out. "But I'm at least thankful that this guy isn't vanishing every potion I put out."

Albus turned to him. "But you agree with me, right? Those questions were-"

Scorpius waved his hand. "Whatever they were, they should be over with now" he said. "I know your dad told you to watch out for this guy, but realistically, I don't see him posing much of a threat. Just keep your head on your shoulders during your personal rendezvous with him, and things should be fine."

Mirra looked at them both interestingly. "What's he talking about?"

"I'm Puckerd's personal servant" Albus told her dryly. "I get to show him stuff and talk to him about things when he needs me to."

She giggled. "Sounds fun."

He narrowed his eyes at her, half flirtatiously, but she was distracted by two third year students who had just run by.

"Hey! No running!" she said as they nearly knocked down a first year girl. "Better go sort this out" she said quickly, again giving Albus a quick, almost unnoticeable kiss and chasing after them.

"Shouldn't you have been on that too mate?" Morrison asked Scorpius.

Scorpius shrugged. "Shouldn't Melonie?"

Morrison pressed his finger to his lips. "That's a good point. Where'd she go off to...?"

Albus stayed deep in thought as they navigated their way through the stone passages. Into the common room they went, and soon enough, books had been spilled out over the floor.

"Alright, what's on the agenda?" Morrison said, stretching himself out into a stone cut chair. "Do we even have homework?"

"O.W.L year isn't supposed to be a homework year like that" Scorpius said. "From what I've gathered we're in charge of our own studying habits. The homework should pile up later."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means learn to read" Scorpius scoffed, pushing one of his old Charms notebooks towards him.

Albus did not even need to be told this, he had already reached into Scorpius' bag and pulled out what he knew to be an old book of Transfiguration notes. Organizing his parchment and preparing to write, he was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder.

He spun around and saw one of the new first years, the same boy, in fact, that he'd seen at the welcoming feast. He heaved a sigh.

"Look, I'm still working on setting a date for Quidditch tryouts okay? When I get everything down on paper I'll let-"

But the student shook his head and held out an envelope.

"What is this?" Albus said, not trying to sound particularly rude but also not taking care to be polite.

"I think it's for you" the boy said. "A tawny owl dropped it off just a little late during breakfast."

He thrust the envelope into his hands. Morrison and Scorpius both looked curiously, but they were not as perturbed as Albus, whose hands shook as he made to open the letter. He felt the

strangest twinge of both foreboding and mystery. He glanced at the name written on the envelope, and was surprised to see that it did not have his name at all. An untidy, child like scrawl read:

the bOy with mesy bLack hair

AND green eys

Slytherin

Albus stared down at these words, blinking a few times to take in the poor grammar and cryptic description. He looked up and over at the student who'd handed him the letter, but he had already returned to playing chess with his friend. Eager to solve the mystery, he tore into the letter, Morrison and Scorpius reading it over his shoulder.

Please-

i cant take no more. soMetimes yor hear and then not.

help

- me

Albus read it over five times before finally looking at his friends. They all wore expressions of utter bewilderment.

"Blimey, whoever wrote that has worse handwriting than me!" Morrison said.

Scorpius took the letter from Albus' hands and examined it.

"It's just mindless scribbling" he finally said. "Do you have any idea who could have sent this?"

Albus shook his head, taking the letter back and holding it delicately in his hands. "No. Well-I-"

They both looked at him.

He sighed. "Last time I got a letter with no name it was from...you know. Fairhart."

He watched as his two friends exchanged their all too familiar looks. And then, simultaneously, they frowned.

"Well Al," Scorpius said, his voice an uneasy quiver. "I don't know what to tell you..."

Chapter 7: Prefect Affairs

Albus knew that it was unwise to dwell so much on a piece of paper with no discernible value, but he simply could not help himself. His thoughts and theories on both its sender and intended purpose varied depending on his mood, and he found himself far too preoccupied with it to allow more normal things to take over his mind. The reason for this, he knew, had roots to his thoughts of many months ago.

There was simply no denying what Albus had felt as he had scanned over the letter during his first read. He had excitedly-and stupidly- thought it to be from Sancticus Fairhart. A letter from beyond the grave. Not that there was one, of course.

"They never found his body!" Albus was still arguing with his friends a few days later. "That has to mean something!"

"It means that his family never got to properly bury him, and yes, that is sad" Scorpius said, his eyes scanning a page of Muggle Studies notes from the previous day. "Do we really need to go over this again?"

Albus crossed his arms and stared into the common room fire. "Yes" he said grumpily.

Scorpius started ticking them off of his fingers.

"First and foremost, he's dead" he stated simply. "Second, that wasn't his handwriting, we know that from the letter you got last year. *Third*, Fairhart could spell."

"I got another one!" Morrison piped up. "That kid said an owl dropped it off! Fairhart used crows remember!"

Albus sighed, though admittedly, these had been the answers that he'd wanted. However much he may think of it at night, he had at least felt closure before, when he'd known his old professor and friend to be dead. This way, at least, there were no more questions that needed to be asked. Still, fighting against his own logic, Albus persisted.

"But it is strange, isn't it? I mean, no body found..."

Now it was Scorpius' turn to sigh. "Al, look...I didn't want to say it before, because I didn't want to hurt your feelings, but there's something you have to understand. That's how murder works. Your dad reckons it was WAR who did it, right? If you were Waddlesworth, and you wanted the public on your side, would you let the body of an Auror be found? Or a former Hogwarts teacher, for that matter? He got his message through by leaving nothing behind. Fairhart's in pieces right now most likel-"

Morrison gave him a swift thump on the back. "Slow down mate" he said.

Albus hung his head though. "He's right" Albus said. "I know he is...it's just..."

He had to trail off there however, for he could not accurately convey what it was he was truly thinking. The thought of Fairhart still being alive was absurd, but the alternatives only increased the mystery. If it was not his former professor, then who was it?

"You're ruling out the more simple possibilities mate" Morrison said. "There's a handful of kids in Slytherin with black hair and green eyes. That could have been meant for a few people."

Albus had already batted that theory away in his head however. He had taken to examining every Slytherin that he'd never bothered to notice before, and though many of them had one of the physical attributes mentioned, Albus thought that he'd fit the admittedly bland description best. Likewise, didn't these kinds of things always happen to him anyway?

"Also can't rule out it being a practical joke and the like" Scorpius added in. "There's nothing to suggest that this was a message of dire importance, or a warning from a ghastly professor. It may have even been discarded trash, placed into a letter to annoy you."

Albus wanted to battle these ideas too, but he simply didn't have the strength. Besides, doing so would only take him back to his original thought process, which did nothing to comfort him.

Instead, he opted to focus on less mysterious but equally arduous things. Though the letter cropped into his head at random intervals, he learned that he now had to deal with the fact that Scorpius had been rather incorrect about his statement on the first day. Fifth year came with plenty of homework.

The first day proved to be only a sliver of the expected work to be done, and by Thursday Albus was already behind. His attempts to practice Transfiguration in his spare time had already lost him an hour in which he had intended to do Professor Handit's first essay of the year, and as Professor Longbottom-Neville as Albus knew him- was asking for drawn diagrams of every disgusting plant that he threw at them, Albus' cramped fingers were getting as much work as his Hagrid was proving to be difficult.

"Now I'm not gonna' be the one teacher to let yeh fail yer O.W.L's, am I?" he said, raising his voice above the groans of the class; he had just had the audacity to assign them an essay on the mating rituals of the lobalug, an aquatic creature whose gender was very hard to find to begin with.

"Now come on, I'm given yeh all a full week to do it! Yeh don't even have to ruin your weekend!"

Albus' weekend, however, was already ruined.

"Tomorrow then, correct Mr. Potter?" Professor Puckerd said crisply, a steely smile on his face. Albus had ended up cancelling his meeting with the irksome professor the day he'd made it,

having lied and cited the intense amount of homework he'd gotten as an excuse. This same statement got him through the rest of the week, including another Potions lesson, but by the end of class Friday he'd ran out of options. He truly was free, and, more importantly, he really did need to plan tryouts; he could not hope to take on Gryffindor in November with only two players.

"Boy, he's really eager to plan Quidditch tryouts with you, isn't he?" Mirra joked as Puckerd dismissed them from class.

Albus practically stomped his way out of the classroom. He had told Mirra, during a quick, impromptu meeting at the library the day before, all that he knew about Puckerd and Fischer. Though Mirra had sympathized with him, she seemed to have different things on her mind now.

"Oh lighten up!" she said, "Find the humor in it!"

Albus gave her a dark look. "There's nothing humorous about it" he said. "This guy-"

"Wait tell me later Al I have to run!" Mirra said quickly, cutting him off. "Sorry, it's just that me and Charlie are supposed to meet Professor McGonagall-"

"Yeah yeah, I know" Albus retorted grumpily, permitting her to give him a clandestine kiss on the cheek before she ran off.

The day had not been a total waste however. His third potions lesson had went well, with Albus delivering yet another perfect potion to a professor who could probably care less about the quality of his work. In addition, he had managed to plan a get together with Mirra for as soon as he was done with Puckerd, his hopes that the gargantuan library would act as a sort of safe haven from the Potions master.

And so, on a rather rainy Saturday morning (in which Albus would have preferred to be outside) he trudged his way through the labyrinth to the Potions classroom, a long sigh preceding a brisk knock at the door. It opened at once.

"Albus!" Professor Puckerd beamed. "Splendid! Right on time, though of course, the quality of your work has suggested as much. Yes, very good sense of time indeed..."

"So...yeah, Quidditch tryouts-" Albus started at once, eager to progress through the conversation as quickly as possible.

"Dear me it's chilly" Puckerd said, still standing in the doorway and giving a false chiver. "Care to join me for this chat somewhere else? I was rather hoping to get a tour of one of the towers while we spoke..."

Knowing full well that it was not in the best interest of anyone to be rude or to object, Albus agreed. They walked through the dungeons and up to the main floors, the entire time Albus being bombarded with questions.

"No, I don't know" Albus said, when Puckerd asked about if he knew the story behind the blood on the Bloody Baron.

"A mystery indeed" Puckerd said, and Albus saw him inching his hand towards his pocket. "But surely, someone must have told you? Your father, perhaps?" he said, the sentence dripping with more than mere curiosity.

"No, he didn't."

"But was he not in Slytherin house as well?"

"No" Albus said, doing his best to keep his temper. How was any of this relevant?

"I see" Puckerd said, and just like that, his notepad had been whipped out. "Your father was a Gryffindor then?"

"How'd you know?" Albus said dryly.

"Lucky guess" Puckerd said. "Only three choices actually."

Albus heard the jotting commence. On cue, Puckerd went in for the kill.

"So are you the only Slytherin in the family then? Something of a break in tradition?"

"Yes."

"Oh my" Puckerd said softly, his light tone not matching the furious work of his hands. He was so distracted with writing things down on his notepad that he bumped into a third year Ravenclaw girl. He ignored her as she rubbed her side sorely. "That must have been difficult for you, in the earlier years. You must have felt-to some degree- separated from them. Perhaps a feeling even akin to...alienation?" he finished dramatically.

"We're here" Albus blurted out, moments away from the staircase leading to the top of the tower.

Puckerd smiled smugly, walking alongside him. "The architecture is truly amazing-"

"Professor, do you think that maybe we could discuss the Quidditch team now? I really want to get it out of the way."

Puckerd kept his notepad out, but nodded. "Very well then," he said, his voice suddenly business-like. He pushed his glasses up his nose so that they were plastered to his face. "What needs to be done?"

"Well I was planning on having tryouts as soon as possible, so maybe tomorrow morning-"

"Quite alright" Puckerd said dismissively.

"Okay well...then I also need to let you know that I'll be looking for five new members, and I need your permission to post a bulletin in the common room telling people what spots are available-"

"Fine with me" was Puckerd's sharp reply. "Is that all?"

"Yes" Albus said, his teeth bared. However frustrated his professor was, he thought that he could top it. The conversation had lasted less than a minute. A trip to the Astronomy tower had most certainly not been necessary.

"Well I'm glad that we've gotten things all sorted out then-oh my" he said suddenly, pretending to have just noticed something just off the balcony of the tower.

"What?" Albus said, barely concealing the irritation in his voice.

"The view! Why, I can see the whole grounds!"

Albus gave him a blank expression before turning on his heel. "Well I'm going to head out then; I should probably get started on my Charms-"

"Albus, what are those?" Puckerd asked, almost childlike. He was pointing out onto the grounds near Hagrid's vegetable patch.

Albus sighed and took a look. He saw what Puckerd was staring at immediately. Just a little way off from Hagrid's cabin were two grazing winged beasts, black in color and reptilian in facial structure.

"Those are thestrals" Albus said plainly, and now that he could see them from a distance, he did not think them as frightening as they'd been the night of his return to Hogwarts. "They pull the carriages."

"Thestrals" Puckerd repeated, apparently in awe. "I think I've read something about them before. Aren't they only visible to those who have seen death?"

"Yes" Albus replied, and he knew at once that Puckerd had successfully snared him into a conversation. He had known very well what thestrals were.

"How strange" Puckerd said, and he raised his notepad up slightly. "But you can see them, clearly. Tell me Albus...who have you seen die?"

Albus hesitated. What was going on here? "I- well- during the Hogsmeade massacre a lot of people died. So yeah I saw a few" he said, trying to sound truly disturbed by it.

"But no one in particular?" Puckerd said, his hand practically shaking. "No one with a name worth remembering? Like-for instance- Reginald Ares, former leader of the Dark Alliance?"

"No" Albus lied boldly. He did not know exactly why he lied; he only knew that it felt right to withhold information from his interrogator. "No one like that."

Puckerd began jotting furiously, the pages of his pad flipping so quickly that Albus could feel a breeze.

"Can I ask you something sir?" Albus said, his fists shaking. "What are you writing there?"

Puckerd put a great deal of effort into stabbing the paper for his final period, and then hurriedly stowed the notepad away. "Oh nothing of interest" he said, smiling like a predator that had learned the route of its prey. "Just my own personal notes on the castle; you know, about the magnificent-"

"Architecture" Albus finished for him. "I know."

And with that he stalked off, leaving his professor to admire the scenery by himself. No sooner had he departed from the Astronomy tower did he pull out a withered piece of parchment. A tap of his wand and the Marauder's Map was at his disposal; he had taken to using it to avoid young Quidditch hopefuls in the hallways. He'd rather deal with them on the pitch, when he absolutely had to.

A quick glance at the corner of the Map told him that Mirra was already waiting for him in the library. He took the long way around a group of first year Slytherins that had pestered him the day before, then took a secret passage to right outside of the library. Satisfied, he wiped the parchment blank and went to join Mirra.

"How'd it go?" she said, looking up from a Defence Against the Dark Arts book that she was poring over.

"Well I have Quidditch tryouts all planned out" Albus said, dropping his own bag and sliding into the seat across from her. "Took a whopping five seconds."

"Not bad" she said, wiping a strand of hair from out of her eyes.

"Yeah, but I haven't even gotten started on the rest of the talk yet. He's a sneaky one he is. Always trying to catch me off guard."

She smiled. "So how else have things been?" she said.

Albus opened up a textbook at random, then flipped to a page that he'd never get around to reading. "Not bad" he said. "Just busy. Oh! I didn't tell you, I've gotten a shoddy letter already..."

He briefly explained the situation with the cryptic piece of paper, adding in casually how it had reminded him of the previous year-when he'd received an anonymous letter from Fairhart.

"Weird" Mirra said, scratching at her chin. "I wonder who it's from this time."

Albus frowned but said nothing. Before he could say another word however, something had caught his attention. Two people had just entered the library. Walking side by side and at a matching pace were Lance and Rose. Their hands were clasped tightly and they were chuckling about something. Albus saw Rose look over at them, and he felt his heart skin. They were bound to come over and ruin his alone time with Mirra-

But they didn't. Rose said something to her angelic boyfriend and they both took a table rather far away, immediately removing books from their bags and gluing their faces to them. How strange...

"What's up?" Mirra said, catching his eye and noticing his lack of attention. She turned to see what he was looking at. "Oh..." she said when she'd seen them.

"I could've sworn she saw us" Albus said, flipping the page in his textbook uselessly.

"Probably did" Mirra said, her attention returning to her work. She started scribbling notes. "Rose has actually been kind of distant with me recently though."

"Mmm" was all that Albus could manage. He had a very good idea as to why that might be, but he was not going to say such a thing unless he absolutely had to. Mirra leaned in close and whispered her next sentence.

"Actually-between you and me-I'm starting to think that Lance isn't too fond of me."

"What?" Albus said, sweating now.

"Yeah. It's weird. We got along great last year. I don't know what happened."

Albus tugged at his shirt collar. "Maybe-maybe get him a nice birthday present and see how it goes?"

"His birthday's not until March" she hissed.

"Really? Rose said it was this month..." Albus said thoughtfully, though he realized now that that was probably just a plot to get her boyfriend a gift free of occasion. "Well, either way...just don't worry about it."

"I can't not worry about it!" she said, as loud as a whisper could be. She turned to eye them quickly, then looked back at him. "That's my best friend's boyfriend! She's been so off since the start of term, I can't let it get worse!"

"Lance doesn't have anything against you" Albus said offhandedly. "C'mon, how could he? You're amazing..."

She gave him a light smile, but it quickly turned back to a stern glare.

"That's sweet Al, really, but I'm being serious-"

Albus sighed. "Look, it has nothing to do with Lance, okay?" he said. It felt weird, as he was Scorpius' friend, but he did not want Lance to get a bad rap. He truly had done nothing wrong.

Mirra narrowed her eyes at him, and then closed her book. Albus gulped.

"What do you know?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Albus I'm serious!" she said, and she sounded too angry for his liking. "Do you know why she's been like this?"

Albus tensed up. For some odd reason, he felt as though he'd prefer to be back with Puckerd than where he was now. He did not want to cause a row between Mirra and Rose. At the same time however, he thought that it was a much better idea than letting himself argue with her.

"Well-and this might not even be it! But she's...eh..."

She frowned at him. "Is it because of me and you?" she said. "She feels like I'm trying to snatch her cousin away, doesn't she?"

She looked close to tears.

"No it's not that at all!" Albus quickly protested. "She's just jealous that you got Prefect!"

He paused and strained his ears, as if waiting to hear delicate glass shatter. Instead, he was greeted with silence, and then an exasperated sigh.

"Oh that's ridiculous" Mirra said. "No, I'm sure she was disappointed, but I know that she's happy for me. She told me so on the train."

Albus gave her a wry smile.

"Unless she told you something different" Mirra added.

Albus shrugged. "No. I mean-it's not-it's not like she's mad or anything. She just made a bit of a fuss over not getting Prefect, that's all. Said that- well-"

"Said what?" Mirra said sharply.

Albus wished that he hadn't commented that last part. It truly had been a slip of the tongue. Deciding it would be in his best interest to say it without its original scorn, Albus repeated his cousin's words from the summer.

"She just reckons you got the badge because you do *more than enough*, whereas she only does enough. As in, you know, how great of a worker you are, and how pretty you-"

But Mirra had already risen from her chair, her cheeks red and her grey eyes piercing. She stuffed the chair under the table and marched over to Rose and Lance, quite a few heads turning as she did so. Albus craned his neck and perked up his ears to get a good grasp of what was happening.

Mirra tapped Rose on the shoulder. "Can I talk to you for a moment?" she said, and Rose, looking bemused, followed her over to a corner of the library, leaving a very confused Lance to watch from afar. Albus was forced to do so as well.

They talked in hushed whispers for a few moments, and even though it was hard to catch what they were saying or thinking by facial expressions alone, it looked as if he was in the clear. Albus breathed a sigh of relief in knowing that he'd averted being the cause of a fight. He should have expected it however, he realized. They were girls after all. Girls were good at making up-

"EARNED IT!" came a bellow from the corner, and Albus saw that it was Rose who was yelling, her face now as scarlet as her house colors. "YOU'D HAVE FAILED BY NOW IF IT WASN'T FOR ME!"

The shouting match started. Albus rose from his chair at once, as did Lance, whose astronomically superior looks seemed to have somehow helped him get there faster. He was in Rose's corner in an instant.

"More goes into it than grades Rose!" Mirra yelled back. "Ever think that maybe your attitude is why you didn't get the badge!"

"Catfight!" Albus heard someone yell throughout the library; it sounded uncannily like his brother. He hurried over so that he was now standing by Mirra, ready to steer her away from confrontation.

"No," Rose screeched, "I think that your sad life story is why I didn't get the badge!"

Even Albus, who had said some pretty messed up things in his life, thought that she'd gone too far. He then witnessed Mirra, now in complete shock at what Rose had said, do something that Albus had never seen her do. She raised her hand as if to smack-

Albus caught her by the wrist, then struggled to lower her arm. Wasn't he supposed to be strong?

Rose too looked as if she'd been struck by lightning. "Oh, you want to *raise your hand at me!*" she roared, and she withdrew her wand at once.

"Woah!" Albus said, and he barely noticed that the people in the library were talking adamantly about what was occurring. He withdrew his wand to defend Mirra. It felt strange pointing it at his cousin, though he had to admit, it was almost a dream come true. What happened next was not however. Lance had promptly withdrawn his own wand and pointed it square into Albus' face. He knew that he was going to end up in the Hospital Wing if he proceeded further with a skilled seventh year...

"Alright, everyone calm down" came a voice from the crowd of students that had risen to watch. James, it seemed, had indeed been the one to initially call out. His own wand was drawn, and Albus knew that this would be the deciding factor; his brother's reputation as a skilled duelist preceded any of their own.

"Lance, you're one of my best mates, but jinx my brother and you'll end up in a dustpan. Al, lower your wand, that's your cousin. Rose-you look like a tomato. And put your wand away."

They all lowered their guard, but the argument continued.

"And I'll have you know that I *never* said anything about you doing 'more than enough!'" Rose said scathingly

"Yes you did!" Mirra snapped. "Albus told me!"

She had evidently not seen the gestures he was making; the ones in which he was slashing his finger across his throat to indicate that she keep that part under wraps.

"Why would you believe him over your best friend!" Rose shot out.

"Because he's my *boyfriend!*" Mirra said, and there was a sharp intake of breath from everyone in the library.

Despite the severity of the situation, Albus could not help but smile. That was the first time she'd used that term...

They were all thrown out of the library moments later; the hook nosed and agitated librarian already had something of a vendetta against him anyway, and soon enough the four of them- James had been permitted to stay- had split into pairs and went in separate directions.

"I can not believe her!" Mirra was saying as the two of them marched through the hallways. A second year Slytherin approached him.

"Hey! I heard that there's a lot of open spots-"

"Not now!" Albus growled, and he pulled Mirra closer as they walked down the hallway, not really sure where they were going.

It was amazing how fast news spread. An attack on the castle by the Dark Alliance could be imminent. Waddlesworth was bombarding the newspapers every day. And yet, the confrontation in the library was all that he heard about for the rest of the had asked to be alone a few hours after it had happened, and Albus, checking the map and seeing that Rose was far from the Gryffindor Common Room, had escorted her there. By the time he'd reached his own Common Room to tell Morrison and Scorpius, they had already heard a mangled version of the story.

"You turned Lance's head into a Quaffle!" Scorpius said excitedly.

"What? No..."

"Oh" he said, looking suddenly depressed. "Well at least it's not the other thing we heard..."

"And what's that?"

"That you'd been murdered" Morrison said simply. "So then what really happened?"

Albus explained the entire true story to his friends, all the while hearing those around him blab about the Gryffindor prefect who had tried to fight another friends did not interject until towards the end, Albus' slight smile acting as a signal of permissance.

"And then she said 'because he's my boyfriend' -"

Morrison and Scorpius high fived each other as if it were instinct.

"Nice" Morrison said with a cheeky grin. "When the girl says it, it's official."

But Scorpius' smile had turned to a sudden frown. "Mate...that's bad news" he said.

"What?" Albus said, unsure as to if his friend was joking or not. "How is that bad news?"

Scorpius shook his head. "Because I doubt our house is going to go for that."

Albus scoffed at the idea, but by next morning, he had come to the realization that Scorpius was rarely wrong twice in one week. Having awoke bright and early to get to the Quidditch pitch, Albus had taken his seat at the breakfast table expecting it to be filled to the brim with Quidditch hopefuls. What he found instead was himself sitting at a distance from everyone else. The only students awake-the older ones- were either throwing him dark looks or ignoring him. Inclined to believe that it was the time of day responsible for this anomaly, he headed down to the pitch with a barely filled stomach.

Albus waited on the Quidditch pitch, circling the hoops aimlessly on his state of the art broom for almost an hour before his potential teammates showed up. They came in groups of two or

three, and as he'd expected, they were mostly younger students. Even Scorpius-already a member of the team and expected to be there-didn't show up until later, yawning and wiping at his eyes groggily.

It wasn't until another full hour had passed that it seemed like the majority of hopefuls were there, and Albus, as he walked back and forth surveying them, could not truthfully say that they looked like a promising bunch.

"Okay" he said, clapping his hands and not letting their relatively small size deter him. "We've got a lot of positions open, but that doesn't guarantee anything for anyone. I'm looking to make the best team possible-"

A third year student with curly red hair and a menacing leer raised their hand.

Albus sighed. "Not really sure that warranted a question, but okay..."

The third year cleared his throat. "Is it true you're dating a girl from Gryffindor?"

Scorpius chortled. "Told you mate" he muttered from beside him, supporting himself on his broomstick coolly.

Albus recovered from the question a moment later. "Yes" he said. "And that's irrelevant."

There was some muttering throughout the crowd, and to his immense surprise, a few of the older ones even left.

"Oh now come on!" Albus roared. "Really!"

"Hey less left than I thought" Scorpius chimed in.

Albus turned to him. "I don't get it" he said through gritted teeth. "Why do they care?"

"Your family hasn't been in Slytherin mate" Scorpius said. "They've sheltered you. I've told you before, and I'll say it again. There's bad blood between the lions and the serpents. You dating Mirra makes you the least popular Quidditch Captain in the history of our house."

"But we were already practically together!"

Scorpius shrugged. "But it wasn't official. The youngsters may not care, but you know how teenagers are. Labels are everything."

Albus turned, furious. "Alright, the rest of you, line up according to what position you're trying out for!"

Quidditch tryouts proved to be the most arduous that Albus had ever been to. Almost entirely comprised of first and second year students, Albus was forced to nitpick his way through more

than an hour of poor to mediocre performances. It soon became a decision pertaining not to who had more strengths, but rather, who had the least weaknesses.

"This is ridiculous" Albus said, engaged in low talk with Scorpius over in the corner of the pitch. "Remember the turn out last year?"

"That was before the captain became a complete traitor" Scorpius said sarcastically.

Albus sighed. "Alright, well then let's make do. Which chasers gave you the most trouble?"

"The kid with the bushy eyebrows made me fly to a different hoop once or twice..."

In the end, it proved to be an almost dismal effort. Albus did indeed end up with a full team, but sizing them up one by one, he thought that he and Scorpius would be doing the bulk of the work throughout the year. He had two chasers who were in their second year, a whiny girl named Tiffani Garrett who had successfully swerved a few bludgers, and a rather tall for his age dark skinned boy named Garth Moone. The third chaser was the oldest of the new members, a confident fourth year with dark hair named Barnabus Curder. His two beaters were both boys in their third year who appeared to be best friends. Their names were Yin Luong and Barry Bryant, and neither of them had much talent to boast about.

"Okay, that about wraps it up!" Albus called out. "Team, I'm pleased with what we've got here!" he lied, and the sad thing was, he knew that it was showing on his face. The rest of the students who tried out sulked off the pitch dejectedly, and Albus even heard one of the mutter something along the lines of "house traitor" as they went. Choosing not to let this sting him, Albus dismissed Slytherin's worst team in years and headed back to the castle with Scorpius.

"Well I think that went well" Scorpius said. "I mean, hey, if worst comes to worse we'll just have Morrison fill in a spot."

"I'm not going to shift Morrison around" Albus replied. "He fared well as a reserve Keeper, that's his place. Up for an early lunch?"

He spent most of the day walking around the castle and eating table scraps with Scorpius, in no particular hurry to wake up Morrison and ruin his sleep. Albus did his best to avoid angry stares from his housemates as they meandered around, though he did take a great deal of notice from the looks coming from Gryffindors. Many of them seemed just as irate as Slytherins, only Albus knew his status as Quidditch Captain would not protect him from these people. He wondered if Mirra was going through the same thing.

"So," Scorpius started, nibbling toast as they strolled around the lake, "any word on the whole Rose situation yet?"

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Which one? Yours or Mirra's?"

"Both."

Albus shrugged. "They're best friends, I'm sure they'll get over it. There will be some really loud apologizing, some crying, a couple hugs, you know how girls are..."

"Ah" Scorpius said with a nod of his head. Before he could ask his next question however, Albus had already addressed it.

"Rose and Lance seem to be going strong" he added, avoiding eye contact with his friend.
"*Really strong.*"

Scorpius nodded once more. "I know that she's crazy about the guy" he said, staring into the lake as he spoke. "But that doesn't mean that she loathes me, you know? I mean, we get along..."

Albus sighed. He did not want crush Scorpius' feelings, but he knew that his friend was very clever and equally observant. Albus had seen nothing from Rose that would lead him to believe that she had feelings for Scorpius, and he knew that once Scorpius gave up hope on the matter, it would become all too obvious to him as well. At the same time, however, he had no interest in stringing him along.

"Well I thought it was shot between me and Mirra, remember?" Albus said. "When she was with Eckley? So there's *always* a chance, somewhere down the line. But...I don't know. Rose has a boyfriend, and you can only really have one of those. But she has plenty of room for friends. Maybe...just step it up a bit as a friend? If nothing changes then nothing changes-and don't expect it to- but apart from that, I mean..."

He trailed off there, positive that he had good advice to give, but unsure of how to articulate it. Scorpius nodded in understanding however.

"But how would I go about doing that?" he asked. "Being a better friend? I barely talk to her unless we're all huddled up together, and with Mirra and Rose not talking-"

"Well," Albus cut him off, "they're not talking currently. They will. Until then...maybe you should let Rose know which side you're on, between her and Mirra."

Now it was Scorpius who had his eyebrows raised. "But I really kind of agree with Mirra..."

Albus smiled. "But you don't have to tell Rose that. I doubt Mirra will mind, I'll fill her in."

Scorpius smiled, and soon after, the subject abruptly changed to classes. It wasn't until the afternoon when they finally met up with a disheveled Morrison, and the rest of an otherwise eventful Sunday went towards the agonizingly boring chores of studying and catching up on the entire week's worth of homework. Like many fifth years, it wasn't until midnight that they were fully finished studying, but Albus and Scorpius, having had Quidditch tryouts to deal with

earlier, were still the last to put their books away. Alongwith Morrison, the three of them sat huddled around the fire, shuffling parchment and screwing ink bottles shut in silence.

"Well I'm just about ready to head back to bed" Morrison said with a yawn as he closed an unread textbook and rolled up half completed Charms homework.

"Me too" Albus said, yawning himself and calculating in his head how little sleep he'd get if he passed out on his bed the second that he went up to his dormitory. With a shudder, he realized that he had Puckerd to deal with the next day. "Didn't even start my Herbology homework either. I'll throw something together tomorrow night; Neville will let me slide..."

"That kind of thinking, young man, will do you no good in your O.W.L year" came a brisk voice from somewhere in the room.

Albus blinked slowly in confusion, then opened his eyes and jumped back in fright, as did his friends. There, in the fireplace, was his father's floating head.

"You three should be in bed" he said firmly.

"Dad!" Albus said, crawling closer to the fire. "What are you doing here?"

The last time he'd seen such a thing was in his second year, in which Uncle Ron had done the same thing to have a quick discussion with him about an important matter. Was his father here for a similar reason?

"Hello boys" his father said quickly to Scorpius and Morrison, and they both muttered it back. "And to answer your question, Albus, I'm actually doing what no father should ever be doing; hoping that his son is okay with staying up late on a school night to have a chat."

"I am" Albus said quickly, turning to his friends. They both nodded.

His father grinned. "I know it's late, I'll try and make this quick. I would have popped my head in earlier, but I didn't want anyone else to hear this. I suppose I'm very lucky to have only found the ears of you and your friends. To be blunt, I'm here for a little status update. How was your first week as Wendell Puckerd's personal chaperone?"

"So you know about that" Albus said blandly.

"Indeed I do. Headmistress McGonagall alerted me of it as soon as it happened. I commend you for handling it so well; a refusal to comply may have been disastrous."

"So it couldn't have been avoided, huh?" Albus asked him.

His father shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Such a thing would have looked too suspicious. Do not be fooled by his role as a professor or Head of House. Puckerd, though by no means hopeless with a cauldron as I've heard, is not quite worthy of either title. Janine Fischer has planted him in

such a position to give him a good opportunity to exhibit control of the students. How is he faring, by the way?"

Albus shrugged, but it was Scorpius who answered.

"He's teaching" he said. "But apart from that, he seems determined on making friends with everyone. Said so the first night here, gave us a personality test and everything..."

Albus' father sighed. "Yes, I figured he'd take the polite route. There's something you should know, Albus" he added, turning back to his son.

"And what's that?"

"That I understand your situation" his father said knowingly. "As highly coincidental as it seems, my fifth year at Hogwarts was also marred by Ministry interference. That being said however, I think we have found ourselves on two entirely different sides of the field."

"How so?" Albus asked, not sure what his father was getting at.

"Because you see, the Ministry interfered during my time to gather information on the school, including the way it was run and degree to which we were taught. Janine Fischer knows that Hogwarts is functioning properly. Her main goal is, as I'm sure you've deduced, to extract information from those closest to me. As in, you."

"But what about James!" Albus blurted out. "And Lily!"

"The thought did occur to me" his father said with a glum look. "But I think that you have more to worry about than they do. Lily is too young; they will not expect her to have much information regarding me. And James is too old. They will assume him to be much too clever and far too involved with his final year here to be of much help. You, however, are a very juicy piece of bait. They expect you to be stressed due to your first year in which major testing is done, filled with angst due to the point in your adolescence, and easier to capture alone due to your house. You have no family in Slytherin to turn to at a moment's notice. Additionally, they know you are prone to doing and saying things without putting much thought into it; the situation in Diagon Alley proved that much. And to cap it all off, these things *do* always seem to happen to only you, don't they?"

Albus nodded while his friends chortled. "So then what am I dealing with here?" Albus asked. "Just an entire year of being badgered with questions about you?"

"Doubtful" his father said. "Though Puckerd will have to keep up his charade, he can use it rather advantageously. Scorpius, you mentioned personality tests?" he said, turning to him.

Scorpius nodded, waiting to see where it went.

"Puckerd, it would seem, is going to try and establish connections between his students. I'd be willing to bet a very large portion of my Gringotts vault that he is attempting to learn who is a friend and who is a foe to you, Albus. Both can be used effectively. He will no doubt use the ones not fond of you to learn things which will give him leverage over you, and your friends, I'm sorry to say, may ended up being interrogated just as you are, under the same cheery pretenses of course."

He then eyed both Scorpius and Morrison.

"This means that you two may have some questions to answer in the future. I will hold no grudges regardless of your answers, but I can only ask politely that you keep what you know of me to yourselves."

"Sure thing Mr. P!" Morrison said, giving two thumbs up. Scorpius nodded as well.

Albus' father smiled. "Good to know. Albus, I hate keeping you up so long, but I was curious, is there anything in *particular* that Puckerd has asked you about?"

Albus thought for a moment, but then smiled at a sudden realization. This question stirred something in him. "I'm your spy, aren't I dad?"

His father gave him a curious look. "An interesting term" he said.

Albus moved even closer to the fire, his smile now fixed on his father's face. "Fischer has Puckerd talking to me to get information on you. And you...you have me talking to him to get information on her! If you know what questions she has him asking, then you know exactly what it is she wants to know!"

His father gave him a toothy smile. "A Slytherin indeed, Albus. Though I think that calling you a 'spy' is a little harsh. No, you're at perfect liberty to deny me any information. I've already said that I will not treat you as a child who isn't allowed to know what's going on. If you choose to keep Puckerd's questions to yourself, then feel free."

Albus smirked. "Well I don't" he said. "But honestly, there's nothing in particular. He's really just tried to bring up basic stuff, like how often you're home, or if you were in Slytherin. Except-well-there is one thing" he added thoughtfully.

"Oh?"

"He asked me if I saw how Ares died" Albus said. "Kind of an odd question..."

But his father had already groaned. "Damn" he said. "Going in that direction."

Albus stared hungrily into the fire. "What direction?"

"If there's one way to attack someone in the government, Albus, it's to use the law against them. There's nothing more incriminating."

Albus scratched at his head. "I still don't-"

But it was Scorpius who blurted it out. "They want to make you out as a murderer!"

Albus' father gave him a wry smile.

"Correct, Scorpius. That is exactly what they want to do."

Albus didn't quite register this. "Wait-what-"

"Reginald Ares' death was a welcome step in the war against the Dark Alliance" his father said. "Many people seemed to think that such a blow would have everything over and done with. Darvy's new position as the big bad boss has led some to doubt Ares' actual standing as a powerful leader. There are very few people Albus-only a handful of Ministry members outside of our family, in fact- who know that Ares was the more powerful and more intelligent of the two brothers. Because the danger has only increased since his death, the public and Fischer's half of the Ministry seem to be under the impression that Darvy was always the true threat; that Ares was a puppet. This makes his death less of a necessity and more of a casualty. Suddenly, his murderer was not quite in the right."

"But you didn't kill him!" Albus said. "It was Darvy!"

"I know who it was" his father said simply. "But no one is going to believe that, even on the word of me and your uncle, especially since Waddlesworth is bragging that it was a member of WAR who did it. If this is disproven, it would naturally be a Ministry member accused next. Incidentally, what did you tell him?"

"I said I didn't see anything" Albus said.

His father smiled. "I feel terrible condoning lying, but that was probably the best answer to give. The less that they know about Ares' death, the better."

Albus nodded, but Waddlesworth's name had flicked something on inside of his head. "And dad, Waddl-"

"Under surveillance" his father cut him off. "We've found nothing yet, but I have not ignored your story. You say that you saw Waddlesworth in Diagon Alley, and that's enough for me to believe that he's up to something. All that his innocence has proven thus far is that whatever he is doing, he's being very, very secretive about it."

Albus heaved a deep sigh, allowing the information that he'd gathered to sink in. It was strange, how he and his father were talking now. It had been years since they'd had a full, legitimately honest conversation. With the truth on his mind, he spoke his next words.

"I can't stand Puckerd" he said. "It's only the first week and he's already hit my last nerve! When will we be rid of him and Fischer?"

His father gave him a stern look. "Try not to harbor too much animosity towards them, Albus. They are our allies."

Albus' jaw dropped. "They're picking at me for scraps of information-"

"Because they believe that doing so will get rid of me, and allow them to focus on other things. Janine Fischer and I have a very big dispute on our hands, the source of all this trouble. Our dual roles as Head Auror was meant to both organize and appease the public, but alas, it's never that simple. Fischer believes that the Renegade movement is our primary problem. Get rid of the Renegades, and the Ministry can put all of their efforts towards the Dark Alliance. In addition, Waddlesworth is, to this day, taking more and more people away from the Ministry and into his own realm of thought. Fischer believes Waddlesworth to be the most prudent dilemma here; she sees him as both an obstacle in the way of Darvy as well as a threat to the structure of the Ministry."

"And you don't agree?" Albus asked, unwilling to admit it, but still somewhat in agreement with what had been said.

"On no, I do" his father said. "But I believe that Darvy is the bigger threat. It will take Waddlesworth a great deal of time and effort, in addition to a large amount of well crafted speeches before the Ministry of Magic no longer has supporters. We do not have that much time with Darvy. His unpredictability makes every potential threat seem imminent. Conceivably, he could launch an attack tomorrow. It's a judgment call. I'd rather deal with Darvy first and Waddlesworth later, and she the opposite. Notice, however, that we both have the same intentions. Only I'm not going to waste my time trying to frame her for murder" he added thoughtfully.

Albus nodded. His father gave him a warm look.

"I understand your frustration Albus, I really do. But I see no reason to be rude to Puckerd; only firm. We are all interested in the safety of our loved ones. So long as we keep that in common, we have no reason to fight amongst one another. I know I'm asking a lot of you Albus, I do. But I can only hope that you understand the importance of your actions now. Acting abrasively will only hinder what we have here."

Albus nodded once more. He understood completely, even if he didn't like it.

"And on that note Albus," his father started, "I think we've discussed all that needs to be discussed. I appreciate your help here. Your help *and* your maturity."

"Dad wait!" Albus said, for his father had seemed like he was on the verge of leaving. "One thing, real quick. I-erm- I got a letter."

He heard Morrison topple over; Scorpius slapped his hand to his forehead. Albus didn't care though, they'd been honest all night, and he had no intention of omitting anything.

"A letter?" his father said. "From who?"

"That's just the thing" Albus said. "It was just-hold on-"

He tore through his books until he found what was already a decrepit piece of parchment; he'd read it several times in an attempt to gather meaning from it. He held it up so that his father could read it. As he stuffed it back into one of his books, he saw an expression of complete bewilderment on his father's face.

"That some kind of neat puzzle?" his father asked.

"I have no idea what it is" Albus told him.

"It's trash" Scorpius added, though Albus saw that his father was staring thoughtfully.

"At first glance the odd writing would make it seem to be some sort of warning. But if that were the case, then the person writing it would have to be very poor at warning people indeed. Delivered by owl?"

"A regular tawny, from what I heard" Albus said. "It came late one day..."

"Interesting" his father said. "Do *you* have any idea who it's from, Albus?"

"I-well-no, I don't. But last year I got a letter from someone, and it was unsigned."

"Like this one?"

"No, it was better written. And it-and it turned out to be Fairhart."

There was an uncomfortable silence following this, the crackling of the fire the only thing indicating that time was moving at all. After a moment however, he could hear Morrison and Scorpius muttering behind him. He paid them no mind; he was staring too intensely at his father. He was wearing an expression of sadness, as if he was not sure how to say his next words without hurting his son's feelings.

"Well Al-"

"I know" Albus cut him off before he could get much further. "I know."

His father nodded, frowning. "I'd put it away from your thoughts right now. If you get another one, or new information regarding it arises, let me know and we'll see what we can figure out. For now, keep to your studies, and try and maintain a cool head around Puckerd, okay?"

Albus nodded, knowing that the conversation was now over. Strangely, however, he saw Morrison motioning with his fingers, as if making a ring around one of them. Slightly confused at first, Albus solved it as his father made to speak once more.

"Oh, and dad, one more thing!" he said. "Morrison's sister is getting married in December, and we've been invited to the wedding! So..."

His father smiled. "We'll make arrangements. For now, get some sleep. I'm afraid I don't have enough pull with the teachers at Hogwarts to let you nap through class."

"Okay" Albus said, and he and his friends all stood up, ready to put out the fire once he left.

"Have a good night, Albus. You too, boys" his father said.

"Good night" they all chorused back.

"Oh, and Albus?" his father added quickly, just as his head started to vanish from sight.

"Congratulations on the new girlfriend. Same one right? Neville told me. I hear that she's way out of your league too. Well done..."

And with one last cheeky smile, his father's head had disappeared. Seconds later, the fire had been extinguished, engulfing them in complete darkness.

Chapter 8: The Beacon Of Light

Albus kept a smile on his face through his next Potions lessons. Having taken his father's advice to heart, he knew that a great deal depended on his ability to remain stoic when around his snarky new professor. This did not, however, make the lessons anymore tedious.

They were certainly brewing potions, but whether or not they were learning anything was up for debate. Professor Puckerd seemed keen on only doing enough to claim that he was actually deserving of the new job. The actual coursework never varied in difficulty, and was only thrown in at seemingly impromptu moments to keep them on their toes. The rest of each class was designed to allocate time towards strange tests that, like the original, were supposed to give a good idea as to the personality of each student.

"Remember" Puckerd announced in their tenth or eleventh lesson. "If you are even *remotely* vehement about your answer, write 'strongly' before either 'agree' or 'disagree'. And of course, while 'does not understand' is a viable answer, exert your efforts in to the questions that you are absolutely positive of."

Albus rolled his eyes as he wrote his eleventh 'does not understand' straight. He glanced over at Mirra's paper and noticed that she had not even bothered to take this particular test. She was doodling absentmindedly. He flashed her a weak smile, which she returned.

She was still fighting with Rose. As far as Albus knew they had not talked personally since their battle in the library, though he knew that they had created a way to communicate outside of this.

"How's it feel to be the most used owl in the history of Hogwarts?" he asked Scorpius on a Saturday in which his friend had been asked by Rose to deliver a message to Mirra. Albus had secured him this position, having specifically told Mirra that Scorpius was the right man for the job, and Scorpius, after the initial trip to Rose, had been used by both of them ever since.

He took a large swig of pumpkin juice and wiped beads of sweat from his eyebrows. He had just ran from the library, where Rose was, to the Great Hall where Mirra had just been for the eighth time straight.

"I'm liking it" he said, gasping for air. "Gives me a chance to offer my opinion to Rose. So far, she reckons I'm right on track with why she's right about everything."

Albus grinned. "Well take the day off tomorrow; we've got practice."

As September shifted itself into October, Albus could not help but have anxiety bubble up in the pit of his stomach about the first match of the season. Though Quidditch could be seen as almost trivial in a time where dark forces were being rallied outside of the castle and the interior was subject to constant testing, it served as a reminder to Albus on just how much it affected both loyalty and popularity. He was still receiving dark looks from his fellow Slytherins due to the

fact that he was dating a Gryffindor, though he knew that if there was one redeemable thing he could do, it was capture the Snitch and give his house a big lead in the House Cup standings. Sadly though, Albus thought he could feel that thought slip through his fingers during his team's third practice.

"No, aim for me!" he barked at Barry Bryant, who stopped in mid-air, unsure as to why he was being yelled at.

"Why?" he replied, nonplussed. "Tiffani was nearly about to beat the Keeper-"

"Was not!" Scorpius yelled from yards away.

"But I was *this* close to nabbing the Snitch!" Albus said sternly. When you have a choice, you stop the Seeker. That goal would have been irrelevant if the game had ended beforehand."

Bryant scoffed and flew away to go chasing after another Bludger. Albus had already spotted two major faults in his new team, even outside of size and experience. For starters, they didn't think properly under pressure and tended to treat every thing as if it could be fixed. For another, they were all bratty little buggers who hated being told what to do.

"I don't get it" Albus said, hovering towards Scorpius as he watched his Beaters practice knocking his Chasers out of the sky. "I got put on the team second year and I did everything Atticus told me to. Never raised my voice or rolled my eyes once!"

"Yeah, but you're forgetting mate" Scorpius said, leaning back on his broomstick and cringing as Garth collided with Tiffani. "Atticus wasn't snogging a Gryffindor."

Even with Quidditch practices being less than ideal and Puckerd throwing his tests at them at an alarming rate ("He'll be giving us the old inkblot next, you just wait!" Bartleby Bing had said) Albus found that his romantic life was somehow improving. He had initially thought that Mirra's responsibilities as a Prefect would keep them from seeing each other outside of classes, but all that happened from these instances apart was that they seemed to grow more and more eager to see one another. They were scheduling time together at every possible moment, and much to Albus' delight, he found that he could do so in front of Gryffindors without much annoyance.

"Any idea why that is?" Albus asked her as they sat in the library, all of their books put away. They were surrounded by people dressed in Gryffindor colors, though no one was paying them any mind as they conversed.

"James" Mirra said at once. "A couple days ago someone made a comment about us being together, and James gave him tentacles for arms. I get the feeling it was really a warning to others though; he doesn't want his last year here marred by having to deal with that."

Albus nodded, smiling at how even in his last year at Hogwarts, his brother was still defending him. An errant thought crossed his mind.

"Do you think that Rose is insulting us?" he asked.

"I haven't heard of it" Mirra admitted. "But then again, I stay pretty clear of her these days. If she is, we'll only hear about it through Scorpius."

As if on cue, Albus saw that they were about to get their opportunity. Scurrying towards them was Scorpius, looking winded.

"Hello" Albus said cheerfully as his friend screeched to a halt; Mirra was playing with her fingers in anticipation.

"So?" she asked.

"Rose says," he started, breathing heavily, "that it's not even just an apology on having tried to hit her that she wants, she also wants an apology for having believed Albus instead of her. And also, she said that she hopes you're-erm-having fun failing your way through Charms without her notes to copy off of."

Mirra opened her mouth in shock. "Well you tell her that not only will she get neither of those apologies, but that I expect an apology for the way she didn't even have the nerve to straight up tell me why she was angry with me, in addition for how stupid she was for being angry with me for being a superior student anyway! *And*, tell her that I'm doing just fine in Charms, but I do hope that she manages to pass History of Magic without peering over my shoulder during a test!"

"Will do" Scorpius said, saluting her and then hurrying back through the library.

"And tell her that Albus is a better kisser than Lance!" Mirra called loudly, and several people turned their heads at this. Scorpius waved over his head to confirm that he'd heard.

"Wait what?" Albus said, caught off guard. "How-how do you even know that?"

"I don't" she said. "Come on Al, I'm just trying to get under her skin."

While Mirra battled with Rose, Albus felt his own battles brewing, and not with any particular person either, bar perhaps his new professor. No, the effort that he typically would have exerted on quibbling with someone like Eckley had been channeled instead to his most exhausting opponent yet: O.W.L. year. There wasn't a single class that Albus could truly use as a break. Hagrid had begun showing them Thestrals, which, in addition to be terrifying creatures, had enough information about them to fill up several pieces of parchment, which Albus did indeed do. Muggle Studies, which Albus had hoped would not have changed, went through a drastic transformation. After a month of studying it, Albus was being forced to do physical work; just last week he had to successfully build a new desk with a variety of muggle tools. His slanted piece of architecture made it very difficult to take the test given afterwards.

One class that Albus was strangely looking forward to each week was Transfiguration. He had never been able to make such a statement in his entire life, but as he slowly improved, he could not help but feel pride in each class that he successfully struggled through.

"Well done, Potter" Professor Bellinger said sharply, eyeing the piece of paper that he'd transformed into a cardboard flap. He was by no means the first to do it, but he *had* done it in the required amount of time.

"I don't know what's going on" he replied to her, amazed at his own work and sparing a glance towards Scorpius', who's looked virtually identical.

"I do" she replied. "It's because you've been practicing."

Professor Handit, their carefree and whimsical Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, had amped up his lessons as well. It seemed to be an unspoken agreement of sorts between him and the students that the defensive magic that they'd be learning was now more prudent than ever, and so, they had passed from mere jinxes to things of a more malevolent nature: curses and hexes

"The Bat-Bogey Hex" he announced one day. "One of the most effective spells to add to your arsenal, due to both the frustration inflicted to your victim as well as the difficulty of saying the counter curse. It is, you see, extremely hard to speak with things flapping around your face."

Once they mastered the Bat-Bogey Hex, he said they would move on to other curses meant to specifically designate body parts, including the Conjunctivitis Curse and the Sciatica Hex. The students also learned that something usually intended to be handled in sixth year would also be taught following the winter break.

"Nonverbal spells" Professor Handit said. "A key ingredient to making a competent duelist. Half of a second can make the difference in a contest of wands, and as we think much faster than we speak, nonverbal magic is an invaluable tool. Fret not-it is passed O.W.L standard and thus you will not be tested on it-but the Headmistress believes that moving it up half of a year is-erm-wise."

The class looked around at one another with a slight feeling of both unease and excitement at this. Albus knew that it was the desire of many to learn this skill, but at the same time, most of them were probably hoping that they would not have to use it so soon.

As each class progressed in its difficulty, the associated workload increased to match the time needed to be spent on it. Indeed, Albus found that his least amount of homework given for any class was for that of Potions. Albus, however, was in a separate category. Puckerd still had him on a leash of sorts; able to pull back and bring him forth when necessary. Just a few days ago Albus had been robbed of a particularly sweet moment with Mirra by the lake when Puckerd had needed assistance in finding a relatively accessible room on the fourth floor, a two minute walk that somehow stretched itself into a ten minute conversation about whether or not Albus believed

that the public had too much influence over the Ministry. And just a few days prior to that, Albus had been requested by Puckerd to meet him in his office to have a brief chat about the history of the Slytherin common room, a talk that lasted a good fifteen seconds before Voldemort, and eventually his father's reputation, had been brought up.

This personal battle seemed to be one that Albus was incapable of winning, and this, more so than perhaps anything else this year, was his greatest source of irritation. He had become fully accustomed to seeing Puckerd smirk at him superciliously from the high table every morning at breakfast; a falsely cheery wave indicating that he was very pleased with their friendship indeed.

One day, however, towards the middle of October, Albus was not greeted with this sight. Having awoken just a tad bit later than most would on a Saturday morning, Albus had trudged his way to breakfast with every intention of mustering a cold glare as soon as he was seated. The entire Hall, however, was buzzing with noise. And Puckerd, he noticed, was looking very surly indeed. His eyes remained unfixed from his porridge.

"What's going on?" Albus asked both of his friends, wiping at his eyes and reaching for a plate of sausage links. "What's everyone talking about it?"

"You really need to start waking up earlier" Scorpius said, and Albus noted that he had the *Daily Prophet* opened up, strangely in place of where a textbook would be on the table.

"And why's that?" Albus practically yelled, for the obstreperousness of the four tables combined was now impairing his hearing.

Morrison, who had been having a chat with Melonie, turned to him. "Because the *Prophet's* got big news this morning" he said with a grin. "Go on, see for yourself."

Albus slid the newspaper over, taking care to perch it up against his glass of orange juice perfectly. He expected the article in question to not be immediately recognizable-his initial thought was that there had been a jab at his father in there somewhere- but what he saw instead made him raise his eyebrows higher than he had all year.

Silver Wizard Strikes Again; Four Renegades Found Bound And Unconscious, One Dead

Last week reports surfaced about three unnamed wizards, confirmed to be members of Sebastian Darvy's Dark Alliance, being found just on the outskirts of the wizarding dwelling Chansley, bound by magical ropes and looking severely beaten. After being identified by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and sent to Azkaban to await trial, members of the Department sought to find the captor, though the only evidence that they managed to procure was the testimony of a village resident who had been taking out the trash at the time.

"Don't know what they were doin' here" said Jacob Divinrod, 22. "I saw them, recognized the masks from the pictures I'd seen of the Hogsmeade Massacre, and hid right behind a dumpster,

doin' my best to stay quiet, you know? And then I heard noise-yelling-spells being fired, and when my curious got the best of me I went an' I saw and there he was; a man, dressed head to toes in silver robes and wearin' a silver mask that looked like a old right rip off of theirs. They were all on the floor, groaning when I saw them. He waved his wand and they were all bound up with these thick heavy ropes and...and that was that. I ran and informed the Ministry right away."

The widely disputed eye witness account fell under harsh scrutiny and was soon commonly accepted to be an embellishment of a story of vigilante justice meant to spread and inspire. This does not seem to be the case however. Just hours ago, shortly after midnight in fact, Ministry members were called to the scene of a battle in Drysburg, another mostly Wizarding dwelling not far off from the rebuilt Hogsmeade. Members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement found five more bodies, one unmistakably dead, the other four bound and unconscious just as the Dark Alliance members had been. Numerous witnesses reported seeing the same thing; a figure dressed in all silver.

"I heard it from my bed" says Tyler Crock, 9. "It woked me up. I looked outside and all I saw was flashes, and I went and told my mum and by the time we was both back at the window all we could see was someone standing, in all silver, and the others was all on the ground, not even moving."

This second sighting of the Silver Wizard has ended the reports of exaggerated stories and has instead been taken seriously by the Auror Office. Co-Head Auror Janine Fischer had this to say:

"The newer victims have all been identified as members of Wands and Redemption, which, as we all know, is the largest syndicated organization of Renegades in the world. It is important to note, however, that the act that took place last night was also an act of vigilantism. The murder seems to be accidental; veritas serum has already been administered to the Renegades and we have learned that it was astray Killing Curse fired by one of them that missed its intended target. Despite this, however, there is no denying that this 'Silver Wizard' character is responsible for the entire engagement. I advise everyone to heed caution and to not help propagate the story of a hero concealed in mystery. I have already heard someone claim that the Silver Wizard is a 'beacon of light' in these dark times. Do not be manipulated by the pull of the unknown. This masked menace is a dangerous Renegade, and we have every intention of finding and capturing him."

Fischer declined to comment further, especially to questions as to why the Renegades were still in custody, as there is no proof that they themselves took place in any vigilante activity and that there is no law against merely supporting the idea. Comments of criticism have already been made towards Fischer's remarks however, by both the public and well known Ministry figures.

"Ms. Fischer's comments are unfounded and biased" says Amos Diggory, now retired. Diggory is a former Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, though

he is also known for having briefly served as a member of the Wizengamot before his retirement. "The term 'Renegade' is thrown around too carelessly here. Both groups of men were not attacked and bound because of their status; it was done because whoever the Silver Wizard is, they took it upon themselves to exact the justice that the Ministry was incapable of. What were those three Dark Alliance members doing there? Would anyone have even cared to stop them, if not for this 'masked menace'? Likewise, the members of WAR were clearly up to no good, otherwise they would not have been singled out and attacked. The Silver Wizard seems to act not off of their own beliefs, but off of what is unanimously perceived as injustice. Renegade? No. Auror who's not being paid? Absolutely."

Those who deem the Silver Wizard's actions to be typical of a Renegade however have wondered about the motivation behind the second attack and, by all accounts, informal arrest. Though some have suggested that the Silver Wizard is a member of Wands and Redemption, this had been reportedly denied. Though Warren Waddlesworth was unavailable for direct comment, his official statement is out: "The Silver Wizard has no relation to Wands and Redemption whatsoever."

For more eyewitness accounts, see page 6. For the full interview with Amo-

Albus looked up from the paper at this point, grinning ear to ear.

"People dying gets you all cheery, I see" Scorpius said blandly, taking the paper back.

Albus frowned quickly. "I'm not smiling at that. I'm smiling at the Silver Wizard."

"Didn't know you two were best mates" Morrison chimed in, and Melonie giggled.

"We're not" Albus said smugly. "But Puckerd and Fischer don't seem to like him, and that makes him alright by me."

It seemed to be alright by the rest of the school as well. Over the course of the weekend the only discussion amongst students was tied to the newspaper article. It was interesting, Albus thought, how suddenly interested everyone was in Ministry affairs, though after thinking more deeply on it he realized that he could see the allure as well. What people seemed to like most about the mysterious vigilante was just that-that he was mysterious.

"He's probably really cute" Denise Toils piped up in the common room Sunday afternoon.

"Then why wear a mask?" Dante Haug said.

"It's about identity" Scorpius said coolly, looking up from his book. He was trying to copy Muggle Studies notes, but the ado of the general area was making it impossible. "What if he pulls off his mask and he ends up being some bloke who used to be in Azkaban? There goes all the positive attention. And he's already got enemies, with Darvy's lot and WAR. If people knew who he was, his family could be in danger. A wife, kids-"

"You've put a lot of thought into this" Albus cut him off, and there was some murmur of agreement amongst the Slytherins.

Morrison pointed at Scorpius, looking panic stricken. "It's him! It's the Silver Wizard!"

People laughed, but Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Look, I just know how things work. Trust me, if they ever do catch this guy, he's going to be someone with a lot to lose."

"If it's a guy" Morrison said knowingly. "We don't know anything about this person other than that they put most Aurors to shame. No offense" he added in Albus' direction, who shrugged.

"Oh I'm sorry" Bartleby Bing threw in to Morrison, lying upside down in an armchair. "I must've misread the article. Didn't realize that it said Silver *Witch*."

"No one knows what gender they are!" Morrison said fiercely, but with a light tone. "It could be either; 'Wizard' is just a placeholder name, you steaming pile of dung!"

There were more laughs, but they died down as quickly as they'd started. There had been an odd noise from the corner of the Common Room, and upon looking, Albus saw what it was. One of the first year boys that had tried out for the Quidditch team was trying to pin a notice to the top of the bulletin board.

"What are you doing!" Scorpius barked sharply, and he held out his chest pompously to show his shiny badge.

"I'm trying to post something!" the boy spat out.

Scorpius rose up and strode over to him. "Give me that," he said, making a grab for the notice.

"Professor Puckerd told me that I had to post that bulletin!"

Scorpius made another snatch for it, and this time managed to nab it. Albus, also interested, approached them as well. Together, he and Scorpius read the notice to the rest of the Common Room.

"Hello students" they both started blandly, ignoring an exclamation point. "This is professor Puckerd writing to inform you at that we are at a pivotal point in our journey to friendship. I now feel that I know enough about you all to sit down with you each personally and engage in casual conversation. Thus, I will be randomly selecting one person each week to come and meet with me at a requested time so that we may get to know each other better. Look out at breakfast-you may be the first lucky one to get my owl."

They all groaned, and Albus actually re-read it in his head, anger bubbling up in the pit of his stomach.

"Is he doing that with all houses or just ours?" a third year asked.

"Most likely just Slytherin to start" Scorpius said, sitting back down and getting back to his notes. The conversation around them continued, but Albus was much too preoccupied with his own thoughts on the notice to throw in his own two cents.

Randomly selected.

He sighed at the thought of this term, knowing full well that it translated to "Albus". This struck him as odd however. Puckerd already had him in his grasp. He could have requested a personal audience at any given time. Why go through all of this?

Three of the four houses continued to talk about the Silver Wizard over the course of the next week, each day beginning with anxious looks at the *Prophet's* front page, followed by annoyed grunts. Slytherin House, however, had other things to worry about. Each day the sound of fluttering owls made them drop their forks and look up wildly; Albus knew that not a single person was eager to spend casual time with Puckerd. For the first four days, mail time went accordingly, with no additional owls dropping off letters. On Friday, however, such a thing did indeed occur. Albus watched as a handsome, overly large barn owl circled above their table, inching closer and closer to where he sat. He groaned loudly. Just as he'd expected-

The letter dropped, falling, not in front of him, but in front of Scorpius. Albus instinctively snatched it up, surprised, but then allowed his jaw to drop at the name written on it. *Scorpius Malfoy*. Albus looked up at Puckerd. He was grinning down at the Slytherin table.

"Open it up!" everyone in the vicinity hissed.

Scorpius did so, taking care to open the envelope properly so as not to ruin anything. As the letter unfolded in front of him, Albus leaned forward, reading it over his shoulder. Written in neat, cramped handwriting, it said:

Scorpius,

Hello! This is your Potions Master, writing to inform you that you have been the first student selected to get to know your Head of House a little better with some one-on-one time! I understand that you have Prefect duties and are undoubtedly busy with your studies, but I do feel that this is a great opportunity for the both of us! I do not expect to take up much of your time. Please report to the Potions classroom immediately after dinner, I can promise you, it will be worth your while!

Sincerely,

Wendell T. Puckerd

Potions Master

Head of Slytherin House

"Bad luck mate" Morrison said, shaking his head and looking gloomy. Melonie Grue patted Scorpius on the back.

"It has nothing to do with luck" Scorpius said, and Albus nodded, knowing exactly what he meant.

They didn't dare say anything further in front of the rest of the Slytherins, but as they had Herbology first, the walk down to the greenhouses gave them a chance to discuss things.

"My dad said that this would happen" Albus said. "Remember? Telling you guys to look out?"

They both nodded, but it was Scorpius who added a new point to it. "But why now?" he asked. "What's the catalyst? Maybe this Silver Wizard business has Puckerd eager for more information?"

"What the heck are we supposed to know about that?" Morrison said.

"Well I'll tell you guys everything he says" Scorpius said. "Hopefully I can just grunt my way through most of it..."

"No" Albus said, thinking carefully. "I have an idea."

The entire day's worth of classes passed by extraordinarily quickly, even Puckerd's, which, suspiciously, was absent of an asinine test. Albus suspected that this had a great deal to do with his eagerness to get to Scorpius' interview, an eagerness that he matched. He did, however, find the time to talk to Mirra before lunch, and right as dinner was going to start he'd managed to meet her in the library as well.

"Did you get them?" he asked.

Mirra looked over her shoulders, and Albus noted how pretty she looked when she was being secretive. Turning back to him, she withdrew a bundle of flesh colored string from her robes.

"James says not to bother with giving them back, you can have them" she said, thrusting the Extendable Ears into his hands. He jammed the contraband into his pockets quickly.

"Really? How many does he have?"

"No idea" she said. "I told him that you said you needed to borrow some, and he whipped them right out of his pocket right then and there. Didn't ask questions or anything..."

"Works for me" Albus said, smiling.

"And what's all this for again?" Mirra asked, lowering her voice.

"Puckerd's interviewing Scorpius today after dinner. I plan on eavesdropping."

"Why?" she said, confused.

"My dad reckons that there's a lot to be learned from the questions he's asking. But I have the feeling we can get even more. I worked it out with Scorpius. Puckerd's not going to be the only one interviewing."

And on that enigmatic note, Albus gave her a quick kiss on the lips and left.

Albus, Scorpius, and Morrison scarfed down their dinner within minutes, taking the time to once again go over the questions that Scorpius was supposed to ask, as well as what answers he was to give.

"Boy did Puckerd mess up picking you to be a squealer" Morrison said as they both escorted Scorpius down to the dungeons after dinner. "I wonder why he picked you over me."

"Because you're about as sharp as a spoon" Scorpius said, briskly stopping at the door to the Potions classroom. "And he wants someone that he can really get information from."

Morrison chuckled. "Spoons aren't sharp silly, you're thinking of knives..."

"Get out of here, both of you!" Scorpius spat, and at once Albus and Morrison cleared away. Albus watched from the corner of the hall as his friend knocked. Before even a second had passed the door sprung open, and Scorpius was whisked into the classroom. After waiting half a minute, Albus and Morrison sprang into action. Pressed up against the wall on either side of the door, they removed the Extendable Ears from their pockets and allowed the thin strings to do the rest. They snaked their way under the door, and Albus could immediately hear.

"...Tea? Or pumpkin juice, perhaps?" Puckerd was saying, and Albus could almost hear the menacing leer on his face.

"No thank you" Scorpius said stoically, and Albus heard the screeching of a chair, indicating that Scorpius had pulled one up to Puckerd's desk. "I just came from dinner..."

"Well if you ever want to wet your whistle, feel free!"

"Mhm..."

Albus heard the intricate details that showed that a typical interrogation was going to commence. The rustling of paper told him that Puckerd's notepad had already been removed, and what followed was a very loud and sharp clearing of the throat. Puckerd spoke again.

"Before we really get to know each other, Scorpius, I just wanted to congratulate you on the Strengthening Solution that you turned in last week. Easily the best in the class."

Albus rolled his eyes, realizing that this was probably the first time in the history of the world that the *teacher* was kissing up to the student.

"Really?" he heard Scorpius say next, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "Albus' potion looked perfect. Identical to what was described in the textbook."

Just as Albus had heard the smile on Puckerd's face before, he thought that he could hear it slide off slightly now. He exchanged a grin with Morrison at this. Though Albus was pleased with the admittedly correct compliment, something far more instrumental had occurred here. Scorpius was now enacting the first part of Albus' plan; to have him mentioned early on. If Albus truly did have a good grasp on Puckerd, then he knew for sure that what would follow next was a comment about their friendship-

"Noble words, noble words" Puckerd said. "Though of course, I'm sure that your friendship with young Potter has swayed them slightly. I will not doubt his proficiency in the subject, but I'd say that you're both just about equal in the art of potionry. Two very precocious potioners, if I do say so myself. It's no wonder that you're such good friends."

Morrison chuckled, probably at how simply and easily he'd been left out. Albus gave him a soft "shhh!" and waited for the question that he knew would be asked next.

"Incidentally," Puckerd continued, "as long as we're going to be getting to know each other so well, I suppose that camaraderie is always a worthy inquisition. Tell me, how long have you been friends with Mr. Potter?"

"Since my first year" Scorpius replied.

Albus heard Puckerd's quill explode on the paper. In between his furious jotting he somehow managed to ask another question.

"I see. And tell me, have you made acquaintance with his family before?"

"Yes" Scorpius replied, his tone almost bored. "They're lovely" he added dryly.

"Well I would certainly hope so!" Puckerd said with a hearty, falsely cheery laugh. His tone became more businesslike. "I daresay that you must've become quite accustomed to any eccentricities then. Well, anything unusual in particular? Perhaps a curiously funny anecdote that you'd like to recount?"

Scorpius flat out ignored this question, instead offering one of his own. "Sir, I thought you were trying to get to know *me* better? Why-why are you asking about Albus?"

It was done perfectly. The slight hesitation, the polite, generally curious way that it'd been said. Albus recalled that the last time Scorpius had used his uncanny ability to steer a conversation it had been done to dissuade Lance from dating Rose. Albus didn't feel quite as bad listening in this time.

He heard Puckerd clear his throat once more. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Scorpius" he said. "I'm merely trying to get to know your interactions with your friends a little better. I do, after all, hope to become as friendly with them in due time..."

"I know" Scorpius said pleasantly. "It's just-well- I don't know. I kind of feel like I'm only here because you know that I'm close with Al. He's-he's not in trouble is he?" he added lowly.

Albus could barely believe how well his plan was going. At this question, Morrison ran his hands through his hair wildly to make it look windswept, a key ingredient in their plan. Albus had told Scorpius to negotiate; to be an interviewer in addition to the one interviewed. The important thing, however, was to be the first one to ask the questions. Once Puckerd divulged everything it is that he wanted to know for information in exchange, Morrison would burst the door and tell Scorpius that he and his shiny badge were needed in the Common Room. It was a battle to see who would get the information they wanted first. Once Puckerd told Scorpius precisely why he was asking about his friend, Scorpius would be whisked away by Morrison, the conversation cut short right when it was Scorpius' turn to do the talking...

"I'm sorry Scorpius" Puckerd said. "You're right."

Albus frowned. This was the first snag that he'd encountered so far. He trusted Scorpius, however. They would get back on track soon enough...

He heard pages being flipped. Puckerd spoke once more.

"I'm terribly sorry. I confess that I did digress far more than I wanted to. Let's get back to *you* then, shall we?"

"O-okay" Scorpius stammered out, and this one seemed natural. Albus wished that he knew what Puckerd was flipping through.

"Let's see, yes, here" Puckerd said, and his voice suggested he was eyeing something of interest. "I noticed, on one of your last tests, that you put '*strongly disagree*' for a question stating the Ministry of Magic had done a good job in managing the stability of the Wizarding World's economy in these tough times. Now why is that? Why would one disagree with that?"

His voice sounded its most sharpest and insincere yet, and Albus was beginning to sweat. Morrison gave him a look, as if to ask if this was the time to interrupt, but he shook his head. He had faith in Scorpius.

"I-uh" Scorpius started, but Puckerd cut him off.

"And this too is interesting" Puckerd was saying. "Yes, very interesting indeed. On a question pertaining to the occupations of your parents, you claimed that your father was a 'floor sweeper'. What does that mean?"

"It- it means- it means that he sweeps floors" Scorpius said uncertainly. "At a pub."

Puckerd started to jot once more, but it ended prematurely. What Albus heard next was a loud thud, followed by more pages being flipped. These pages sounded thicker; more official.

"That's very interesting" Puckerd stated. "Because, Mr. Malfoy, I have here in the Ministry of Magic records that your grandfather, Lucius Malfoy by name, was once rather prominent in the Ministry. Even served as a governor of this very school, isn't that correct? Well? Isn't it?"

It sounded as though his words were stabbing Scorpius in the face.

"Yes, it is."

Albus heard the grit in his voice. He knew that now was the best time to interfere-to abort actually- but it did not seem tactical. If they interrupted now, when things were working so against his friend, it would be blatantly obvious that they'd been listening.

"Well that's a rather interesting decline" Puckerd said. "How very strange. I suppose that the hard times-the war and such-are responsible for your father being neglected. Yes, what with the revamping of the Ministry of Magic and the amount of effort being put towards defense, it is truly unfortunate that your father did not attain the same level of recognition as your grandfather. I suppose, however, that it's never too late..."

Albus' stomach went cold. Puckerd's next sentence seemed to penetrate the air like a sword.

"Tell me, Mr. Malfoy, how close are you to Albus Potter?"

"He's my best friend" Scorpius responded quickly and defiantly, and Albus, though he already knew the relationship that he, Scorpius, and Morrison shared, could not help but feel his chest swell up with pride.

Puckerd cleared his throat yet again. "What do you know of the Silver Wizard?"

Albus' jaw dropped, he saw the same of Morrison and could only assume the same of Scorpius. Scorpius then said what Albus was thinking.

"*What?* What does that have to do with anything?"

Albus heard another pounding, and this, he knew, was not a book, but rather a fist on the table. Puckerd barked his next sentence so loudly that the Extendable Ears were quite unnecessary; they even hurt Albus' real ears.

"You're friends with Potter, are you not!"

"Huh?"

"No theories! No ideas! Nothing's been let slip!"

"What are you talking about!" Scorpius yelled, and again, Albus felt pain in his ear. He saw Morrison cringe as well.

"I'm here to be your friend, Scorpius" Puckerd said, he now sounded more reserved and calm. When he spoke it was as if he regretted losing his temper. "And I am hoping very much that my hand does not remain extended in vain. A friendship can sometimes give two seemingly insurmountable predicaments the answers needed. As your friend, Scorpius, I am certain that I would be most able and certainly most willing to help with any troubles that you-or your family-may be having. I'm sure that a quick look over your father's record and-well I don't know- the Ministry of Magic would realize that he's precisely the kind of person they want working in their higher up departments. Such a discovery could lead to renewed respect, affluence, all sorts of things that the Malfoy name is known for. But I need you to be *my friend* first-"

Albus heard the screeching of a chair, followed by thunderous footsteps. He and Morrison both dove away from the door in opposite directions only a moment before Scorpius had burst through and walked passed them. Albus tried to catch a look at his friend as he swept by, but before he could so much as capture a glance of his face, he'd already turned the corner.

Chapter 9: The First Attack

Scorpius was a ghost for the next several days. Albus knew that whatever negative feelings he had were felt solely towards Puckerd, but this did not make him feel better about the situation. The fact was, their Potions professor had attempted to "get to his friends," and on some level, he had certainly succeeded.

"I'm really not mad at you" Scorpius said to him quietly one morning at breakfast. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I know" Albus said. "But it's because of me that you were interrogated. And I'm the one who made you steer the conversation. Plus I chose to not have Morrison interrupt-"

"Quit it Al!" Morrison threw in, giving a shaky laugh. "He doesn't mean that Scorpius, no one did anything wrong except for Puckerd-"

Despite all insinuations of this however, there was no denying that it was a more melancholy, generally disinterested Scorpius that was joining them for meals and studying among them. Though the changes seemed subtle at first, they became readily apparent once Albus learned that he was no longer playing messenger for Rose and Mirra.

"You had a good thing going mate" Albus said to him lowly in Muggle Studies one day. "Don't throw it away..."

But he merely shrugged.

The saddest thing about the entire situation was that Albus knew precisely why Scorpius was so hurt by it, and what's worse, he did not think that he was able to tell him without sounding accusatory. The first day that Albus had befriended him way back in their first year, Scorpius had commented about the degradation of his family name, as well as about the pressure that his mother was putting on him to restore it. Whatever the motives for Puckerd's offer, Albus knew that for a moment-maybe even two- it had sounded tempting. But as Albus could hardly tell Scorpius that he had most likely given serious thought to betraying his best friend, he was forced to act as though he didn't know what Scorpius was thinking about in silence.

Before October passed to November, however, Morrison had taken it upon himself to try and improve his friend's cheer.

"Dates" he said simply in the Common Room one day, a little bit later, when they only had the oldest students to listen to them from afar. "After the wedding there's a reception, and that means dancing. And for the sake of normalcy, we have to dance with girls."

"Won't there be girls there?" Albus asked.

"Of course there will" Morrison said. "But, it's best we all kind of have our own dates. Mirra's invited, so that covers you Al."

Albus made a pumping motion with his fist, pleased that having a girlfriend was benefiting him now more than expected. He now had the luxury of not having to awkwardly dance with one of Morrison's cousins.

"My date will be Melonie" Morrison continued simply.

"Oh are you two dating then?" Albus asked.

"No, but good question!" Morrison replied, pointing at him. "We will be though, by the end of the wedding. I've got it all planned out. While you lot were playing delivery boy and scanning nonsensical letters I was hard at work..."

"Well you're going with Melonie, and Al with Mirra" Scorpius spoke up, his voice almost raspy; he hadn't used it so much as of late. "What about me?"

"You, my dear Prefect, are going with Rose" Morrison said, and both Albus and Scorpius raised their eyebrows.

"What about Lance?" Scorpius asked.

Morrison made a dismissive sound. "What about him? I didn't invite him. I don't want him smiling and blinding our guests. Rose has no date, you have no date, so you'll go together. Don't worry, I'll work it out with her."

Albus could not confirm the validity of this statement-he had no idea just how much power Morrison had over a girl that he scarcely talked to- but either way, this prospect seemed to cheer up Scorpius as intended. Albus, however, would have preferred a more drastic improvement. With all that was going on in November, he thought that Scorpius' spirits needed to be rather high.

The first Quidditch game of the season was set for the thirteenth of November, which meant that if Albus had his team practicing every single day for twenty four hours straight up until the day of the match, they could possibly end up scraping a narrow loss. The cold weather made the already abysmal practices even worse, with the younger players showing limited mobility and complaining loudly about the harsh cold.

"If it gets too cold, then they'll cancel it right?" Garth Moone asked one practice, sniffing twice afterwards. There was murmuring from the other second years.

"Well duh, I mean they wouldn't have us play in snow-"

"Yeah, I'm sure that there's a certain temperature where they stop play-"

"No!" Albus bolted out, frustrated, and Scorpius, even in his generally disheartened mood, cracked a smile at this. "Have you guys even watched Quidditch before? Weather doesn't matter! If the fans can show up, then the players can play! Now get back out there!"

As aggravated as he was with his team's shortcomings, Albus thought that the bigger factor could end up being his brother. He was not able to sit in on Gryffindor practices, but as Lily did, he had some indication as to what they were up against.

"So," he started, cornering her in a hallway on her way to Charms one day, "how is James holding up? Is his team hindered by the cold? Any illnesses?"

She shook her head violently. "I haven't heard a single complaint" she said. "He's more like a coach than a captain, to be honest. He seems pretty intense this year. And he's got everyone looking scary good."

Albus did not inform his team of this information however; he didn't want to deter them or make them any more lackadaisical than they already were. The good thing about Quidditch though, was that it provided more than just entertainment on the day of the match. Though the Final had been cancelled last year under tragic circumstances, no one seemed to view this as something that should be perpetual. The fact that the game hadn't been played in so long only added to the eagerness of nearly everyone in the student body, and, likewise, this meant that Albus was now going to have the chance to redeem himself for having "betrayed" his house.

Quidditch ended up being the second thing on most people's minds however. At the Halloween feast, it had been announced that the first Hogsmeade trip of the year was set for the sixth, approximately one week before Slytherin was to play Gryffindor. This caused something of a stir among the students; most of them, Albus knew, had thought for sure that the Massacre would have had a much more profound effect on the scheduling of Hogsmeade trips.

"Settle down, settle down," Professor McGonagall said, her mouth thin as she waved her arms almost like a bat. "The Ministry of Magic has wished for me to inform you that there is now greater security than ever both within and around the village. Some of the most highly regarded members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be present, as will several Aurors who specialize in recognizing clandestine dark activity. In addition," she continued, and her mouth became, if it was possible, even thinner, "Wands and Redemption has promised to further secure the village by providing their own members, to ensure that safety is of highest priority."

Albus saw Puckerd roll his eyes at this, and for the first and probably last time, he could not help but agree with him. Having WAR there did not help Albus feel safer at all. If anything, he felt that a battle might end up occurring inside the village long before any exterior attack took place.

"Why do you reckon they're bringing Hogsmeade back already?" Albus whispered over to Scorpius.

"Money" he grunted. "If there are no students to shop there, then there was no reason to rebuild it. Hogwarts visits are their busiest days."

The new Hogsmeade visit did, however, provide Albus with the opportunity to spend some quality time with Mirra outside of the castle. He knew that she was still not getting along with Rose, and this meant that unless she wanted to spend the day with Eckley instead of her boyfriend and his friends, he was in the clear.

"Yeah, we're all going together" Scorpius told him one night, having returned from a Prefect meeting in which he'd had the opportunity to speak to Mirra.

"I'm bringing Melonie!" Morrison piped up from the corner.

Though they were among the most cheerful, Quidditch and Hogsmeade were not the two most primary topics amongst Hogwarts students. There had been no more newspaper articles on the Silver Wizard, and yet the mysterious figure was still talked about in between classes and at mealtimes, with various people claiming to know who it was or to have had information prior to the Ministry. Still, the references and conversations thinned eventually, and soon it became the wonder of the student body if they would ever receive more information. The other topic on the minds of the students, as it turned out, were the meetings with Puckerd.

Albus had hoped that Scorpius would be the only victim of such an interrogation, but this was not the case. Scorpius' rejection of Puckerd seemed instead to have been a catalyst of a drastic change in the situation, one which now had students of all houses and years going to speak with him on any given day. This made Albus rather nervous; no one as close to him as Scorpius had been selected yet, but there'd been a few close calls with acquaintances.

"What did he say?" Albus barked at Bartleby Bing one night as he entered the Common Room, fresh from a chat with Puckerd.

Bartleby shrugged. "Not much" he said. "Asked what my life goals were, if I had any brothers or sisters, stuff like that..."

"Anything about me?" Albus asked, so sharply that Scorpius and Morrison looked at him.

Bartleby gave him a perplexed look. "Why would he ask anything about you?"

After he walked away Albus gave an exasperated sigh and sunk into an armchair.

"That's the third one this week mate" Scorpius said. "Nothing about you yet."

"But he's only asked that Barry Bryant kid and Denise" Albus said, jerking his head towards the latter, who was in the common room studying.

"He talked with that Hufflepuff Prefect Anastasia or whatever" Morrison said. "She helped you find a library book once in like third year or something I think..."

"Well I hardly doubt she knows enough about me or my dad then" Albus said. "I just-I don't know. I get the feeling that the next person he picks is going to hit me hard."

Albus hated it when he was right. The day of the Hogsmeade trip, a fresh chorus of booing told him that a Gryffindor was on their way over. Mirra flashed her badge for minimal effect before approaching him.

"Hey" he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek, much to the annoyance of a few housemates. Some of the older ones even hissed.

"Hey, listen-" she started.

"All excited for today?"

"I actually have to tell you something-"

"I figure we'll want something warm to start, so the Three Broomsticks will-"

"I can't go" she said sulkily.

"What?" he replied, now crestfallen. "Wh-"

But then he saw the curled up piece of paper in her hand.

"Aww no way!"

"Just got it" she said. "And the appointment is for two o' clock, so I can hardly leave and be back in time. Really bad timing, I know."

Albus snatched the letter away from her. "It's not bad timing!" he said, not bothering to read it and merely crumbling it up. "It's not bad timing at all! He did this on purpose! Forget it, just go..."

"I can't" she said, and Albus noticed just how upset she looked. She pointed at the crumbled piece of paper in his hand. "It says that we're going discuss my Prefect duties, and that I can't miss it..."

Albus could only stare, mouth agape as Mirra gave him a hug and promised that she'd make it up to him. As soon as she'd turned around, Albus stared up at the high table in anger.

Puckerd was waving at him, a wide smile on his face.

"That," Morrison said, shaking his head, "is low."

Albus returned to his seat and stabbed a link of sausage so hard with his fork that it almost exploded. "How does he even know that we're dating?" he asked to no one in particular.

"I'd of though that the kissing, holding hands, and giggling in his class was a powerful indication" Scorpius said, looking up from his Herbology textbook.

Albus stared down grumpily at his plate, and by the time that they'd departed for Hogsmeade, his mood had not changed. It was just as cold as every Quidditch practice, but the wind had picked up considerably, blowing them back an inch with every step they took. Morrison and Melonie were walking close enough so that they could have a hushed conversation all to themselves. Albus and Scorpius struck up a conversation about their terrible team to pass the time.

"Alright, where to first?" Scorpius announced just as they'd passed through the gate to Hogsmeade. Albus surveyed the village with interest, too preoccupied with a sudden thought to give an answer.

It looked amazing. Whatever his personal feelings were towards Waddlesworth, there was no denying that funneling gold into the village had been a good idea. The streets were more crowded than he could ever remember them being, and the shops looked splendid, full of vibrant colors and stable, welcoming architecture. Stands were set up along the roads with people selling different items and foods, every few seconds or so stopping to address a customer. Even as Albus looked he watched a young boy walk away grinning from the stand nearest to them, holding up a black shirt to his friend. It had WAR written on the back in large gleaming letters, and the small wand-sword insignia that they wore on the front in the corner.

With a chill that had nothing to do with the wind, he looked through the street and tried to see if he could pinpoint the exact place where Ares had been murdered. He couldn't.

They headed towards The Three Broomsticks first, taking care to glance at the windows of shops and see if any major changes had been made. He saw Hugo and Lily, on their first Hogsmeade trip ever, standing in Honeydukes with several other third years, licking their lips in anticipation of the euphoria that they'd soon be tasting. A few shops down was a new antique store called *Relics and Remnants*, a shop filled with interesting looking things like old fashioned clocks that seemed to fire spells every hour, as well as finely crafted tables that looked as though they had Egyptian symbols carved into them. He could see James walking among the rows of strange art with his girlfriend, looking sullen as she pointed at things that he seemed to have little interest in.

More than just full of new shops and loads of people however, Albus saw some strikingly similar features to Diagon Alley. On just about every corner were two black robed members of Wands and Redemption, all of them standing straight and turning their heads as though looking for trouble. On the contrary, the official looking Ministry members sporadically placed around the village all seemed to be rather nonchalant; they were staring ahead blankly from their posts, looking as though they were sleeping with their eyes open.

They reached the Three Broomsticks half as fast as they normally would; all of the stopping and excursions prolonged their trip. The welcoming warmth of the pub almost managed to bring a smile to Albus' face, and he saw that the place had been refurbished completely, with all new tables and decor. The counter was in the same place however, and it was Albus who went and purchased Butterbeers for his group.

When he'd returned he saw a sight similar to what he'd seen during the walk. Morrison and Melonie were sitting extremely close, and Scorpius was sitting with his face supported on his hands, his expression as bland as those of the Ministry workers.

Albus tried not to match this expression as Morrison and Melonie giggled together for five minutes straight. He knew that it was not Morrison's fault that he and Scorpius were both dateless, but that didn't make things any more enjoyable. After a moment he decided to look in the direction that Scorpius was glaring, curious as to what he was so transfixed on. There, in a cozy corner of the pub, sat Rose and Lance, huddled together and talking lowly.

Albus nudged his friend.

"Why are you looking over there mate?"

Scorpius didn't lift his eye for a moment.

"Because I'm stupid" he admitted under his breath.

Albus sighed and took a large gulp of Butterbeer, the warm and fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach the highlight of his day by far. He wondered what Mirra was going through. Would Puckerd simply give her his regular treatment of odd questions? Or would he go more in the same route that he'd went with Scorpius, resulting in a furious interviewee marching out of his office? With a slight pang, he hoped that her parents weren't going to be brought up as well...

He heard the sliding of a chair from afar off and, snapped from his thoughts, saw that Lance had stood up and pushed in his seat. He began walking across the pub towards them.

Albus looked around wildly. Had he seen them looking? He approached their table unsmiling.

"Hey buddy" Morrison said casually, oblivious as to what was going through Albus' head.

"Hello" Melonie added pleasantly.

"Hey, nice to meet you" Lance said, and Albus thought that he sounded as if he were in a hurry. He quickly turned his attention over to Albus. "Can I talk to you for a second?" he asked, jerking his head in the direction of a different corner of the pub.

Albus looked passed him and saw Rose sitting, unsmiling as she swirled her drink. "Yeah, sure."

Lance led him over to the corner, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he did so. Standing upright and across from him, Albus noted that Lance was about as tall as his brother-that is to say, a little bit taller than Albus-and that his good looks did not make him look any less intimidating.

"We need to talk for a second" Lance said seriously.

"What's up?" Albus asked, stuffing his own hands in his pockets. He quickly withdrew them when he realized he wasn't as cool looking as Lance when he did it.

"I know that you know what's going on with Rose and Mirra" he said, and Albus was not taken aback; he'd expected something along these lines. "And I'm not going to lie to you; Rose hasn't been very pleasant to be around since."

Albus came extraordinarily close to commenting that Lance now understood how the rest of the planet felt, but he opted out of it. He merely nodded.

"And what's worse," Lance continued, "is that whatever she may say, she's really upset. So I need your help here."

"And how's that?" Albus asked, confused as to how Rose being upset correlated to *him*.

"I need you to convince Mirra to apologize."

Albus barely held back his laugh. "Look mate, I don't like seeing Mirra mad either, but Rose has to at least meet her half way-"

"Rose can't do that" Lance said. "You know how stubborn she is."

Albus frowned. "I'm not Mirra's argument representative. I can't just 'negotiate' with my girlfriend and make her less proud."

"But you have to!" Lance shot out. "I'm not going to let my last year be marred by this..."

Albus threw him a dirty glare, something that he thought he'd never do. He understood Lance's point, he really did. He wasn't too fond of Mirra going at his cousin's throat either. But Lance was making it sound almost like a threat.

"Well I can't help you mate" Albus admitted. "Maybe you can talk to Mirra, but I'm not even going to waste my time trying to convince her..."

"Yeah you will" Lance cut him off, and his expression darkened. "Because I've had a few chats with Rose since last year, some questions about some previous boyfriends. And it seems to me to like your best mate-" he jerked his head towards the sullen looking Scorpius- "put on a good show in trying to make sure me and her didn't end up where we are now. Now I don't want to upset her further, but-"

"I get it!" Albus spat, feeling nervous. Lance, perhaps the least likely of all to do so, was giving him an ultimatum. He had never seen him like this; indeed, he had actually always seen him as being too kind to be with Rose. Here, however, that thought was no more. All that he could see now was a taller, less attractive male version of Rose.

"So you know what to do then?" Lance said, and his expression softened as if he was relieved that things had gone so well. Albus did not give him this satisfaction.

"I know what you *want* me to do" Albus said bitterly. "That doesn't mean that I'm going to do it."

Lance leaned in a bit closer. "Look, me and your brother go way back. I have nothing against you, okay? I don't even have anything against your friend! I just need you to do this for me..."

"-Or else you'll ruin Scorpius' friendship with Rose" Albus finished for him menacingly.

Lance gave a frown and a shrug, as if to apologize. And without saying any more, he walked back to his table briskly.

Albus stood firmly on the spot, watching him go. His fists clenched in anger. All that he had going on right now, with Puckerd and his father, with the world being in the state that it's in...and Lance throws this on his plate?

He strode over to his own table, and Scorpius turned to him immediately.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Explain later" Albus replied. "And I'm leaving."

"What? Why?" all three of them asked.

Albus threw a nasty look in Lance and Rose's direction. "Not feeling well. Just going to head back and catch up on some homework" he lied, and at the next second, he entered the streets of the village once more.

He walked briskly through the cold, not taking care to acknowledge the shoppers or the security. His head was flooding now, but he thought that it had less to do with Lance's request and more to do with the combination of every thing on his mind. He had enough to deal with apart from having to decide between friends. On one end, Scorpius was among his most loyal and best friends, and with how he'd been feeling recently, the last thing that he wanted was for his chances with Rose to disappear on the spot. On the other end, he was not going to try and force his girlfriend into doing something that she didn't want to do, especially if it was only done as part of a charade anyway.

He sighed as he walked, keeping his head down and mulling over his thoughts, a new dilemma appearing in his head every step. As he pushed his way through the crowd of people, he could

not help but notice an unusually large gathering around a certain shop. It appeared to simply be a hot cocoa stand, but most heads were turned towards the side of it. He strayed off from his trail and took a look.

He laughed. It was a wanted poster, the exact same kind that he'd seen two years ago in Diagon Alley. Rather than bearing the faces of Ares or Darvy, however, they had no images at all. Only a description:

Description: Silver Wizard is highly dangerous. Described as wearing silver robes and silver mask. Average height. If you see this figure, contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement immediately and ask to speak directly to Auror Office. Your life could be in danger!

Wanted For: Vigilantism, Murder, etc.

Reward: 1000 Galleons

Albus did not bother to read any further, he'd already spotted enough errors. Calling the Silver Wizard a murderer was clearly incorrect; from the articles he'd read, no such thing had occurred. And what's more, why was the Silver Wizard's reward even higher than those of Darvy's and Ares' at the time? The Ministry, or at least Fischer's half of it, seemed unable to get anything right.

This cheered him up considerably as he continued his walk back to Hogwarts. At least now he had the comfort of knowing that whatever he was going through, Puckerd's crowd was going through something just as bad.

Albus was quite relieved to learn that Mirra's interview had gone fairly well.

"Really just a quick chat about Prefect duties, a change of schedule for patrolling and so forth. Not really much about you."

"But some about me?" he asked, looking up from the library table.

"Well just how long we'd known each other, actually. I told him early first year."

Albus frowned, trying to piece things together. He had been sure that Puckerd was out for information. Or maybe he really did just want to ruin his Hogsmeade trip?

"And that's it?" Albus asked. "Promise?"

Mirra narrowed her eyes. "No Albus. We snogged on his desk as well."

Albus gave a wry smile at the sarcasm, but stayed silent. Mirra brushed her hair out of her eyes and continued to speak.

"So how was Hogsmeade?"

"Fine" Albus replied quickly. "Just fine."

He did not tell her about what Lance had said. Partially because he knew that it would only agitate her, and secondly because it would probably diminish all ideas of reconciliation with Rose even further. He could not hide this truth from Scorpius however, and as he'd predicted, his friend took the news very poorly.

"Do it" he said strictly. "You have to do it mate, confound her if you have to!"

Albus sighed, staring into the fire that illuminated the dark Common Room. "You know I can't do that" he said. "Mirra wouldn't go for it anyway."

"Explain the severity of the situation!" Scorpius blurted out, looking over his shoulder to check that the few other people awake didn't hear. "Tell her it's a matter of life and death!"

"But it's not..."

"I still can't believe Lance" Morrison chimed in, shaking his head. "He always seemed like such a great guy."

"I knew he was evil" Scorpius said through gritted teeth. "Pure evil. Knew it all along. And all you guys did was ignore me..."

"I know that it's wrong of him" Albus spoke up. "But evil is a little much. Just extremely selfish. Either way though, I really don't know what to do..."

"I told you what to do!" Scorpius said. "Convince Mirra to-"

"Now you're the one coming off as selfish mate" Morrison cut him off, and Scorpius went silent.

Scorpius' vehement insistence that he try and convince Mirra to go groveling to Rose weighed in his head over the next few days; so much so that it had begun to interfere with his studies. Despite whatever initial struggles he may have had, Albus had been pleased up until this point in the year to say that he was content with his work. Transfiguration class was now asking him to conjure things out of mid-air, a tricky piece of magic that he looked forward to tackling, even if it was a little bit later than most of the class. Neville and Hagrid were showing them more exciting things each and every class, with Hagrid even allowing them the opportunity to approach and touch the thestrals as he explained their habits. Even Puckerd-who Albus now stared at venomously every class period- had stepped up his game slightly. About two months into the year, he was finally assigning Potions that required that Albus exert some effort.

Still, he didn't let his actual classes get in the way of what was really important; the spirit of competition. And thus, he was completely prepared on the morning of the thirteenth. Dressed and in the locker room early, he waited eagerly as his team joined him.

"What, are people just not showing up?" he asked Scorpius, though even as he said it Barnabus Curder marched in, his dark hair plastered over his eyes as if he'd just woken up.

"I'm just going to have a quick breakfast-"

"No you're not!" Albus spat. "You're going to get in your uniform so that we can prepare. You should have woken up earlier if you wanted breakfast."

One by one they marched in, every few minutes or so, all of them yawning and showing displeasure.

"Why do we have to be up so early-?"

"Is this really necessary-"

"Yes, because I'm the captain" Albus said. Once they were all there he watched them sloppily throw on their Quidditch clothes. Only when they were all dressed did he realize that some of them looked extremely nervous. Tiffani Garret, his second year Chaser, was shaking silently.

He frowned. "I know that a lot of you are nervous. I was too in my first game. But you can't let that get to your head. If you tell yourself that you're going to fail, you can never hope to surprise yourself and succeed. You have to go out there eager to do your best."

Scorpius nodded his head from beside him. "Now you listen to him" he told them all, wagging his finger up and down as if they were dogs. "He's won the cup, he has."

They marched out of the locker room about an hour later, Albus hoping that his team was fully woken up by now. They were met with sounds of contempt, three fourths of the audience being in support of the scarlet clad. The clapping from the Slytherin stands was barely audible, but Albus was more than accustomed to this by now. Some of his new recruits, however, most likely weren't.

"Just ignore it" he called back to his team. "Sometimes it's more fun to be the bad guy. Makes victory sweeter. And we do have our own fans" he added, throwing a look towards the emerald portion of the stands.

Some of them nodded their heads, but for the most part they all kept a furtive look on their faces as they marched to the center of the pitch. The roaring of the crowd signaled that James was making his way towards the middle as well, and indeed, Albus saw him stroll confidently with his team behind him, stopping to bow his head to the Gryffindor side of the pitch as he did so.

Once the noise had died down considerably Albus could hear the commentator, a different voice from last year but still an unfamiliar one. Albus wondered what house he was in.

"And the older Potter has led his troops out! They're a ferocious looking bunch this year; you can tell that Potter is eager to have a Quidditch Cup on his resumé before he graduates! And now the captains shake hands!

Albus and James approached each other, and Albus could see Charles Eckley, a Beater for the Gryffindor team, staring ahead eager to get swinging. Next to him stood his cousin Fred, who was wearing a similar expression.

Though Albus did not have a large amount of faith in his entire team, he could not help but feel some sort of exhilaration as he and his brother quickly clasped hands. No final had been played the year prior, but Slytherin had defeated Gryffindor in their last meeting together. As this was his brother's last year of Hogwarts, there was always the possibility that this would be the last time that they played against each other. It would take yet another Gryffindor-Slytherin final to give either of them a second chance. The pressure was starting to sink in...

The whistle blew, and Albus immediately kicked off. Circling high, he saw Scorpius speed off towards the hoop, a blank expression on his face that Albus liked to attribute to what he called "Impossible Mode" a state of mind that Scorpius seemed to enter right before it became nigh impossible to score on him. Grinning, he scanned the pitch for the snitch, listening rather than watching the rest of the game unfold.

"Already a quick start for Gryffindor, with Thomas, new member, taking the Quaffle right away. Dodges a pathetically hit Bludger by Slytherin newcomer Luong-"

This statement told him that the commentator was most likely a member of the Gryffindor House, but it was the sounds of utter disappointment that told him what happened next.

"And Malfoy saves it" the commentator said, sounding upset. "It looked so close to being in..."

Scorpius continued his obliteration of the Gryffindor Chaser's confidence over the course of the next ten minutes, batting each and every shot away as if his life depended on it. Rather than use this to their advantage in gaining a lead however, Albus' own chasers were doing just as bad; though he knew that this had little to do with Gryffindor's keeping.

"And Curder drops the Quaffle! Not really sure why, there wasn't another player or Bludger in his proximity..."

Realizing that it would come down to he and James only, Albus took his search a step further and began tailing his brother. A common Seeker tactic, Albus knew that it would irritate him more than anything, providing a necessary distraction. It almost worked until-

WHAM!

"And Potter takes a nasty bludger to the back, courtesy of Fred Weasley!"

"Sorry Al" he heard his cousin say as he whizzed by. Albus continued to spin rapidly, regaining composure and feeling his back with his hands. It wasn't broken. He'd be fine.

"And we have our first goal of the game! Tabbers gets by Malfoy with a nice deke and the right goal post was left wide open!"

Albus looked over at his friend, who was cursing under his breath and looking furious with himself. Albus wanted to tell him to shake it off, that it was only one goal, but he knew what Scorpius was now thinking; with their pitiful offense, Albus would need to be one who caught the Snitch for them to win.

He continued to try and trail James, now more mindful of his surroundings, but it amounted to nothing. The cold weather was starting to sink in fifteen minutes into the game, and Albus feared that it would end up taking its toll on his new allies. They were not, as he knew, fond of the cold.

"And Bryant seems to have inadvertently hit himself with his own bat!"

Albus sighed, wondering how such a thing was even possible, when he heard a barrage of booing. He looked around frantically.

"And Moone gets by the Gryffindor Keeper following a mediocre pass from Curder. Ten to ten!"

Albus blinked a few times, trying to wake up. Once he realized that they were tied once more, he continued his search-

There it was. Hovering just near the left goalpost of the Gryffindor side, the Snitch was obscured by the flurrying of movement from the Gryffindor Keeper. Albus shot towards it, dodging a Bludger from Eckley as he did so.

"And it would appear as if we have our first sighting of the Snitch! Potter is bolting towards the Gryffindor hoops!"

Albus continued to swerve his way around players, oblivious to the noise of the crowd. Slytherin could scrap a win right here, despite their terrible overall play-

He hit a roadblock. Or more accurately, a player block. James had somehow managed to cut him off, opting to obstruct Albus' attempts rather than aim for the Snitch himself.

"You've got speed on me" James said, hovering in the air and grinning. "I'll give you that. But all that means is that I can't let you move."

Albus narrowed his eyes and tried to move underneath his brother's arm, but James, more muscular and toned, had moved down with him, arms spread out as if to create a barrier. Albus was forcibly reminded of how James had blocked his entrance to the bathroom over the summer.

"And it seems as if James Potter has found a way to successfully shield his younger brother single-handedly! And to great effect! The Snitch is gone..."

Albus gave a growl of anger and spun around, flying in another direction and realizing that he'd have to rework his plan of tailing James. Doing so kept him too close, and Albus could not risk James getting in his way again.

But it did. Ten minutes later and James had twice more blocked his way to the Snitch, each time cutting him off and not bothering to race for it.

"Are you even going to try and catch the damn Snitch!" Albus roared through the wind, ducking marginally to avoid a Bludger that may have accidentally been hit by one of his own Beaters.

"Or are you just going to cut me off until we both get old and one of us snuffs it first!"

"Oh no, I'll go after the Snitch" James said. "Once you're on the entire other side of the Pitch from where it is. I told you that I wasn't going to race you..."

Ten minutes later the score was still ten to ten, and Albus was growing more than agitated. The next time that he saw the Snitch, James was already hovering in his way, smiling broadly.

Albus accelerated. James had thus far stood his ground because Albus had attempted to avoid collision. This time, it would be his brother who moved out of the way. He began picking up more and more speed. The wind was screeching in his ears now as he headed straight for his brother, who certainly was not stubborn enough to stay in the way and be impaled-

He was. James had refused to move, and Albus shot right into him at full speed, crashing and sending them both toppling through the sky. Albus barely managed to keep hold of his broomstick, and he saw an injured James struggling to do the same. He heard a whistle sound.

"Foul!" Mr. Wood called, and to Albus' immense shock, he saw a hand waved in his direction. "Deliberate broomstick-to-body contact with the Seeker outside of the vicinity of the Golden Snitch. Penalty shot awarded to Gryffindor!"

Both Albus and James flew towards the referee. Albus saw that his brother looked fine, if not a little disheveled.

"Penalty!" Albus barked. "He's been getting in my way all game!"

"But he hasn't made deliberate contact" Mr. Wood said, his voice sounding extremely official.

"Because I've been skidding to a halt!"

James spoke up next. "I was just minding my own business, floating in the air, enjoying the breeze and the like, and then this *fiend* comes and rams into me, entirely unprovoked, and I say *two* penalties sir, because he's arguing with your decision as well-"

"It will be one penalty to Gryffindor" Mr. Wood reiterated.

The Gryffindor chaser that ended up taking the shot was Thomas, and whether it was from annoyance or having actually been beaten, Scorpius was unable to save it. Slytherin was now down twenty to ten.

Albus wanted desperately to call a time out just as play was resuming, but he feared that if he did so they would never resume. He saw Tiffani nearly collide with Barnabus just a moment after play resumed, and he thought that his two Beaters were chasing their bludgers rather than trying to hit them. Intent on ending the game as fast as possible, he flew upwards and decided to circle the pitch from above again.

He knew that this was precisely what James wanted, to keep Albus out of the vicinity of the Snitch just in case, but it was too illogical to continue to tail his brother, especially as he now knew that garbage penalties were going to be thrown at him. He instead meandered through the sky, taking care to inspect every inch of the field for James as he did so. He also did not want his brother to get a good jump. Just as he was peering over the middle of the pitch he saw yet another glimpse of gold. And this time, James was not near him to take preemptive measures.

With a surge of speed he pulled into a downward spiral, and once again, the noises of the stands became nothing but a blur of sound. He dodged a Bludger that was going straight for his head ("Sorry!" he heard Barry Bryant yell) and he turned himself sideways to move in between two Gryffindor Chasers. The whirling of the wind told him that someone was flying right behind him, and he knew it to be James. It didn't matter however, he was faster. He extended his hand-

He heard buzzing in his ears. Strange, things were supposed to be almost silent apart from the wind. He was suddenly starting to feel sick. Had he grabbed the Snitch yet?

And then he felt it, a strange surge of pain had shot through his body, and his eyes were now jammed shut, flashes of gold that had nothing to do with Gryffindor's robes now visible to him.

Not again he thought in his head. *Not now. Why now?*

"Slytherin wins! Potter proves to be the savior of his team, pulling into a dive that his brother simply couldn't keep up with! One hundred and sixty to twenty! And after a brilliant showing by the Gryffindor Keeper as well, this one's a heartbreaker..."

Albus landed on two feet, blinking rapidly. The feeling was gone. Everything had returned to normal. The only moments that he'd missed had ended up being the most important of the match. He opened his hand and saw the Snitch nestled in his palm, but before he could see much else he was swarmed by his team. Scorpius was clapping him on the back, and Barnabus Curder and Barry Bryant were trying to lift him up, though they were not big enough...

It happened again. More stabbing pains, and then, quite suddenly, more flashes of gold under his eyelids.

"Al!" someone was asking, but their voice sounded distorted. "Al are you okay?"

He could feel more and more people crowd around him; the Slytherin stands had joined as well. He wished that they wouldn't. He was starting to feel slightly claustrophobic. He felt himself sink to his knees for a moment, but afterwards he felt good enough to stand. People were clapping him on the back and talking to him, but he could only hear them half the time...

"You okay?" he heard again, and he saw that it was Scorpius who'd asked it.

Albus blinked a few more times. He suddenly felt better, as though it'd passed for good. "Yeah I'm-I'm fine"

But then there was more noise. Yelling from the remains of the audience. Albus saw adults running towards the field, Headmistress McGonagall among them. He could see Neville waving his hands in front of the Gryffindors.

"Back to the Common Room!" he was yelling. "All of you, now!"

There was muttering from everyone on the pitch it seemed.

"What's going on?" Denise Toils, closest to the headmistress asked as she neared.

"Back to your dormitory! All of you! At once!" she said crisply, her nostrils flared.

"What? Why?" a seventh year called over the heads of the rest of them.

"There has been an attack not far from the castle!"

The news continued to spread throughout the entire day, every hour or so more and more information trickling through the student's population. By the time that they'd all been called out to their Common Rooms for dinner the story seemed to be almost entirely told. Members of the Dark Alliance-along with the horrifying monsters that his father had called Silhouettes- had completely destroyed a town known as Tottsville, a place mixed with both wizarding kind and muggles. Albus did not believe some of the more preposterous rumors-like that the skeletal monsters had entered the village riding on charcoal black horses twice the size of normal ones-but the story still gave him goose bumps all the same. To know that so many people had been injured or killed, all while he was playing a game of Quidditch...

"And no one was caught from it?" said a third year blonde haired girl that he did not know. One of the seventh years, who Albus knew only by the first name Sidney, answered her.

"They just wrecked the place and left. I hear that Aurors are there now investigating. They've got other people wiping memories from Muggles, other dousing flames and the like. It's just terrible..."

Albus stared down at his plate, unable to touch his food. He had been in such an enthusiastic mood hours ago when the game had first started. He spared a glance up at Puckerd, who was also staring at his own plate, nothing having been touched. For the second time now, he felt some sort of connection. Perhaps his father had been right in that they were all allies. But still, Puckerd had ruined his Hogsmeade visit with Mirra out of spite only...

Dinner ended with Professor McGonagall giving a brief speech on the safety of the castle, ensuring them that the retreat to their Common Rooms was simply a precaution and that Hogwarts was well protected. She began to choke up slightly at the mention of the actual attack, but she had them raise their goblets to the victims before dismissing them to bed.

Albus was not sleepy when he returned to his dormitory. He still had other things on his mind, things that were now worrying him for the first time in months. Most of the house was still down in the Common Room discussing the day's events-the Quidditch victory now overshadowed by the first actual attack by the new Dark Alliance-and thus Albus had ample opportunity to sit on his bed and dwell in solitude. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his friends however.

"What are you doing up here?" Scorpius asked.

"Maybe he's ready for bed" Morrison said. "Tired from wiping the floor with Gryffindor today..."

Albus did not have a response for either of them.

"Al, what's wrong mate?" Morrison continued, his tone changing at the look on his friend's face.

"You don't blame yourself for the attack do you?" Scorpius asked incredulously. "I thought you were over that phase where everything's your fault."

"It's not that at all" Albus said quickly, turning to them and feeling tense. Should he even bother explaining? He wished that he had his father to talk to; they had been so honest with each other as of late. Or Fairhart. He'd discussed these things with Fairhart before.

"Then what is it?" Morrison asked.

Albus hesitated. "Remember that thing that we wrote about over the summer a bit? And-and the thing that was going on last year, that I told you about-"

"You mean all your weird dreams and golden eyes and stuff" Scorpius cut in, and he sounded somewhat agitated. Of the two of his best friends, Scorpius had always put the least thought into what Albus was talking about, and indeed, never truly seemed to consider it as an issue either. Morrison however, who had seen such an instance occur first hand, gave him a serious look.

"What about it?"

"It happened. Again. On the pitch."

Morrison widened his eyes in shock. "When?"

"After you caught the Snitch?" Scorpius asked. "When you were looking all out of it on the field?"

"Around there" Albus said quickly. "In the air too, actually, near the end..."

"Probably adrenaline" Scorpius said. "Adrenaline, plus your a wizard, typical combination for weird things-"

"It wasn't adrenaline!" Albus said, and for a moment, he felt an unusual amount of anger in himself. It quickly faded. "It-I don't know what it was-I'm just not used to it. Not for a while now."

Before either of his friends could make another suggestion, he voiced what was his biggest concern.

"And it happened-it would have happened right around the same time that that place was being attacked."

Both of his friends opened their mouths to speak, probably completely different ideas, but they never got the chance. There was a sudden, sharp knock on the dormitory door, and then the unlikely entrance of Melonie Grue.

"What are you doing here!" Morrison gasped. "How'd you even-"

"Girls are allowed into the boy's dorms" Melonie replied sweetly. "Just not the other way around. Pretty old rule actually."

"Well next time wait for permission, don't just knock once and barge in! What if we were naked in here!"

Melonie raised her eyebrows. "Oh I'm sorry, are the three of you usually nak-you know what, never mind. I have a letter for one of you."

As she held it out, Morrison snatched it away.

"Hey, don't snatch from me!" she said.

"Sorry" Morrison mumbled, reading over the front of the envelope.

"Who's it for?" Scorpius asked.

"I figured it was for Albus" Melonie said. "It came during breakfast, but he and Scorpius were already in the locker room, and you were still in bed Morrison..."

Albus took the letter from Morrison. His heart plummeted as he read the untidy scrawl on the front.

Black haiR

Gren eyes

Slytherin

Albus stared down at the letter, anticipation mingled with wonder in his head now. "Did a tawny owl drop this off?" he asked Melonie.

She thought about it. "I think so, yeah. Or maybe it was a barn owl. One of those common ones. Aren't you going to open it!"

Morrison went over to her and started steering away towards the door. "Privacy please!"

"Hey, just because you're bigger than me doesn't mean you can move me around as you see fit!"

"That's *exactly* what it means" he told her cheekily, and within the next few seconds she was gone and back down in the Common Room.

"Well, open it up mate" Scorpius said, and Albus saw that he too looked extremely curious.

Albus tore into it. What he unfolded was the shortest letter that he'd ever seen. Written in the same child-like scrawl was:

Is,

it

- you?

"Is it you?" Morrison read from over his shoulder. "Is what who?"

"I-I have no idea" Albus said, peering over the letter but knowing that there wasn't enough there for him to be able to decipher anything. "I really have no idea."

He turned to Scorpius, who was silent and looking equally perplexed. It was Morrison who spoke up again.

"Blimey, we're just not going to get that year where nothing weird happens, are we?"

Chapter 10: The Suspect

The Great Hall was flooded with owls for the next week. Every day more and more news arrived about the first true attack by Darvy, and each day the discussions grew louder and more tense. Students from every table had received word from family about injured or dead loved ones, and though Albus was relieved to find that he himself had no powerful attachments to any victims, the looks on their faces were enough. A seventh year Slytherin who Albus had once lent a quill to was whisked away one morning after learning that his mother had been killed. He had heard that a girl from Ravenclaw had lost an entire family of cousins. Even James had been sent a letter and been told to pass down news. Rolf Scamander, a friend of the family, had a brother who was to be buried.

And yet, Albus almost looked forward to the mail. He knew it was terrible-terrible to wait for the moment in which someone close to him may receive horrifying news-but he could not help it. He was not, however, looking forward to the owls that bore bad news, but rather those of a more quizzical nature.

Albus had placed his fresh new anonymous letter side by side with the old crinkly one from the first day of school, and sure enough, the handwriting matched. Unfortunately, this was about the extent that his sleuthing skills got him.

"Okay, so we can eliminate scraps of parchment being inadvertently sent" Scorpius admitted one day in Charms, the easiest of all classes with which to discuss things. "But that's *all* that we can eliminate."

"Still looks like it was written by a child" Morrison said, his wand hanging loosely by his side as the class practiced the Silencing Charm. "Maybe Al just has a secret admirer in a lower grade? I mean, those are some common owls. They're probably in the owlery."

"Doubtful" Albus said, flicking his wand towards the toad on his desk. "*Silencio!*"

It fell silent at once, and Albus, now feeling relatively satisfied, continued his deductive reasoning.

"A secret admirer would be more into telling me things than asking me them. And besides, I'd know if some first year was ogling me in the halls."

"Plus it's a miracle Al nabbed Mirra" Scorpius commented. "Let alone some girl whose life he didn't save."

Sadly, applying logic to the letters got them nowhere. It was very easy to find information that was contradictory towards obvious ideas, but as they had no idea what it was they were looking for, Albus had no starting point. He thought that if he could just determine the purpose of the

letters-just decipher them- then he could maybe discover who was sending them. To him, the writer was more important than the writing.

He tried to put certain meanings in front of the letters, and then backtrack his way to a possible correspondent, but this proved to be just as difficult. He recalled his father mentioning, at a single glance, that the first letter looked to be a warning. Albus now examined both letters from this point of view, but he could not see them being written by someone who had important information. Somehow, juxtaposing the two letters had helped open his eyes to a strange possibility; that of a desperate plea.

"See here?" Albus said, pointing at the first letter, illuminated by the fire of the Common Room. Morrison didn't bother looking, but Scorpius paid close attention. "Ignore the dash that separates the signature from the rest of the letter. It's just 'help me'. And then, on the next one it says 'is it you'. As if whoever they are, they're asking if I'm the one that can help them!"

"That works out great," Scorpius said, pulling the letters towards him, "but you're leaving out the rest of the first letter. 'Sometimes you're there and sometimes you're not'? I didn't know you played favorites with who you helped..."

"Well I haven't figured that part out yet" Albus admitted, pulling the letters towards him. "But it takes time!"

"Why would someone ask Al for help though?" Morrison said, almost rhetorically. "Shouldn't they be asking the Silver Wizard?"

They all gave a large grin at this. Just the day before, another rather small but still worthy of note newspaper article had been written, again chronicling the exploits of a certain masked figure. This time there had only been one victim, a single WAR member unconscious and bound by thick ropes. The article in question also had the wanted sign from Hogsmeade in it, but Albus had the feeling that no one was much for turning anyone in. Among the students of Hogwarts at least, the Silver Wizard had reached cult status.

To a certain member of the staff however, he had not. Puckerd had permitted the student body a single day of grieving before he continued with his interviews of assault, with sometimes two or three students a day being called to his office for him to "make acquaintances with". Every student that Albus later asked admitted to at least one thing; the Silver Wizard had been mentioned. Albus smiled with glee at this, knowing that once Puckerd exhausted every single student for all the information that they possessed, he would be forced to report back bad news to Fischer. Albus took particular pleasure in hearing the difficulty that the Potions Master had with Morrison, who had been interviewed the weekend after the attack. Albus had given his friend specific instructions on what to say, and another listen with the extendable ears had told him that the new route was safer, but just as effective.

"You seem like a student who enjoys the topic of the day" Puckerd said, and Albus could hear him turning a fresh page of his notepad. "What do you make of this 'Silver Wizard' fellow?"

"No real opinion" Morrison said, and though Albus couldn't hear it, he knew that his friend had shrugged. "Haven't met him. Or her."

"I see" Puckerd said, jotting slowly. He sighed, and Albus knew that he was getting exasperated. For ten straight minutes Morrison had fed him dead ends. "Well I suppose we have an infinite amount of knowledge to be obtained about you, shall we continue? Any particular dreams or aspirations?"

"Nope."

"Expected" Albus heard Puckerd mutter, loud and clear. "Out of curiosity, Mr. Vincent, are you aware that you have been obtaining very poor results in my class? Among the lowest, actually."

"Yup."

"Does that not bother you?" Puckerd asked, snakelike.

"Way I see it, sir, it's O.W.L. year. I'm more focused on the end of the year than anything else, actually. I study at my own pace."

"But surely, you wouldn't mind some extra help? Correct me I'm wrong, but you're frequently seen in the company of Mr. Potter, who has shown himself to be...proficient."

He said it as though his tongue had turned sour midway through, and Albus knew that Puckerd hated giving him praise. Morrison responded perfectly.

"Yeah, I hang with him."

"Indeed, how long have you known him?" Puckerd said, now jotting faster.

"Just met him this year actually. Nice bloke."

As Puckerd ran into brick walls with his search for information on either Albus or the Silver Wizard, Albus found himself thoroughly enjoying his last weeks before the winter break. Again, he knew this was not proper considering the state of the world, but he could not deny that Puckerd's failures were only the beginning of his reasons for feeling good. He had somehow managed to get a good grasp of his class work now, with time being allocated to each individual subject more so than any other time in his Hogwarts career. Indeed- he'd even taken notes in History of Magic once or twice. At the same time, he'd somehow managed to make stable ground with his Quidditch team. The first game of the season had given him a chance to analyze the rather large flaws in his team, and weekly practices now focused on bringing his new players

up to scratch rather than trying to turn them into professionals. The only dilemma that he had not made headway with was the conundrum that Lance had presented to him.

"I really don't think it's ever going to happen, Al" Mirra said one day as they sat in the library. She was going over her Charms notes-a class that she'd been struggling with slightly as of late-while he doodled game plans in the back of his notebook.

Albus frowned. "'Ever' is a bit much, don't you think? I mean what, you guys are just done talking for the next two and a half years?"

"I didn't say we were done talking" Mirra said, turning a page stubbornly. "I said I don't think that I'm ever going to reach out. Why would you ask that anyway?"

Albus shrugged. "I dunno. Just curious..."

He had not bothered to inform her of the situation that he was now in. On one end it felt terrible to conceal information from her, especially as he was being so honest with everyone lately. But on the other side of the coin, he knew that telling Mirra his interest in her reconciliation was forced would only make matters worse. She'd probably begin to resent Lance as well, and this would not bring her any closer to solving her issues with Rose.

Even as they discussed it, Albus saw the perfect couple stride by them, settling at a table in the corner of the library. For the past week they had always met at almost the exact same time that Albus and Mirra did, and though Albus knew that they were most likely not doing it intentionally, he could not help but feel unnerved. Mirra paid them no mind, though when she spoke it was quieter.

"I am a little worried though" she admitted. "I mean, we're both invited to the wedding after all. And I know that we're both going..."

Just a day ago Albus had received a letter from his mother telling him that arrangements had been made for the wedding. The event took place just two days after Christmas, during the break, and as Morrison *did* have a wizarding mother-regardless of whether his squib sister was fond of it or not- they also had an operating fireplace. Scorpius would be staying with the Potter family shortly before the day of the wedding, and then they'd all be flooded over. Nearly everyone in Albus' somewhat immediate family had been invited, despite Morrison's mother having never made contact with any of them. Morrison had already set up the dates for the reception as well, and, as he'd let slip to Rose casually, Lance had not been invited.

"I wouldn't worry about it" Albus assured his girlfriend. "Rose isn't going to cause trouble, especially not without Lance there."

"She doesn't need Lance to be there to start trouble" Mirra told him. "Hopefully Scorpius makes his move and keeps her busy all night."

Albus grinned, but seeing the serious look on her face, instantly grabbed her hand from across the table. "Look, this will all pass over" he told her soothingly. "Seriously, don't even worry about it..."

She nodded, squeezing his hand tightly. Over the top of her head however, he could see Lance throw him a pointy look, as if to ask if he'd done anything yet. Albus ignored it. He instead leaned in closer to his girlfriend.

"I'm getting a little tired of the library" he said, and she raised her eyebrows.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking that maybe after the break, I'll show you somewhere a bit more private."

The next day at breakfast, Albus' friends appeared to be outraged with him.

"Oh come on mate, the Room is our spot!" Morrison blurted out, so loud that Albus was not sure how he could complain about revealing it.

"I don't want to be hanging out anywhere that Lance can corner me and try and get me to give Mirra a talking to. And besides, we barely use that room as much as we could. It's always just been a place of refuge..."

"Unbelievable" Scorpius commented, clearly unwilling to let the cheerfulness of the weekend deter him from being pessimistic. "I ask you to assuage your girlfriend-convince her to comply-and all that you managed to do is set up a nice date!"

"There's a way around this whole thing" Albus said, taking a light sip of orange juice. "Lance is only blackmailing us-"

"-You-" Scorpius threw in quickly.

"-us," Albus repeated firmly, "because he's in a hurry and he doesn't want his girlfriend all bent out of shape over everything. If he does make good on his threat though, then he loses his only bargaining chip and things get worse. I'll let things run their course. I don't think that they can keep fighting forever."

Scorpius mouthed wordlessly at him, but at the same moment, the four tables erupted into noise. Albus looked up wildly, expecting to see owls, before suddenly realizing that mail had been delivered before he'd even been down for breakfast. What was all of the noise about then? He looked up at the high table, where Headmistress McGonagall had risen and cleared her throat.

"Settle down, settle down!" she said sharply, though some light babbling continued. Albus peered around the head of an older student, looking to see the cause of the disruption. He immediately saw Pukerd sitting still, his glasses plastered to his face and his hair somewhat

slicker than usual. For some reason, he was looking rather grim. A few seats down Albus could see-

"I understand that Ms. Fischer's arrival is an unexpected one, I can assure you that I myself had no prior knowledge. I do, however, expect my students to show her the courtesy and honor that she deserves as a prominent member in our Ministry and as a powerful advocate to our safety! Now, she would like to say a few words..."

Albus watched, eyes narrowed, as Janine Fischer stood up. Her glasses too were ridiculously close to her face, but this was the only neat thing about her. Her curly hair was just as tangled as ever, and her robes looked a bit shabby for someone who was supposed to be high up. She too cleared her throat, and Albus knew at once that her mere arrival had captured the attention of the entire student body.

"Good morning students" she said, sounding so strict and snappy that it was as though she was accusing them all of injustice. "I'm sure that you are all wondering what it is I am doing here, and for a few of you, you are probably wondering who it is I am. My name is Ms. Janine Fischer, and I am the Head Auror at the Ministry of Magic."

Co-Head! Co-Head! Albus thought bitterly, and he noted with satisfaction that one or two people at each table had muttered something along these lines. Fischer continued as if no such thing had occurred.

"As your Head Auror it is both my duty and privilege to serve as the protector of you and your families. I understand that this recent attack has-unnerved us all" she said. "And I understand that it is sometimes easy to misconceive lack of progress with lack of effort. Know this, students. The Ministry of Magic is doing everything that it can to stop the threat that we all now face. At the same time, however, there is one more issue that I feel the need to address. An issue that is possibly of greater importance."

The four tables all turned to one another curiously. Albus wished that he could get a good look at his brother and sister, but he instead had to settle for another glance at Pukerd, whose straight face had twisted itself into one of concealed glee. Albus saw a few other faces as well. Most looked normal, but Neville and McGonagall were both wearing expressions that masked something like anger. Even Hagrid was flushing.

"I am speaking to you all," Fischer continued, "about the Silver Wizard."

Albus smacked his forehead. He knew that his father had told him that Fischer considered Renegades to be the principle threat, but one Renegade in particular? A vigilante who had only, as far as they knew, been involved with three separate cases?

None of the students seemed to gather much from it either, as the muttering turned to full blown conversation. Fischer quieted them all down by waving her hands frantically in a manner that could not be further from what they were used to.

"I understand that this statement may create confusion" she screeched through the hall, her eyes darkening. "But know that this is of the utmost importance. The Ministry of Magic sees past what we understand to be a clever facade. It is easy, in these dark times, to incorrectly label a person with little respect for rules and regulations as a symbol of justice. But the person you all hear about in newspaper articles, and through word of mouth, is only the product of hope and imagination. On the surface we face a very great threat. The Ministry of Magic-or most of us anyway-have deemed the Silver Wizard a great danger to the stability of our society and the safety of our inhabitants."

This did little to calm the students, who all seemed to be eager to hear more. Fischer, once again, persisted through it all.

"The Silver Wizard shows little regard for those around him. Random attacks-even on those who may be suspected of criminal activity-endanger the lives of innocents. Furthermore, the Silver Wizard has thus far been fortunate that all of those that he has apprehended have been guilty. Regardless of who he is, no single person has the information necessary to determine who is a danger and who is not. I advise you all to think deeply on how you would feel if a loved one of yours suffered accidental death due to mere association."

Her eyes narrowed over to the right, squarely on the Gryffindor table, and Albus could feel the uneasiness in the air. She was most likely referring to the fact that several Gryffindors were related to or had ties with Renegades. It was an interesting thought. Would the Silver Wizard still be as appreciated if they ended up responsible for the death of someone like Donovan Hornsbrook's father?

"I will be here all day" Fischer continued icily, and many students seemed taken aback by this statement. "I advise anyone who has any information at all, regardless of how seemingly trivial it may be, to seek my subordinate-" she indicated Puckerd-" who is also your Potions master. He will arrange to have us speak. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Headmistress McGonagall made no further comments during breakfast, and the rest of the day was meant to be spent at the leisure of the students. Albus, realizing that he played no part in the nonsense going on, instead decided that he would use the day to get ahead of his studies. As they finished breakfast however, he could already hear the blabbering of fellow students.

"I reckon I actually know someone who knows him-"

"You think that maybe there's a reward of some kind?"

"I wonder why the Ministry cares *this* much-"

"How many people do you think will actually go to Fischer?" Albus asked Scorpius as they walked back.

"Probably a good amount" he replied.

"And how many do you think have actual information?" Morrison asked.

"None" Scorpius answered stoically. There was a knowing look on his face however, one that surprised Albus. Strangely, Scorpius gave a backwards glance to Fischer as they walked.

"What's on your mind?" Albus asked him as they made their way down to the dungeons.

"It's just strange, that's all. All of the people in the world, and the Head Auror-

"Co-Head-" Albus cut him off quickly.

"You know what I mean! All of the people in the world, and Fischer seems to think that Hogwarts is her best bet for getting information? Shouldn't she be interrogating fellow Ministry members?"

"Maybe she's already done that" Morrison added as they approached the Common Room door, which had already been opened by another student walking with them.

They entered the Common Room, where a bubbly Melonie Grue had already beaten them there.

"Sorry Morrison" she said darkly. "I have to tell that Ministry woman. I have to tell her that you're the Silver-

But Scorpius cut her off, still pondering out loud. "But if no one in the Ministry knows anything, how could she expect us to? It just doesn't make any sense for her to put so much stock in children knowing what was going on..."

"Whatever mate, I'm not really concerned by it" Albus admitted. "All I know is that she's not getting what she wants, and that's good enough for me. Tackle some Muggle Studies?"

They spent a great deal of their morning in the comfortable Common Room, skimming over their work to check that everything was in order. It was odd, but Albus was very pleased with the way that his studies had been going. He had dreaded the workload associated with O.W.L year, but he found himself almost looking forward to the end of year exams. Indeed, he was quite confident that his performances would mostly be up to scratch.

Students fizzled in and out of the Common Room throughout the day, Albus watching each of them with a sideways glance from his work. He wondered, if only just a little, if any of them were going to Puckerd and, ultimately, Fischer.

"You look a little nervous" Scorpius commented from next to him. Morrison was distracted by Melonie-they appeared to be playing their own variant of Chess for Morrison's sake, as he wasn't very good at the original- and thus their words went virtually unheard.

"Not nervous at all" Albus commented. "I think I'm actually okay this year-"

"I mean the look on your face every time that someone leaves. What's it to you who goes to Fischer anyway?"

"I don't know" Albus said honestly, looking over at the fireplace and wishing that there was a floating head to be seen. "I just feel like this is one of things that my dad doesn't want going on; her being here and interrogating us."

"Yeah...yeah I agree. For a few reasons" Scorpius said, somewhat cryptically.

Albus turned to him curiously, but before he could say anything the Common Room had opened up once more, and surprisingly, it was robes of black and canary yellow that entered. It was the Head Boy, a student with frizzy hair and buck teeth whose name Albus did not know.

"Albus Potter!" they called throughout the room, and all eyes turned to Albus, who lowered his quill slowly.

"Yes?" he said.

"Professor Puckerd wants to see you."

"*What!*"

The Head Boy turned his body and pointed at the door. "I'm to escort you."

Albus looked down at the textbook that he had open. He flipped a page casually, trying to think about what Puckerd would want with him. Or more accurately, what *Fischer* would want with him.

"Tell him I'm busy" Albus said coolly, and there was an in-take of breath from many of the students.

"You tell 'em Al!" Bartleby Bing called out.

The Head Boy was not impressed. His stare remained fixed in his direction. "Come with me" he said, and Albus was forcibly reminded of the Hammer.

Knowing that he was only prolonging the inevitable, he groaned and slammed his book shut. He stood up and followed the Head Boy out, walking several feet behind him the entire time. He was silently led through the stone labyrinth in this way, though most unusually they passed by the potions classroom. He was eventually led up several staircases, each time students walking

passed him idly, apparently as unaware of his destination as he was. He was finally stopped just outside of two identical looking gargoyles.

"Here?" Albus asked his escort, confused. This was the Head's office, and he had not been there for quite some time.

The Head Boy nodded. "Password is 'Wulfric'"

And with that, he strode off. Albus stared blankly at the stone creatures. His guard had left. He could turn away now. But he was extremely curious as to the purpose of his summoning...and he may even end up in serious trouble if he did not oblige...

"Wulfric" he said, and the gargoyles slid out of the way, revealing a familiar spiral staircase. Albus sighed and stepped on to them; within moments he found himself facing a highly polished door. He knocked.

"Enter" said a nasty voice that had none of Headmistress McGonagall's warmth.

Albus pushed the door open, immediately met with several surprises. For starters, his headmistress was nowhere to be found. The room was occupied by only two people. Fischer was sitting at the main desk, looking stern as she peered at him through her circular spectacles. Puckerd was standing at her side, notepad ready. What was more, however, was the peculiar actions of the portraits hanging on the walls. They were all staring intently, and Albus noticed that more than curiosity was on their well drawn faces. They looked almost like spies in the way that they surveyed the room.

The newest looking portrait, which Albus knew belonged to Severus Snape, was empty. Albus wondered vaguely where it had went to, as he had never seen another portrait of him in the castle, but the portrait next to this one distracted him from his thoughts. Albus Dumbledore alone among the portraits was asleep, snoring loudly and with such force that his beard swayed with his artificial breath. Before Albus could turn away however, he saw the portrait tip him a wink so enormous that the frame may have been close to falling off of the wall.

"We meet again, Mr. Potter" Fischer said acidly.

"Hello" Albus said dryly. For some odd reason, Puckerd began jotting at once. How had he extracted so much information from that mere greeting?

"Wendell tells me that you've been very helpful as his personal assistant" she said curtly. "So much so, in fact, that he scarcely has use for you anymore."

"Glad I could help."

Albus almost had to shout over the sounds of Puckerd and his notepad. Albus waited to be told to sit, but it didn't happen.

"You must be wondering why you are here" Fischer said simply.

"Where's Professor McGonagall?" Albus blurted out, wanting questions answered before he did anything else.

"Your headmistress was kind enough to give us privacy."

"But why are we in her office?"

Fischer gave him a contemptuous glare; she clearly did not enjoy being on the receiving end of questioning.

"I do not wish to stay here for long" Fischer replied, and she turned her head towards a rather new looking fireplace in the corner of the room. "The Headmistress' office is the only office in the castle that supports full body flooing."

Albus peered over to the fireplace as well and saw, to his surprise, a pot of murky yellow powder. Insta-Floo.

Fischer did not give him the opportunity to say anything else. "As I was saying, I'm sure that you are very curious as to why you are here."

"Not really" Albus said, and for some reason, he felt as though *he* were in control of the conversation. Perhaps standing up did something for his ego.

"Oh?" Fischer said, and Puckerd stopped, his quill balanced on a page. "You know why you have been called here?"

Albus nodded. "I have a good idea" he said casually, enjoying the amount of control that he had.

"Care to inform us?"

"Well I think that it's one of two reasons" Albus said, and without being told to, he took the seat across from Fischer. Puckerd gasped.

"He sat down without your invitation Ms. Fischer! See how I was saying how diff-" but his superior silenced him by raising her hand up.

"Go on" she said, blinking slowly.

"I think that you either want me to talk about my dad, or the Silver Wizard."

"How did you draw that conclusion?" Fischer said, and Albus saw a flicker of a smile on her face.

Albus drew a deep breath. He could say several things here, but now that he really thought about it, was he supposed to? His father had told him to maintain something of a civil tongue around

Puckerd, and he was sure that the same applied to Fischer. But at the same time, Albus was also the only of his siblings that his father was using as a personal informant. He obviously expected him to make the right decisions when it came to discussing these matters.

"Because every single person that *he*-" he jerked his head towards the stagnant Potions Master-" has a little chat with ends up being asked a question about one of those two topics. At first it was just my dad, but then after a few articles it became more about the Silver Wizard. And as I haven't had a proper interrogation yet, I figure that you'll try and get both out of the way right here."

To his immense surprise, Fischer kept the smile on her face. "Well that much is obvious" she said, and Albus found that his body had suddenly tensed up at this sentence. "What I mean to say Mr. Potter, is, do you know why it is that you're being asked these things? Or more specifically...do you know why it is I wanted a personal audience with you?"

Albus opened his mouth, but no words came out. He knew that Puckerd had wanted him as close as possible to bombard him with questions about his father, but he did not know why he would be suspected of knowing anything about the Silver Wizard. He was not sure whether Fischer was a legilimens or not-she made no eye contact anyway- but she seemed to have read his mind.

"Have you not yet made the connection as to why these two questions are asked along side one another? Or perhaps, why we specifically believe that you would have the answers that we are looking for?"

Again, Albus had no answer for her. Fischer smiled sweetly at this. She exchanged a menacing glance with her lapdog, and then turned back to her prey.

"We know that you are aware of more than you let on, Mr. Potter" she said, and this, more than anything, surprised him. About his father perhaps, but he truly did know nothing about the Silver Wizard.

"Erm-"

"And we also know that you are very unwilling to give us this information. Which is, by all means, understandable. But I do not believe that you fully understand how helpful you can be, or indeed, how beneficial your cooperation can be. What if I told you, Mr. Potter, that the mere presence of the Silver Wizard endangers your father?"

Albus said nothing. He simply let these words sink in, taking care to examine the curling of Janine Fischer's lips as she made such a statement.

"And how's that?" Albus asked, his curiosity piqued.

Puckerd stashed away his notepad for a single second, withdrawing from his robes a highly official looking slip of parchment. Fischer took it from him wordlessly and without looking at it.

"The Silver Wizard left a message after his last attack. It was written in the concrete by magic. This is what it said."

She slid the parchment over to him. In fancy writing it read:

Deliver Harry Potter, the worst of them all!

Albus read through what was written several times; making less and less sense of it each time he did so. This was a different game entirely from the cryptic, poorly written letters that he'd been receiving. This was coherent, but it didn't make any sense in any context. Indeed, looking over it, it seemed like-

"Ms. Fischer, did you just lie to me?"

"Excuse me?" she said sharply, and Puckerd began jotting again.

"Did you just lie?" Albus reiterated plainly. "This message wasn't left by the Silver Wizard, was it?"

Her face suddenly looked hungry for information. Puckerd was now muttering as he wrote, so as to keep organized.

"Interviewee...confirmed...falsehood..."

"What would make you say that?" Fischer said. "How would you know that this message is fake?" she barked, her breath a chilly rattle now. She leaned forward as well, and Albus had to move back in his chair to avoid the more repugnant aspects of her character.

"So it is then?" Albus said, refusing to say anything until he himself was answered.

"Yes. It is" Fischer said darkly through gritted teeth. "Now, explain to me how you know this message to not have been made by the Silver Wizard. Is it because you know too much about the identity of him to know that it could not-"

"I know it wasn't written by him because it's just obvious" Albus said blandly.

"Elucidate" she said, and Puckerd was now leaning in as well.

Having called her bluff made him feel more in control than ever. He smiled as he answered her.

"Because the Silver Wizard only goes after Renegades or Dark Alliance members, neither of which my dad has any allegiance to. If he did write that, he would have been referring to the fact that my dad is the worst Ministry member, but as it's *you* who's mostly against him, I have a feeling that he has no qualms with my dad at all."

"Oh is that so?" Fischer said. "You know that for a fact? Or has it not occurred to you that perhaps you do not know of everything released to the public? Perhaps, you simply have not heard about the attacks on Ministry members that have thus far been kept exclusively confidential, so much so that you could have never heard-"

"No, there haven't been any attacks on Ministry members" Albus said smartly.

"How would you know?" she snarled, her lips twitching in ire.

"Because you dislike me" Albus replied. "And you know that I dislike you. And that means you know that every single thing we're discussing here I'm eventually going to tell everyone that I know. If these Ministry attacks were such a well kept secret, and if it was so important that they not be released to the general public, then you never would have told me about them, because you wouldn't want it spread around. The only attacks have been on Renegades and Darvy's lot. And the fact that you just made up that lie about Ministry members being targets shows me that the message used to reach that lie was also a lie. You wrote that message. You did it to trick me into saying something, didn't you?"

Albus took a moment to relish in his defeat of Fischer. Both she and Puckerd wore faces of mingled surprise and hatred, the type of expression that you would never expect an adult to have for a child or teenager.

When Fischer finally spoke her voice was a raspy one.

"You are fifteen, correct?"

"Yes" he replied, grinning widely at the fact that she'd had no argument for him.

She gave the slightest of sighs, and Puckerd recoiled back to his corner. Albus noticed that rather than jotting he was tracing lines, as if crossing out bits of his accumulated work.

"You are unusually bright for your age, Mr. Potter."

She seemed to utterly loathe the awe that she'd detected in her own voice. Albus continued to smile smugly, eager to throw in one last attack.

"Not really" he said with a shrug of his shoulders, and the comment had its intended effect; Fischer's nostrils flared. He had not been insulting himself. He had been insulting her.

Fischer rose from her seat so abruptly that Albus was quite sure that she was going to draw her wand on him for the second time in months. She didn't however. She merely stood up straight and fixed her robes, taking the time to brush raggedy curls from out of her face as well. Walking right around him and towards the fireplace, she grabbed the mustard powder and turned to him and Puckerd.

"Wendell, I look forward to reading your report. Keep up the good work as Potions Master as well." She turned to Albus, said nothing, and then threw the Insta-Floo powder into the fire. She shouted something incoherent over the roar of the flames, and at the next second was gone.

Albus turned to Puckerd, who stowed his notepad away and addressed him icily.

"Dismissed."

Albus didn't even need to be told once; he had already risen from his chair and made his way out of the office. Descending down the spiral staircase and entering the seventh floor corridor, he kept his smirk fixed on his face. Regardless of how many people had gone to her earlier in the day, Fischer and her side of the Ministry had nothing. Nothing on his father or the masked vigilante that was causing her strife. And what's more, he, Albus, had successfully swindled her out of information and made her look foolish! He thought that his father would be very proud of him if he knew what had just occurred. This more than anything brought him cheer.

As he descended the next set of stairs, he could not help but ponder the strangeness of what he'd just went through. Fischer had expected him to see through her lie. Her immediate reaction to his accusation was to inquire as to how he'd known. Surely, she had not been counting on his deductive skills. What information then, did she think that he had? She had been trying to ensnare him in a trap that would reveal how he had prior knowledge that the Silver Wizard had not left that message about his father...

Connections began formulating themselves in his head at an alarming rate. Albus felt his heart beat quicken as each small clue intertwined itself with another one. By the time that he'd reached the dungeons again he was bounding off of the walls in his hurry to reach the Common Room.

"Gaunt!" he yelled at the blank stretch of wall, and in another moment he was back where he'd started. A few people had left, but the environment was still mostly the same. Morrison and Melonie had abandoned their chess game and were playing exploding snap, a game that was probably less likely to hurt someone's ego. Scorpius was sitting in the exact same place, everything identical except for the book that he was reading.

He would tell Morrison when his friend was less distracted, for now, he'd dive right in to theorizing with Scorpius.

"Scorpius!" he hissed, scooting beside him.

Scorpius looked up. 'How'd it go?' he said, prepared to turn his head back to his book.

"I think that Fischer and Puckerd reckon my dad is the Silver Wizard!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

Scorpius blinked once, then gave a sheepish grin. "To be honest mate, I kind of agree with them."

Chapter 11: Magicianship

"There he goes, the Silver Wizard! Off to go beat down some criminals, I expect" Albus mumbled sarcastically.

Scorpius narrowed his eyes at him, then flicked water off of his fingers and into his face.

It was the winter break, and Albus' father had just exited the kitchen. Albus and his friend were stuck in front of the sink washing dishes without magic. He had by no means volunteered to do such a thing, but Scorpius, whether to spite him or to kiss up to his mother, had offered to do it.

"You can joke about it all you want" Scorpius said, vigorously rubbing a plate clean. "But that won't change the fact that out of all the possibilities, more than one person has come to my conclusion. About half of the Ministry, in fact."

"They only think that because they're out to get my dad" Albus said, squeezing a soapy sponge half-heartedly.

"Ever think that maybe they're out to get him because that's what they think?"

Albus sighed. "Believe what you want. And will you stop spending twenty minutes per fork? We're not going to be done until midnight..."

It was two days before Lisa Vincent's wedding, and Albus had been rather enjoying his break thus far. Christmas was the usual affair; a variety of guests showing up and asking him about how school was going. His presents had included the typical assortment of sweets and interesting books, with the occasional newly introduced joke shop item thrown in. His favorite present by far had been the collection of sweet poems sent to him via owl by Mirra; many of which had veiled references to him and her that dated back quite some time. He had taken to reading them each night before he went to sleep.

"Well are you at least done with all of that Waddlesworth crap now?" Scorpius said, taking his time as he methodically wiped a spoon clean.

Albus, surprised by this question and sporting soapy hands, dropped his own perfectly cleaned spoon into a dirty pot. He frowned at his idiocy and picked it up once more.

"Say what?"

"At the beginning of the year" Scorpius said. "You were all about catching Waddlesworth."

Albus felt nonplussed. How had he forgotten?

"I'm not done with it" he said. "I'm still curious as to what he was doing in Diagon Alley that day. And he's been *unusually* quiet in the papers recently, he's definitely up to some- hey, wait a minute!"

Scorpius turned to him. "Yes?"

"You don't think- Waddlesworth-"

"- Is the Silver Wizard?" Scorpius finished for him, and he actually ceased his scrubbing for a moment. "I don't know" he admitted. "I mean, I haven't met him."

"Well I have" Albus said quickly, now prepared to dismiss his own question. "And he's not the sort. I mean, he ran away last year during the massacre once his bodyguard got wrecked by Ares."

Scorpius nodded. "Seems to debunk it. Plus, I'm sure that whoever they are, they must be a pretty skilled wizard-"

"Or witch, like Morrison said" Albus corrected him, though they both chortled.

"Still though" Scorpius said, recuperating from the laugh. "Makes you wonder. Skilled and courageous. I wonder who fits the profile..."

Albus received a knowing look after this, which he rolled his eyes at as he rinsed off more cutlery.

As Albus went to bed that night, yet another poem tucked away under his pillow, he allowed himself to ponder more on the identity of the Silver Wizard. Despite only a few appearances, there seemed to be so much associated with the mysterious figure. Wanted by the Ministry, praised by the students of Hogwarts, probably feared by WAR and the Dark Alliance alike. It would take someone rather extraordinary-or perhaps even someone ordinary prone to extraordinary circumstances-to be a candidate for this title.

Could it be his father? The thought swam in his head as he rolled over restlessly, eager to discuss the matter further. Scorpius was tucked away in a cozy guestroom down the hall however, making this quite impossible. His father being the Silver Wizard was highly unlikely. But it wasn't impossible; stranger things had happened before, he was sure...

Through his eyelids he saw what he imagined the Silver Wizard to be. He had only a vague description thus far, and that was of a wizard adorned in shiny silver with a matching mask. He imagined proficient wandwork as well. Spells flying furiously. He saw clearly in his head The Hammer fall over, Waddlesworth running away, defenseless. He saw Darvy being blasted through a series of walls. Both had occurred by the masked vigilante, who had dodged spells effortlessly before flicking their own wand (which looked rather like his father's) and wiping away the opposition. But wait, that wasn't right. It had been Ares who had done that to The Hammer. And he, Albus, who had inflicted that damage to Darvy, inadvertently of course. What was he even thinking about? He was drifting off...

As easily as sleep had come, it had been harrowing to rise out of bed in the morning. Albus' dreams kept weaving in and out of memories and fantasies, moments in his life that were viewed accurately until the arrival of the media's favorite individual. The last dream that he could remember had been the most unsettling. It had ended with the Silver Wizard removing his mask, and his father holding a single finger up to his lips.

He decided that he would simply address the matter. He and his father were being truthful with another, after all, and there was no reason for Albus to not voice his suspicions; or more accurately, Scorpius' suspicions, which he wished to do away with. Besides, he wanted a private chat with his father anyway. He had not yet had the opportunity to mention that he'd received a second cryptic letter.

It seemed, however, that he would not get the chance until at least during the wedding. He wanted to do it with some degree of privacy, but the day before was almost destined to be a busy one. Despite the fact that no one in his family was set to serve as the bride or groom, the hustle and bustle of preparations managed to reach his home. For starters, some people weren't as enthusiastic about attending. James didn't quite seem to mind it, but Morrison had not invited his girlfriend and this proved to be something of a let down for him. Hugo, always the reserved one, had concealed a groan when his obligation to be there was mentioned. And then there was Lily.

"But why do *I* have to go!" Lily whined, sounding like she was three rather than thirteen. "It's Albus' friend!"

"You get along with Morrison too!" Albus hollered across the dinner table, shocked at this statement.

"I get along with him" she said pointedly. "But we're not exactly best mates. And besides, it's not even his wedding, it's his sister's, and you're the only one that's even met her!"

There was too much truth to this statement for Albus to create a proficient rebuttal, but thankfully, he was saved by his mother, who was magicking a large cauldron over to the table slowly.

"Morrison is a friend of the *family*. And that means that his family is collectively our friend, and that means that we go! Besides, it will give you an excellent excuse to dress up and look pretty. Didn't you see the dress that we picked up for you?"

Lily huffed, and Albus knew that her unwillingness to attend had less to do with personal relationships and more to do with her dislike of formal occasions; specifically dressing up. Rose, who was sitting at the table as well, patted her mouth haughtily with her napkin.

"Lily, I'll help you get all done up. Believe me; you'll catch a few glances."

"Oh no she won't-" Albus' father started, but his mother continued speaking instead.

"And as we mention proper dress, Scorpius, your parents sent yours, it looks lovely. Albus, we got you a new suit as well."

Albus nodded, and about an hour later, he thought that he was reasonably satisfied with his muggle clothing. It was the standard muggle suit, complete with a white tie. The shirt he'd be wearing underneath was a brilliant shade of emerald, which, according to his mother, would match his eyes and show his "Slytherin side" perfectly.

Learning what he'd be wearing was not the most arduous part of the day though; this time instead went to the laborious chore of giving his parents-or more specifically, his mother- as much information as he could about the Vincent family. As she did not want to attend a wedding and have nothing to speak about, his mother was giving him oral surveys that reminded him of the type he was accustomed to in his Potions class.

"And the groom-Mike, you said his name is- what does he do? Most muggles are office workers."

"He does magic" Albus said, trying not to let his smile escape him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean he...you know. Does magic."

Other questions had him stuck entirely however. He had no idea what edible treat his mother should bring to the wedding, nor where she should be shopping for a wedding gift, both of which were to be settled upon with very little time to make either possible.

"Mum I really don't know!" Albus said after inquired as to if the husband and wife would be moving in together and would thus require home appliances typical of non-magic folk. Albus insisted that it was irrelevant. If Morrison's family was anything like him at all, presents would not be held in nearly as high regard as their mere appearance. Then again, he realized, he was not sure if Morrison was anything like his sister.

All in all, neither act of courtesy ended up taking place, and the morning of their departure to the Vincent household was signaled by the large crowding of people around the fireplace. Albus lined up with bags around his arms-he and the rest of the males had been given the task of carrying the suits and the like- and watched as his father removed the pot of mustard powder that he'd just seen Fischer use only weeks ago.

"Do we really need Insta-Floo?" he asked his father quietly, everyone else preoccupied with trying to line up.

His father shrugged. "Might as well. It makes for easier travel just in case, and we're not exactly low on it."

The idea of using a special kind of powder to enter Morrison's home interested Albus greatly. Before he could stop himself, he had asked another question.

"Is there going to be any like-wizarding security and stuff-at the wedding? And at the reception?"

"We've already worked out the details with Morrison's mother by owl. The vast majority of guests will be muggles, and we have to respect that. The wedding takes place at a rather nice hotel, and the reception is on the top floor. We'll have charms and enchantments placed around the entire place; the muggles won't notice a thing, but everyone will be safe."

"Just enchantments?" Albus asked, slightly unnerved. He was not expecting anything bad to happen, but at the same time, he thought it unusual that his father would be going somewhere without some kind of extra security.

His Uncle Ron, who was standing behind them, chuckled. He nudged Albus on the shoulder playfully.

"You've got nothing to worry about Al" he said. "The enchantments just contain the dangers inside. Me, my wife, and your parents will all be there. We're the real defense. And between you and me," he lowered his voice a bit at this, "I feel safer with your Aunt Hermione around than I do any Auror, and that includes your old man. No offence Harry."

"None taken" Albus' father replied absentmindedly, tossing the powder into the fireplace. "Okay now listen up!" he called out loudly. "The address is 715 North Ford Road. A little tricky to say clearly, so take your time with it-"

"We know how to speak dad!" James called out.

"I know you do" he replied to his son. "Too much" he added, turning back to the fireplace.

"Okay Gin, why don't you go first-"

Albus' mother left first, then Lily, and then Rose. Albus personally thought that this was a little ridiculous, as he was the one holding heavy bags and who desperately needed to put them down, but he waited for his turn nonetheless. He went after Scorpius, clinging to the bags tightly with his eyes jammed shut. The familiar feeling of constant spinning made his stomach do flip-flops. When his feet finally hit solid ground he blinked his eyes open and absorbed his surroundings.

He had never been in a house quite like it, and yet, it was a very normal house. He was in a sitting room, the size of which Albus took to be that of a typical single home. It was decorated plainly as well. There was a single painting on the wall furthest away from him that depicted some smooth underwater scene, and a few tables loitered with pictures that either had babies or young children (all Morrison and his sister, Albus was sure) on them. The carpet was a plain beige that looked like it had been tread on for years, though it was barely visible amidst the assortment of tan colored couches and comfy looking chairs scattered throughout the vicinity.

Against the wall to his left, nearest the door, was a television set placed inside of a fancy, new looking unit. This was only the second home that Albus had ever seen one in, the other being that of his cousin Dudley, who also seemed to favor the box more than anything else in his home.

Albus felt rather awkward to be standing in Morrison's home, for the first time ever even, and not having anyone there with him to give him permission. Scorpius was also standing in the room with him, holding his bags, but neither of them seemed to have any indication as to where everyone else had gone. There was a flash of fire, and James had appeared with them, he too grasping a bag.

"Where is every- blimey, nice TV."

"Where do we go?" Scorpius asked, but almost on cue, a very familiar if not slightly out of place figure approached them from the next room. It was Melonie Grue.

"Hey guys!" she said, beaming. "Here, just put those-yeah-no okay I'll just take them-"

Acting as if she knew her way around the house considerably, she led them through a cramped dining room that looked scarcely used and into a kitchen that was a tad bit more interesting than the sitting room. There was a bright blue floral pattern to it, but it still looked generally unkempt. It had the feeling of business to it, as if it had been used regularly as of late, and Albus again found himself among contraptions that he either knew from the Dursley household or from his Muggle Studies class. There was a battered looking toaster taking up much of the first counter he saw, a heavy looking silver microwave placed atop a shelf, and even a dishwasher that looked like it may have been broken. Most peculiar about the kitchen however, was that it was filled with people.

His mother, Lily, and Rose were all cramped into the kitchen, ogling the appliances with interest. Albus wondered where Morrison, or any member of the Vincent family for that matter, could possibly be at a moment when their guests were arriving.

"How- how long have you been here?" Albus asked Melonie, who looked extremely comfortable. She had strolled over to a milky white refrigerator and removed a carbonated drink from it.

"A couple of days" she said. "Morrison and Mirra are upstairs" she added quickly.

Albus raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Huh?"

"Mirra's here" she repeated crisply. "She arrived earlier in the morning, she offered to help Morrison clean up a bit upstairs, you guys should probably go join them. I have to stay here to welcome everyone."

"I'll stay here" Rose said in a dark manner that was noticed only by Albus and Scorpius, who dropped their bags in the kitchen, exchanged a look, and went back through the rooms. This time

they turned and proceeded up a staircase, the whole while examining the pictures that they passed. Albus thought that he saw Morrison's sister far more than he saw his friend, but he did certainly notice him. Though he'd barely had the time to adjust himself to the new appearance, he looked different without the whiskers above his lips or the goofy smile that accompanied his lackadaisical expression. Indeed, he almost looked tense in most photographs, especially as they were unmoving. And though Albus would not point it out to anyone, he noticed an additional detail. As far as he knew, he could not see anyone who would look like Morrison's father in any of them.

As they passed up the stairs he heard the sounds of more flooding.

"In the kitchen!" he yelled down to whoever had just arrived, wanting to spare them the uneasy feeling he'd had while waiting idly. His voice alerted people of his presence though, and Mirra was waiting for him at the top of the stairs.

"You're late" she said to him. "We're almost done."

"Sounds like I came just in time then..."

She was dressed in a most unfamiliar outfit. She had thick gloves on an apron that looked like it was designed more for cooking than cleaning, complete with boots that looked like they were designed for trekking through mountains. Albus eyed her with interest, though it was Scorpius who voiced the next question.

"Is all that really necessary?"

"It's disgusting up here" Mirra said lowly, accepting a quick kiss on the cheek from Albus.

"I heard that!" came a shout, and soon Morrison was by her side, grinning. "Glad you guys could make it!"

He didn't look half as prepared for the task of cleaning as Mirra, though he certainly looked as though he'd been doing a fair amount. His typical muggle clothes-a pair of jeans and a loose fitting blue shirt- were covered in thick dust and what looked like liquid stains. Albus thought that he carried himself very well in muggle clothes, though, and now that he thought about it, they were probably just normal attire to him.

"Let me show you around" he said, turning on his heel and leading them through the upstairs hallway, passed Mirra.

"Why are we here?" Scorpius said bluntly. "We should have just came tomorrow, I don't see the need for all the cleanin-"

"Eh" Morrison cut him off. "Mike-the bloke my sister's marrying- he's got his family coming over for dinner tonight, so we're sprucing up the house, plus we wanted to have a lot of guests to

show. Oh, and also, they all still have no idea that we can turn people into frogs with a wave of our wands, so no talking about magic. If anyone asks, you all go to a public school. Think of a name on the spot. Oh, and Al, any family members old enough to be out of school are stock brokers. Pass the message along."

This succinct summary accounted for quite a bit, but Albus now had something different to ask about.

"Melonie's been here for a bit, huh?"

Morrison didn't respond; he simply grinned. Instead of saying anything however, he simply led them into a cozy room at the end of the hall and flicked on a light switch.

It was clearly Morrison's room. The walls were all painted blue, but there were enough sports posters there to make it look multi-colored. It seemed to be a blend of his muggle youth and his current wizarding status. One wall was covered completely with moving pictures of broomsticks and furious colliding, the other with still pictures of a sport played on ice that Albus knew to be called Hockey. The floor itself was so cluttered that Morrison needed to navigate his way through it as if he were stepping on stones to cross a lake. There were heaps of cloths, stacks of magazines or other pieces of crumpled paper, and more muggle related products like CDs loitered throughout. Albus noticed that the bed looked a tad bit too small, especially considering Morrison's size, though this may have been an illusion do to all of the plain looking pillows and blankets on top of it. All in all, it was a mess.

"Welcome," Morrison said, looking upwards with a dignified expression and raising his arms, "to my palace!"

"Mate, this is the worst looking room I've ever seen" Scorpius said blandly, and Morrison lowered his arms and hung his head.

"Meh, whatever. I'm here like three months a year..."

"Then how does it get so messy!"

Before he could answer however they heard the sound of entrance downstairs, not from the whooshing of the fireplace, but rather from the front door. Albus felt slightly uneasy at this. It felt strange enough to be in Morrison's room without having been invited into the house, but it was even more odd to think of the interactions that would soon take place between all of the people now in the cramped house. He heard yelling that signified it was Morrison's mother who had entered.

"Morrison!" she yelled up. "Come down here and introduce us to your friends!"

"Coming mom!" he yelled down, though he made no discernible effort to move back through his room.

"See those magazines?" he commented. "Good health tips in there, really solid stuff-"

"Morrison!" came the yell again.

"Coming!" he hollered back down, though he turned his attention back his friends.

"Mate, maybe you should-" Scorpius started.

"Also, fun fact: if you shave, it actually grows back faster and thicker, great article on it in the magazine at the bottom, and I know a lot of people say it's not true but they have a scientist saying-"

"Morrison Ruth Vincent!" said a bellow from down the stairs, and Morrison did not even respond. He looked horrified.

"Ruth?" Albus and Scorpius asked simultaneously, both of them struggling not to laugh and failing terribly.

"I never even knew you had a middle-" Albus started

"It was my great aunt's name!" Morrison said quickly, his face as red as a cherry. He pushed passed them both hurriedly.

"Coming mom!" he yelled again, and this time he made sure to thump on each stair he went down, as if to prove that he was truly on his way.

The day progressed as one of the strangest that Albus had ever had. Michael, the groom (who asked to be called "Mike") came by in the evening after being out for lunch with his fiancé and parents. He proved to be nice enough, though Albus thought that he was among the most eccentric muggles that he'd ever made acquaintance with. He had long, straw colored hair and a bulbous nose that made him look almost like a clown, as well as a stringy, pallid look to him that was almost unhealthy. His hearty laugh was booming however, and he did it quite frequently. Also, as Albus had expected, he was always eager to show of his magical ways.

"Is...this your card!" he snapped, and was met with applause as Albus nodded yet again.

"Isn't he amazing!" Lisa Vincent exclaimed, clapping more exuberantly than all of them and tossing her hair behind her head. Albus noticed that she was much more talkative when it came to praising her partner, though she did frequently whip out her mobile phone and press buttons rapidly.

"He sure is!" Uncle Ron said, clapping almost as much and looking around frantically, appearing to be utterly perplexed. "Kids did you see that! Do another one!"

By the time that dinner had been served, they had seen an assortment of magic tricks that Albus had to admit, seemed impossible without a wand. Signed cards had flown through windows,

coins had vanished, and in the grand finale they'd even watched Mike levitate a few inches off of the ground for a short period of time, resulting in a squeal from Uncle Ron so strong that his wife had to ask him if he needed a change of diapers. Albus mostly sat with Mirra and his friends the whole time, blushing as his family silently mocked him for holding hands with his girlfriend. By the time that they actually sat down for dinner, Albus had already accommodated himself to the strangeness of the Vincent household. He was not quite prepared for the meal however.

"Mashed potatoes, could you please pass the worthless son? I mean, Morrison, could you please pass the mashed potatoes?"

Only those used to this humor laughed, and that included Morrison's mother, who had said it. Albus watched with his mouth open as Morrison playfully tossed several string beans across the table at her.

Someone was always saying something at the dinner table in the Vincent house. Always. Albus recalled having had dinner with the Malfoy's three years ago, and he had thought that the long stretches of silence and bitter tones had been somewhat awkward. Ten minutes into dinner with Morrison's family, and Albus knew that he would always think of supper differently. Whereas Scorpius' family seemed intent on bottling in their relative dislike for each other, Morrison's seemed to think it was most therapeutic to let it out in long, sporadic bouts. The initial "wet willy" that Lisa gave her younger brother had been slightly shocking, but the amount of effort that went into deprecating one another afterwards, even if done playfully, was staggering. Even Mike and his elderly parents seemed to be accustomed to it, though they didn't contribute as much, and the same went with Melonie, who sat next to Morrison. It was up to Albus and his family to stabilize things and ask actual questions.

"So Mike," Uncle Ron said, clear over the sound of Morrison accusing his sister of having been born with a tail, "those are some pretty neat tricks. How do you learn that stuff?"

"Magician's code Ron" Mike replied, smiling wildly. "There's no magic in simply telling people how it's done. It would damage the wonder."

"Yeah I get that, I get that" he replied, "but how would someone go about learning-"

"So Mr. Potter" Mike's mother said, addressing Albus' father, her wispy hair covering her forehead. "I hear that you're quite skilled with moving money around."

"Call me Harry" he replied kindly. "And erm-yes-something like that, don't really like to discuss my work unless I have to-"

"What I don't get," Uncle Ron said loudly enough to end all other conversations, "is how he managed to put the *same card* that I'd signed through the window. My handwriting and everything. Truly phenom-"

"Give it a rest dad!" Hugo quipped up from next to him.

"So Scorpius" Mike said, turning his attention to him. "I've heard that you're one of the top students in your class. Anything in particular you excel at? I was a math whizz myself, never very good at writing though..."

"Uhhhh, no just a bit of everything..."

It proved to be relatively easy to keep their magical identities a secret from the unsuspecting muggles, and Albus was pleased with this in particular as they neared the end of dinner. He had never truly considered it before, but he thought that Morrison deserved a large amount of credit for how easily he'd assimilated himself into the wizarding lifestyle. He knew that he was mostly used to muggle surroundings, and seeing it in person, he thought that he should have taken much more interest in his friend's life outside of school.

"It was delicious" Aunt Hermione was saying to Morrison's mother, and there was a murmur of agreement at this.

"Hopefully you'll be able to fit into your dress tomorrow, Lis" Morrison said, patting his stomach and supporting his chair on two legs, "it would be a shame if we had to return another one for being too slim..."

There was some cackling throughout the table, except from Albus' crowd, who all looked around unsure of whether they were permitted to laugh at it. Lisa grabbed the back of her brother's chair and pulled it back quickly; he gave a yelp in anticipation of the fall which never came, and after one last chortle, it was time for bed.

"Okay, we've got plenty of room," Morrison's mother was saying as people gathered into sleeping groups, "so long as we bunk up just a bit. Boys, you'll be fine together?" she asked Albus, Morrison, and Scorpius, all of whom nodded.

As it turned out there was a rather roomy basement with which Albus' parents would be staying the night, and Mike was leaving with his family, not to be seen again until adorned in groom garb; they had more room than previously anticipated. Melonie, Rose, Lily, and Mirra all ended up getting a room together (Rose huffed indignantly at this, while Mirra seemed to try and disregard it completely) and Hugo and James took the sitting room without complaint.

Albus was the first to lie down in his bed. Scorpius and Morrison were still in the bathroom brushing his teeth when he started to nod off, though a sudden entrance returned him to reality.

"Look tired kiddo" his father said quietly.

Albus nodded.

"You've made some nice friends" his father continued, looking around at the mess of Morrison's room and settling his eyes on the sleeping bags that Albus and Scorpius were to use. "Unkempt, but nice."

"Not really what I expected, but I'll take it" Albus said. "What's up?" he asked, sure that his father had a reason for being there.

"I just wanted to thank you" his father said, and this took Albus rather aback.

"For what?"

His father gave him a plain stare, then looked over his shoulder to make sure that no one was coming; they could still hear the faucet running in the bathroom. "I've wanted to say it for a while, but to be honest, something told me tonight was the best night to get you on your own. I wanted to thank you for putting up with everything. Puckerd, the attention, all of it."

It was weird to see his father this calm. Typical apologies occurred at the end of arguments or when revealing bitter feelings of resentment or disappointment, but this apology seemed almost serene; unnecessary.

"No-no problem" Albus said, not really sure what else to say. There was one thing-and almost comical accusation in fact-but Albus could not bring himself to mention in this very moment. His father seemed to take his acceptance as a cue to end the conversation however. They heard the faucet turn off, and his father prepared to leave.

"Get some sleep Al, we've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Goodnight."

"Goodnight" Albus replied, slightly unnerved. His father left, and he was asleep before Morrison and Scorpius had even entered the room.

Chapter 12: The Silver Wizard

Morning came far too early for Albus' liking. The cacophony that greeted his ears was nothing compared to the smell of burnt breakfast, and the furious nudging was only a further reminder that he had spent the night in the Vincent household.

"Up up up!" Morrison was saying groggily, poking him without pause.

"I'm up, I'm up!" Albus said, tossing and turning until he was entirely separated from his sleeping bag. "What time is it?"

"It's time to hurry. We have like an hour before we have to go."

"An hour!"

Once Albus had left the room he realized that he was not the only one disheveled, and, more importantly, he knew that he was not the only one who had just learned the time. The first person to greet him apart from Morrison was his girlfriend.

"Don't laugh" she said, her voice a croak.

"I'm not!" Albus said, smiling at her pink dressing gown. He had never seen her so unkempt, though then again, he'd also never seen her so early in the morning. Her dark hair was tangled and looked as though it would be painful to comb, and her eyes were sunken.

She turned her head away from him. "Don't look! I'm hideous!" she joked.

"Okay I won't" Albus said, smiling, and she gave him a playful slap.

"Enough messing around" came his father's voice from the bottom of the stairs. "Come have some breakfast and then get dressed."

His voice sounded tense, and Albus knew that he was not enjoying the prospect of having to rush.

Morrison's family didn't seem to mind so much however.

"You don't have to scarf it down dear" Mrs. Vincent said to Scorpius, who had indeed nearly choked on his eggs.

"Won't- won't we be late?" he asked.

"Wedding can't start without me" Lisa said from next to him, looking at the back of a cereal box. Scorpius jumped in surprise at being addressed by her, but said nothing.

It became readily apparent to Albus that Morrison's family was even less organized than his own. They seemed to have no concept of time, choosing not to rush or even to check the clock, and

they also seemed to know very little about the wedding in itself-surprising considering how very instrumental they were to it.

"Wait, you don't even know where it is we're going?" Melonie asked Morrison in the living room. He was still in his pajamas, yawning and dozing in and out of sleep.

"No, we know what it's called and stuff; we just don't know how to get there."

"So- so we're just not going then?" Hugo asked.

Morrison snorted. "Course we're going. We're going to call Mike and ask for directions on the way."

"Ahhh..."

Albus spent most of his morning in Mirra's vicinity, waiting for everyone else to get ready. His first priority was to check on her sleeping arrangements.

"So how was it sleeping with Rose in the room?" he asked in Morrison's cluttered room.

"We sleep in the same dormitory, don't we?"

"Well yeah" he said, shrugging. "But I mean, you guys were closer last night. No girl talk?"

She sighed. "She went straight to bed, and so did I."

He frowned at her. The pressure of Lance's proposal was not weighing very heavily on his head, but he himself was growing a bit uneasy. Were they really never planning on speaking to each other again?

"It's been more than two months" Albus said to her.

"I can count Al."

"I know you can, I'm just saying..."

Far more than an hour had passed before things started moving. After a while they were all told to get dressed, something that the men managed to accomplish rather quickly compared to the women. Morrison was wearing a brown suit that looked like it was typical of a lawyer, though it actually went quite well with his hair. Scorpius ended up dressing entirely in black, so much so that he looked as though he were wearing his own shadow, and he'd also slicked his hair to give him an extremely clean look matched by no one in the house. Albus was content with his standard suit and green undershirt.

The girls went all out. Melonie had put her hair up for the wedding, and it looked very good. Apart from this she had opted to wear brown to match Morrison, which made Albus feel slightly embarrassed. Unless Mirra had miraculously chosen green, they would not be matching.

She didn't. She emerged from the upstairs wearing a strapless dress of sparkling grey, one that complemented her eyes quite well in fact. Albus smiled broadly as she made her way down to him, her hair straightened and down her back.

"You look amazing" he said as she stood by him.

She smiled. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Rose came down with Lily next. Rose was wearing a crimson dress of an almost identical design to Mirra's, and in Albus' opinion, it didn't work too well with her hair, which had been curled. Scorpius looked quite close to fainting next to him however, which Albus could only assume had more to do with how he felt about her than it did her actual appearance. Lily too was dressed in red, but she didn't put any effort into her face or hair like the other girls had done. On the contrary, she looked bored and disinterested.

"All right, we're ready to go!" Albus' father said, and he saw that his father, like himself, was wearing a standard suit with green trimming. Albus' mother was wearing matching green.

It felt weird to have his own father be handling the departure, but he supposed that if Morrison's mother were in charge, they wouldn't have made it to the proceedings until the next day. They shuffled into three separate cars, with the car in the lead belonging to Mrs. Vincent, her children, and Melonie. Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione had Rose, Hugo, and Lily with them, and Albus took the back of his parent's car with James and Scorpius.

It appeared as though Mrs. Vincent did indeed manage to get the correct directions, but their trip was slowed down considerably by the numerous stops made by the car in front. First they had to stop to get gas, and shortly after, both Lisa and Morrison decided that they needed to go to the bathroom. Couple this with two quick stops to get food for a hungry Morrison that could not wait for the wedding, and Albus wondered if perhaps Mike would end up thinking that he'd been left at the altar.

Albus finally sighed with relief when they pulled up to the grand looking hotel, and he had to admit, the hectic morning had made him eager to get the affair over with. They were practically frogmarched through the doors, Lisa was whisked away by her mother, and Albus ended up in the middle of the room where the ceremony would take place.

"It's beautiful in here!" Mirra gasped, and Albus silently agreed.

He had been to many weddings in his life, but he could scarcely remember them. There had been a period of time in his youth when his family had continued to grow almost by the hour, and

though he had vague recollections of these events, they were too far back in his history for him to grasp the concept of what a wedding actually looked like. The one thing shared by the Vincent wedding and the previous ones he'd been too, he knew for sure, was the amount of people there.

The room was gargantuan, designed purely to have as many spectators as possible. The aisle in the middle, where the bride would walk, was the only open space noticeable; the benches were filled up almost completely. He didn't know if the people there were mostly in support of Lisa or mostly in support of Mike, but there were far too many of them to matter. The buzz of the room prevented Albus from talking to anyone who was not close enough to him for a collision to take place, and thus, he had no idea where to sit. He was moved along by his mother, who was desperately trying to organize in a situation where none seemed possible. Ultimately, he and Mirra ended up sitting next to Morrison, Melonie, and strangely, Hugo, all in a bench near the back. The rest of his party had all been whisked to other places, and he could only assume that Lily and James were with his parents, and Scorpius and Rose with hers.

"You ever been to one of these things?" Mirra asked him.

"Years ago" he replied. "Don't remember much. You?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea what to do. Do I just sit quietly?"

"Basically" he replied. "Until the reception. That's when we get to dance" he grinned.

She gave him a weak smile. "I can't dance."

"Well I've been dancing since I was three..."

"Really!" Mirra asked, petrified.

"No...Come on Mirra..."

She giggled, and then they both took the opportunity to look towards the end of the room, where they could see Mike waiting with the minister. He was dressed in typical groom garb, but he looked overly sweaty as he danced on the spot, tugging at his collar and whispering something to his best man, who had a full foot on him and was sporting a sleek ponytail.

He suddenly felt himself being pushed along in the row. Several people were now standing as someone made their way through the bench, finally stopping to sit right next to Morrison. He was tall and thin, with short graying hair and hardened features. Most noticeable about him was his mustache, shaped like a comb and colored like pepper. Albus saw him lean into Morrison and begin speaking.

"Am I late?" he asked, and his voice sounded like he had gravel in his mouth.

"No later than me" Morrison said, barely acknowledging him, though he wore a smile as the man spoke. Albus was very curious as to whom this man was, but his question was soon answered by their next exchange.

"Mom know you're here?"

The man scoffed. "I don't need to inform your mother of anything. Though I admit, not receiving an invitation to my own daughter's wedding is a bit of a blow. I think I've been active enough in both of your lives to deserve a bit more! What's the groom's name, by the way?" he added in an undertone.

"Mike" Morrison said to his father.

Mr. Vincent surveyed Mike from a distance, his eyes narrowing as he saw him sweat profusely and bob back and forth with his hands in his pockets.

"Let me guess," he started gruffly, "he bags groceries?"

Morrison chuckled. "Don't think so low of people, pop. He's a magician!"

Mr. Vincent gave something that sounded like a hybrid of a laugh and a terrible cough. He continued his wheeze for quite some time, wiping at his mouth with his sleeve as he did so. "Does he know anything? About us?"

"Nope" Morrison replied. "And we're supposed to keep it that way until Lisa is ready to tell him. Mom's orders."

"Shouldn't be too hard" Mr. Vincent replied, and Albus, who knew very little of the man, could not help but agree here. Mr. Vincent carried himself in muggle clothes very well, and in fact, now that Albus really thought about it, hadn't Morrison once mentioned that his father worked in California producing films?

Almost as if he knew that he was being thought about, Morrison's father turned his attention to the others in his row. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

Morrison introduced them each in turn, with his father batting away the idea of being called Mr. Vincent and instead opting to simply be called Terry. When he reached Albus he gave a handshake twice as long as he had for the others.

"Potter...Potter...dear me, that's a famous name you've got boy..."

Albus smiled weakly; it had been a long time since anyone had given him this kind of recognition based solely on his father's reputation. He went to make a comment about this, but at that very moment everyone fell silent. He heard organ music, and then, the wedding began.

There was a powerful intake of breath as Lisa moved her way down the aisle. Albus stood up with the others while people whispered compliments to her and discussed her beauty quietly with those around them. Though Albus knew that this probably happened with every bride when they first appeared, Albus thought that it was authentic here. He already considered Morrison's sister attractive (even if he felt ashamed by it and told no one of it) but he thought that she looked especially pretty in her sleek white dress. It clung to her curvy body very well, and her beaming smile, highlighted by the fact that her hair was out of her face, only added to the picture. Walking down the aisle by her side was her mother.

"Ludicrous" Morrison's father-or Terry, as Albus was to call him- muttered. "It's as if she has no father to speak of."

Albus felt his stomach drop. He had already deduced that Morrison's family was rather dysfunctional, but he had not been anticipating it to this degree. He'd never given much thought into the reason that his friend's parents lived in different places. He'd always assumed that it had involved relationship troubles that manifested into a situation where separate locations were best. It seemed, however, as if Terry had almost been cut out of the picture by the mother of his children. Albus wondered why he'd never learned this detail about Morrison's home life, though, then again, he'd never asked.

He could feel the tension in his row increase as Terry balled his fingers into fists, neither Lisa nor her mother seeing him amidst the sea of people attending. The music stopped when Lisa reached the altar, and Albus was pleased to have an excuse to pay attention to other things. He noticed that she looked close to tears, most likely of joy. Next to her, however, Mike was already silently crying, his grin wide.

The minister, a stout looking man with thinning orange hair, cleared his throat. Silence fell at once as he began to speak.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today-"

Albus tried to follow what was going on, but he found himself incapable. It was not that he was disinterested in what was being said, but rather, that his mind kept wandering. He was here on Morrison's behalf, and as he knew very little about the bride and groom, he was unable to laugh or "aww" with everyone else during the exchanging of vows. The minister was also monotonous, and try as he might to completely grasp what was being said, he did not have enough proper motivation for it.

Instead, he found himself almost subconsciously changing the scene he was viewing. In Lisa's place was Mirra. The white dress contrasted perfectly with her raven colored hair, which was down over her neck much like how it was worn today. Albus had swapped places with Mike, wearing an identical suit, though he was not crying. He wondered vaguely who his best man

would be. Either Scorpius or Morrison, definitely. Or maybe he would choose his brother, to save himself the trouble of deciding between his two friends...

"Do you, Lisa Gretchin Vincent, take Michael to be your lawfully wedded husband...?"

He imagined his own vows with Mirra. He'd make references to their first kiss, by the lake. He'd make humorous comments about how he'd drug her through a dungeon and saved her life. He'd even mention the odd way in which they'd met; literally bumping into one another on the second day of school, both of them entirely unaware as to how much they'd later affect one another...

"Do you, Michael Richard Hunton..."

He found himself grinning wildly, almost like a clown, when he'd returned to his senses. Mirra had weaved her fingers in between his, and he could not help but wonder if similar thoughts were floating through her head. What would be in her vows?

It was foolish to imagine his own wedding, of course, but he really had no choice as to what it was he thought about. And regardless, it took up time. By the time that he'd imagined every intricate detail of that day, people had already begun clapping. A quick glance to the newly married couple showed them kissing, while at the same time being pronounced man and wife. The noise in the room reached an unparalleled degree; had Albus not felt his hands smacking together, he would not have known that he was clapping.

Albus exchanged a deep glance with his girlfriend as Morrison whistled loudly. The new couple walked down the aisle in one another's arms, and soon enough disappeared, most likely to have pictures taken. The rest of the procession was ushered out almost at once, Albus again actually being pushed along by the crowd.

"Wait, what's going on?" he asked no one in particular, still somewhat lost in his thoughts.

Strangely, it was Terry who answered him.

"I'd imagine that we're heading towards the reception now."

Reaching the wedding party proved to be a feat in itself. There were so many people that the elevator was quite useless-it would have taken about fifty trips to get everyone there-and the winding steps were rather narrow. They marched up the stairs in roughly two straight lines, Albus somehow getting shifted along so much that he ended up surrounded entirely by strangers, though he did recognize two people as groomsmen. The walk itself was an arduous one, and Albus was relieved when he finally entered the hotel's reception hall.

The reception hall was several times the size where the wedding had been, and was clearly designed more for dinner and dancing. From the staircase, there were circular tables set up to the left, meant to hold probably seven or eight people each. The tables were all adorned in white cloth and with fancy candles in the center, and Albus, who had never experienced a meal not in

some way helped along by magic, could only wonder how in the world everyone was going to end up served and fed. Classy streamers and large white balloons were the center of the decor, though Albus noticed that the room itself had nice surprises to the tables was a glass sliding door that looked as though it led to a balcony in which you could survey things from above; by the looks of the sky outside, they were extremely high up. Not that this was necessary, however. The right side of the room presented a beautiful, polished white dancing floor, and the right wall, rather than being an actual wall, was a sheet of thick glass stretched all the way across. Albus could see the appeal at once; when looking at it the right way, it would appear as if you were dancing in the stars.

He was not the only one amazed however. As more people entered the awe-inspired noises only grew louder and clearer. Albus had heard faint music when he'd first entered, but it was now entirely blocked out by the guests, most likely to increase in volume once the party reached full swing.

He took a seat at one of the tables in the corner, and was soon joined by Mirra, Morrison, and Melonie. Terry took a seat with them soon after, saying nothing, and the other three ended up being occupied by people that Albus did not recognize.

"Where's Scorpius at?" Morrison asked him.

"I have no idea" Albus admitted. "I know that he was sitting with Rose, and probably my aunt and uncle. That's about it."

They scanned the room, but it was far too large in size and had too many people for them to find anyone. What they did notice, however, was that after a minute the light buzz of the crowd turned again into cheering. Done with their pictures, the newlyweds had arrived.

"Have you congratulated them yet?" Mirra yelled to Morrison over the ado.

"I congratulated Lisa" he said. "Not Mike though. Guy doesn't really have much to be congratulated for. His life's over."

Silence resumed yet again as the clinking of glass reverberated off of the walls. As they were all sitting down now, Albus had a clear view of the ponytailed best man standing up to make his toast.

"I know we're all eager to eat" he said, grinning, and again, Albus found it hard to pay attention to someone whose name he did not know. "But I think we can all take a few minutes to pay our respects to my best friend. Michael- you did it pal. You pulled off your biggest trick. You convinced Lisa that you were attractive."

There was uproarious laughter from the crowd, but Albus only smiled weakly, not comfortable to laugh at this jab. Mirra leaned in to him.

"He's not that bad looking" she whispered to him as the noise died down.

Albus narrowed his eyes and spoke with sarcastic jealousy. "Well then why don't you just marry him?"

The toast ended, but it was immediately followed by another, and then another ("We're running out of marmalade!" Morrison yelled, though no one laughed), until it seemed that everyone who had something to say about the happy couple had managed to get it out. The music did indeed grow in volume at this point, a slow song that Albus did not recognize, and then the new husband and wife took to the dance floor.

Albus watched, trying to pick up tips as he went along, though neither Lisa nor Michael seemed very coordinated. He could tell that the man was supposed to lead however; something that he was not looking forward to.

After the first dance Mrs. Vincent took the floor with Mike while Mr. Hunton danced with Lisa, and then the floor was free to everyone. Food was being brought to all of the tables at an alarmingly fast rate, and Albus used this to procrastinate dancing. He was eating quite a bit, and he was doing it slowly.

"You are so full" Mirra said, smiling.

"Say what?" he asked, spooning mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"You're not hungry at all. You just don't want to dance with me" she huffed.

"That's not true at all!" he said, swallowing. "I didn't have breakfast, so...yeah..."

She laughed and patted him on the shoulder. Everyone else had already left the table, except for Morrison's father, who was sitting with his arms crossed, glaring at the festivities. Albus could see Morrison and Melonie dancing not too far away. Neither of them were experts, though they appeared to be having fun, or at least they were whenever Morrison wasn't inadvertently stepping on her feet.

Albus was right about to dig in to another plate when someone approached their table. It was Mrs. Vincent, and she appeared to be looking for her son so as to dance with him.

"Have you-" she stopped mid-sentence when she saw who else was at the table. Her stare went blank. "Terrence" she said strictly.

"Laura" Terry replied in the same tone, and he did not even bother to stand. Albus looked back and forth between them, then buried his face in his plate.

"I'm so glad that you could make it" she said through gritted teeth. "Muggle post is so unpredictable, I wasn't sure that you'd received your invitation-"

"Thirty seconds in and I'm given a lie" Terry said dryly. "I think you've broken your record..."

"Shall we dance?" Albus asked Mirra quickly, pushing his plate away. Before she even had the chance to respond he'd already pulled her away from the table and on to the dance floor. He did not want to be a witness to any conversations of a sensitive nature.

"Okay, what do I do?" Albus asked her, standing across and gazing at other dancing couples, as if one of them had placed down an instruction booklet somewhere.

"Well first things first Al, you have to stand on one foot and recite the alphabet backwards" she said, her tone now dripping in sarcasm.

Albus went red. "I'm serious" he said, and she took his arms and placed them on her hips.

"Just move back and forth I think..."

All in all, it wasn't so bad. He enjoyed the feeling of having Mirra pressed up against him, his hands wandering her back as they revolved on the spot. No one was really judging them, and this more so than anything made him feel more comfortable. A few feet away he could see Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione dancing pleasantly and with expert craft-he supposed that they'd had a lot of practice together. His aunt caught his eye and grinned, then tried shifting her arms around into a more manly position so as to give him an example as to what he could work on. Albus tried it but almost ended up punching his girlfriend in the face by accident. He decided it was better not to risk it and continued with what he was doing.

After looking around for a few minutes he caught sight of Rose and Scorpius. She was looking extremely bored as she danced with him, inching back and forth so slowly that at first glance it appeared as if she wasn't moving at all; Albus knew what was on her mind immediately. She wished that it was Lance dancing with her. Scorpius, on the other end, looked as though he were oblivious to the blank expression on her face. He was beaming at her.

The song ended as a new one started up, which Albus danced to in like manner. After this song however the dance floor started to thin slightly, with more and more people deciding to socialize with one another or get more food. Morrison and Melonie had already abandoned their dancing to make an excursion to the punch bowl, and Lily and Hugo were sitting at a table by themselves chatting unenthusiastically, both of them clearly counting down the hours until they could leave.

Albus took a glance at the large window and saw that it had miraculously turned dark. It was strange to think about it, but things had actually passed by quickly. The idea of dancing in the stars that he'd had was now more clear than ever, with numerous couples twirling around in front of the evening sky.

"Get some punch?" Albus asked Mirra, and she nodded. They left the dance floor and weaved their way through tables. At a distance he could see Morrison's parents still sitting alone at the

table, having what was probably a hushed argument. He nearly bumped into a very pretty girl that he recognized as a bridesmaid, and then he actually did knock over who he recognized as the flower girl. She gave him a sour look as Mirra apologized profusely on his behalf.

They reached the punch table, where Albus scooped up two cups for him and Mirra. He was soon joined by Scorpius however, who was sweating an unnatural amount considering the nice temperature of the hall.

"How'd dancing go?" he asked as soon as he'd approached.

"I'm getting the hang of it" Albus said with a shrug, and Mirra nodded and smiled. "How about you?"

Scorpius grinned, looked both ways clandestinely, and then whispered to him.

"I'm going to tell her."

"Huh?" Albus said, barely paying attention as he handed Mirra her punch, though she herself raised her eyebrows.

"I'm going to tell her. Tonight."

"Tell her what exactly?" Albus asked, trying not to let the worry show on his face.

"It's going really well!" Scorpius said, ebullient. "We're talking and I made her laugh once and just-I don't know-tonight feels like the night."

"Maybe-maybe you should wait a bit" Albus said, glancing around the hall and finding Rose at once. She was sitting alone, arms crossed, a single foot jingling to the music. "She looks a bit preoccupied."

Scorpius batted this away. "Nah, she's fine. Really. Anyway, got to hand over her punch. Wish me luck!"

"Scorpius wait-"

But he'd already left. Albus saw him briefly say something to Rose, watched her drink her punch, and then they disappeared back to the dance floor. He quickly turned to Mirra, who would have an answer for him far before Scorpius got one from Rose.

"She doesn't like him at all, does she?" he asked her.

"Well I haven't talked to her for a bit" Mirra said. "But no, not from what I know. I mean, she doesn't *dislike* him..."

Albus sighed and spun back around, far from eager to learn the results of Scorpius' conversation with Rose. Deciding that he'd best try and occupy himself until then, he decided to move through the tables, Mirra moving along behind him. She tapped him on the shoulder however.

"I'm actually going to go and get some dessert" she said, pointing towards a dessert table with delicious looking treats on it. "Care to join me?"

Albus gave her a weak smile. "I had a lot for dinner" he said, and she laughed. "But I'll catch up with you later..."

She gave him a quick kiss and they split. He continued to wade through the tables, eventually finding a peculiar sight; his father was sitting alone at one, an empty plate in front of him. Albus sat down at once.

"Where's mum?"

"Teaching James how to dance" he replied, smiling. "Kid thinks he can do anything...Anyway, how'd you make out?"

"Not bad" Albus said, giving a shrug. "First time dancing" he added.

"Ahhh, yeah, I remember my first time slow dancing. Her name was Parvati. Pretty girl. A little aggressive on the dance floor, but it was kind of necessary considering I was the opposite..."

There was a momentary silence between them before his father struck up another conversation.

"So how's life at Hogwarts? I heard Jan gave you guys a visit."

Albus smiled and nodded. He wondered whether his father had intentionally mentioned that or not; if so, it would have been done because he expected Albus to ask questions about it. Questions which, to be quite honest, Albus did indeed have. Scorpius' comments from days ago rang in his head.

"Yeah she did" Albus said. "Same stuff as Puckerd though. Just a bunch of questions about the Silver Wizard" he said casually.

His father grinned at him and started to take a sip from his glass, which Albus realized was filled with wine rather than punch.

"The Silver Wizard," he started, an air of mystery in his voice, "yes, he-"

"- Or she-" Albus cut in, thinking of Morrison.

"-Or she, quite correct," he said, inclining his head as he took a drink, "is causing quite a stir everywhere. I confess that it grew out of control faster than I thought it would."

Albus tilted his head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

His father smiled. "Albus, the articles that you've been reading are not the first incidents, they're only the most recent. The Ministry of Magic has, in fact, been aware of the Silver Wizard for about a month longer than the public has."

Albus froze on the spot. "Were any-were any attacks on ministry members?" he asked. What if he had called Fischer out on a bluff that had not been a bluff at all?

"No" his father said simply, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief. "But there were quite a few attacks on both WAR and Dark Alliance members. Nothing major, but even the smallest of trouble caused for these groups seems to have shaken them slightly. There's been a little bit less activity since the Silver Wizard came around."

Albus worded his next question carefully. "So then I guess...I guess that you're pleased with what's going on then?"

To his surprise, his father frowned.

"Personally," he said, "no. I think that whoever they are, they should quit while they're ahead and stop."

"Really!" Albus exclaimed. "Why?"

"Because it's causing a lot of trouble for the Ministry as well. The safety of the public is at stake."

"Has anyone been hurt?" Albus inquired. "Apart from the bad guys I mean..."

"You misunderstand" he said, taking another sip. "We are not worried about the Silver Wizard hurting anyone. We're worried about people getting hurt trying to play copycat. When the war with Voldemort first ended it was a few acts of vigilantism that got the Renegade movement growing. I can't help but worry that it isn't long before some stupid teenager dresses himself up in silver and goes picking a fight with someone who has no intention of playing. Don't get me wrong, I don't want the Silver Wizard caught-I think that what they're doing is pretty good, actually-though you didn't hear that from the co-Head Auror- it's just that I think that whoever they are, they should stop before it gets out of control. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Albus nodded, then grinned to himself. How stupid Scorpius was. If his father was the Silver Wizard, then he'd just stop. And Albus knew that he wasn't lying either-they were now being honest with one another, it'd been that way for months.

"And another thing," his father continued, "it makes the Ministry's investigations flawed."

"How's that?" Albus asked, eager for more details.

"Because now we can't tell if the behavior of our enemies are natural or influenced by fear. Take WAR for example. Their activity has slowed down considerably since random members started getting picked off. Likewise, Waddlesworth hasn't given a speech in a while, he's barely seen. I still haven't forgotten your testimony from Diagon Alley, Al. It seems like he's up to something. But we can't prove that his silence is indicative of anything other than that he's frightened. With no Silver Wizard, we'd have more evidence that he's up to no good. As of now, he just comes off looking like another WAR member afraid to go outside."

"But can't you just track him?" Albus asked. "Stuff like that?"

"Not that simple Al. We have our own laws to follow, we can't just knock down doors and demand Waddlesworth's whereabouts. We're sure that he spends a lot of time at WAR headquarters, but we can't get in there either...difficult magic to break through there..."

"Can't you just Insta-Floo in?" Albus asked. Wasn't that what it was designed for?"

His father sighed. "I wish it was that simple Al. But it's not just a standard protection spell or concealment charm we're dealing with. WAR headquarters is protected by the Fidelius Charm."

"What's that?"

"It's a very reliable safeguard. Usually" he added bluntly. "Anyway, it involves a single person, known as a Secret-Keeper, being entrusted with a location. Unless that person divulges the location to someone, they can't access it. Even if they know exactly where it is, it simply will not appear to them."

"Is Waddlesworth the Secret-Keeper?" Albus asked.

"Doubtful. Too much of a wimp. My bet is on the big bloke, the Hammer."

Albus pondered on this. Hadn't he been in the headquarters of WAR before? Last year? And hadn't it been the Hammer who'd brought him there?

"Dad, I've been there before" Albus told him.

"What's that Al?" his father said, smiling.

"I've been there. In WAR's headquarters."

His father chuckled. "I know that you've been surrounded by Renegades before Albus, but WAR's actual-"

"It's in Hogsmeade" Albus said quickly. "It's an old Quality Quidditch Supplies-"

His father started choking on his wine.

"Dad- dad!"

He cleared his throat. "I'm fine, I'm fine, it's just-what- you really- you really have been there? When? How?"

"Last year" Albus told him quickly. "It's a long story, but the Hammer drug me there to talk to Waddlesworth in person-"

"*What?*"

Albus was beginning to feel very nervous now. The fact of the matter was that if his relationship had been better with his father last year, he would already know everything that he was being told. At the same time, however, Albus had somehow expected his father to know these things. They had occurred, after all, when Fairhart had been both alive and a spy. Why had he concealed this information?

"Yeah-like I said, it's a long story- but anyway, the Hammer brought me there personally."

His father was ogling at him now in disbelief. When he spoke, it was in a carefully calculated tone.

"Brought you there, you say? As in, he revealed the location to you in person?"

"Yes" Albus said, unsure as to how he could make himself any clearer. "Why?"

"Well it's just-well..." his father began, looking as though he were in the middle of conceiving something very elaborate. "To be quite honest, Albus, under these circumstances it would appear as though-as though- theoretically, *you* could-"

But he stopped in the middle, and Albus felt the reason why tapping him on the shoulder.

He spun around, expecting the dainty fingers to belong to his girlfriend, but they didn't. Standing there instead was the attractive bridesmaid that he'd bumped into earlier. She was around Mirra's height, only her hair was light brown, matching her eyes. Like the other bridesmaids, she was wearing a cream colored dress.

"He-hello" he said, slightly bemused.

"Can I have a dance?" she hollered over the music, and Albus almost toppled over. Very rarely was he approached by girls, and this took him aback so much that he actually looked to his father for help. He was still staring off into space as if pondering something important however, and when he did come to, he only had a question for the girl.

"Excuse me," he started, "do you know where the nearest bathroom is?"

She grimaced at him. "The only one I know of is in the lobby on the first floor. Sorry. But you can take the elevator" she said, pointing over near the stairs, where the elevator was only a few inches away. His father stood and left abruptly, and the girl turned back to her intended conversation.

"So?" she asked. "A dance?"

"Sure" he said on a whim, though as she took him away by the hand he couldn't help but wonder if there was any other possible answer without sounding rude. For a tiny moment he contemplated if Mirra would mind, but this *was* a wedding, after all. Was there anything wrong with just having a dance?

She led him into the center of the dance floor, and a few couples away Albus could see Scorpius and Rose. He was still beaming, and her bland expression hadn't changed either. He clearly hadn't told her yet.

"So how do you know the happy couple?" the girl asked him.

"Huh? Oh, I'm friends with Lisa's brother. From public school" he added, stupidly regretting having specified which kind of school. "You?" he added, aiming to change the subject.

"My sister is best friends with Lisa" she said. "Though now that you mention it, I don't even think I know the name of Morrison's school..."

"Oh. It's-erm- Slytherinsburg" he said awkwardly, shaking his head slightly at his own stupidity.

"Oh. Haven't heard of it..."

The song currently playing was faster compared to the ones that he'd danced with Mirra to, and as he was already used to them, he ended up looking especially bad. He tried flailing his body around in sync with his dance partner's, but the end result only had her laughing.

"You don't dance often, do you?" she asked him in between her giggles.

"Today was my first time, as far as I can remember."

"Well you're very good already" she said, nodding her head and smiling.

"Hahaha..."

The song ended, though his partner seemed in no hurry to abandon him yet. "Next song?" she asked.

"Uh..."

But something caught his eye from behind the bridesmaid. Mirra was staring at him, and the dark look that she gave him had no hints of sarcasm in it. He scratched the back of his neck and turned to who he'd just been dancing with.

"Nice dancing with you!" he practically yelled to her, and he approached his girlfriend. "How was dessert" he asked her.

"How was yours?" she replied, her question clearly rhetorical.

He sighed. "You can't be serious. You're mad at me for that?"

"No" she said, though her tone suggested quite the opposite.

"You sure? Because you sound kind of-"

But she cut him off by walking away. Albus, completely bewildered at this point, followed after her, again pushing his way through people.

They walked all the way over to the glass sliding door that Albus had caught sight of earlier, and as he'd expected, it opened up to a balcony. Mirra went through it, as did he.

The balcony was completely empty, and Albus thought the powerful wind and freezing weather had something to do with it. Staring out at the city before them, however, Albus thought that it might be worth it. From the top floor of the hotel you could only see the lights of other buildings and the stars in the sky; it looked almost like a beautifully drawn portrait.

"Are you really mad at me?" he asked at once, and he was thankful that the glass door was blocking out most of the noise of the party.

"I'm not mad at you Albus" she said, turning to him and crossing her arms. "I don't know what came over me" she admitted.

"It was just a stupid dance" he said plainly, mptioning to the sliding door with his hands. "I mean, she asked me, and I could hardly tell her off."

She shifted her mouth to the side and moved her dark hair out of her face; the furious wind was throwing it around with ease.

"I know" she said. "I just didn't expect it, that's all."

Albus said nothing, but internally, he was quite surprised. He had never seen Mirra act anything close to jealous before, but then again, he'd never given her any reason to. He had to admit, he kind of liked it.

"Do you think that she's pretty?" Mirra asked him out of nowhere.

"No" Albus lied quickly.

She smiled. "Yes you do."

He shrugged. "Well...I mean, she's not ugly. Nothing on you though" he added lightly.

She smiled at him, and intent on warming her and himself, he wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm sorry" she said. "I just...I don't know. I think of losing you a lot. That's just the first time I saw it in a different way. I never really think about losing you to another girl, even though I probably should."

Albus was shocked at her compliment, but he had something else to ask.

"What do you mean losing me?" he said, and he pulled away from her slightly so that he could look at her face.

She shifted her mouth to the side once again and avoided making eye contact. "Do you remember when Puckerd interviewed me? He said-not a lot about you- but he said one thing. He said 'your boyfriend is a playing a dangerous game.' And it just unnerved me a little bit."

Albus snorted. "Mirra come on, that's just Puckerd trying to mess with your head. He wants you to think that the Ministry is all big and bad-"

"Which they are!" Mirra said. "And that's not even what I was thinking about exactly. You're in *danger* a lot Al. Actual danger. I know you don't mean to, but you always end up in these terrible situations. You've been kidnapped, been in the middle of riots, chased by those-those monster things- and it's only getting worse out there."

Albus had nothing to say to her, but the worry in her voice was noted. He exhaled deeply. "But I always end up okay, don't I? And besides, those things were all circumstantial. And that was a different me. I don't run into danger any more, honest."

"I know you don't, but please don't let that change! Promise me!"

"I promise" Albus said at once, though even as he said it, he could not believe the conversation he was having. Did she really think about these things that much?

He held her close again, and she muttered her next sentence. "I saw you dancing with some other girl and the first thing I thought of was how miserable I'd be if it was more than just a dance."

"But it wasn't" Albus said in a placating tone.

"I know" she said. "I know..."

"And don't worry about what's going on out there" Albus added. "I know things are scary, but my dad is back in the Ministry now. He's going to stop all of this, you just wait. Waddlesworth, Darvy, all of it. Personally I'm hoping he lets me finish me off the latter" he added without thinking, and Mirra pulled away from him, her face horror struck.

"Albus don't say that! I could never love a murderer!"

Albus was right about to comment how little she could talk, considering her behavior during their first year, but something about her sentence took precedence. What had she just said?

"Wait, did you say lo-"

There was a crashing noise, one so loud that Albus automatically checked the sliding door behind him. Nothing had happened to it though. He looked around wildly while more strange noises occurred; mingled expressions of terror and surprise. Peering through the glass door he could see that the organization of the party had changed. No longer were the dancing floor and the tables separated, everyone appeared to have moved back towards the tables. The music, he noticed, had stopped.

"What the-"

He slid the glass door open, and Mirra followed him. Some semblance of quiet had taken place, and it appeared as if a conversation was going on. Albus fought his way through the middle of the crowd of people, and he almost gasped at what he saw.

The giant glass wall that had served as a backdrop to the dancing had been shattered completely. The howling of the wind could be heard, but Albus was far too focused on what he could see. Standing in a cluster near the open air was a collection of no less than thirty hooded figures, all of them wearing identical red masks. Some of them were holding brooms, but the one in front was holding, most strangely, the very girl that Albus had been dancing with moments ago; a hostage. She looked terrified.

The shock value of what'd happened appeared to be rubbing off slightly, and many of the muggles in the room were muttering about entertainment.

"Did Mike plan this?"

"Surely they're paying for the window..."

"Leave it to Mike to come up with an illusion like that!"

The few wizards who were in the crowd however were silent. Albus could see Uncle Ron in the front, though only the back of his head. Next to him was his wife. They were both standing still.

"No heroics Weasley!" the one holding the girl barked, their voice nasal, and Albus could only assume that his uncle had reached for his wand. "One move and this one here gets the green treatment.."

Another one of the masked figures stepped forward, and this one had a voice that sounded like thunder.

"Hand over Potter!" he said.

There was a slight disturbance in the crowd, and Albus saw that someone had stepped forward in front of Uncle Ron.

"What do you want with me!" James bellowed, and several of the Dark Alliance members chortled.

"Not you, you idiot!" their leader spat.

Albus looked around wildly, expecting his father to come forward. He was nowhere to be seen however. Where had he gone off too? Mirra started squeezing his hand so tightly that it went numb; he could feel her breath on the back of his neck.

His uncle's voice brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

"No one wants a firefight" he said lightly. "Why don't you just hand over the girl, and I'll see if I can get all of your sentences reduced for not resisting arrest..."

Not everyone in the crowd agreed however. There was an even greater disturbance in the crowd, and the next thing that Albus knew, Morrison's father, with surprising speed, had lunged forward, wand drawn.

The masked figure to the right of the one holding Albus' dance partner moved forward and slashed his wand through the air. There was a bolt of orange light, and Terry was on the ground.

"Hey!" Uncle Ron bellowed, and Albus saw him raise his hands up in defense. "None of that! We can work this out..."

The muggles in the crowd no longer seemed to be entertained by what was going on. Seeing a man knocked to the ground painfully by a stream of light issued by a thin stick had done away with their child like wonder; many of them were now looking utterly terrified. A few people made to leave surreptitiously, but yet another masked figure, this one being one of those holding a broom, barked an order.

"No one goes anywhere until we have what we came for!"

He felt someone move close to him, and then heard Hugo's voice in his ear.

"How come no one's doing anything?" he murmured through gritted teeth.

It was Mirra who answered. "They have a hostage!" she breathed. "And besides, not everyone here can exactly fight back..."

"I said no one goes anywhere!" the same person said as one of the groomsmen neared the stairs. There was a flash of light, and a solid wall emerged from the ground, blocking the entrance to the stairs.

"Not that it matters anyway" the main masked figure, the one holding the girl said. "We've got about twenty more working their way up..."

Albus swallowed, suddenly feeling ill. They were trapped. Where was his father at? Did it even matter when they were this outnumbered?

"Search" the one with the thunderous voice said, and a few masked figures behind him edged their way around and towards the crowd. The crowd of people immediately huddled together in fear, and Albus could see his aunt and uncle squirming on the spot, apparently unsure of how best to go about whatever it was they planned on doing. Just a few people behind them were his mother; she was holding on tightly to Lily's hand.

Albus heard more noises of destruction, though these came from below him. It appeared as though the statement about reinforcements had not been a bluff-people were indeed working their way up. The noises were oddly punctuated however, as if there were two sides to them. Was some form of resistance occurring? What could a group of muggles be doing to oppose wizards?

His father. He was not here, but he was in the building. Did he have any chance of coming to their aid however? How many Dark Alliance members were there supposed to be downstairs? Twenty?

The masked figures working their way through the crowd were only peering at people once before moving along, and Albus knew that it was only a matter of time before they deduced that his father was nowhere to be found. But what would they do then? Would the entire congregation be proven a waste? Would they launch an attack?

The noises grew louder, though still all appeared to be on the bottom most floor. Albus thought that he could hear muffled screaming as well. What was going on down there?

Uncle Ron spoke again, and it sounded almost as if he were trying to mock them.

"Darvy got you boys working overtime, huh? Little risky though, isn't it? Crashing a party with Aurors in it? He must not care too much about your freedom..."

"Shut it!" the lead grunt said, and the loud, bigger one behind him actually made a move with his wand.

"Silencio!"

Albus could only assume that the spell had connected; Aunt Hermione drew her own wand out anyway. He saw his uncle grab her arm and lower it however-he was still clearly hoping to get out of the situation without endangering anyone.

The crowd of mostly muggles was all standing frozen in both confusion and fear. Some of them were exchanging meaningful glances, others had their eyes closed as if it were all a bad dream. Albus had the feeling that it was only going to get worse...

The tension in the air was punctuated by a light ringing noise, almost like that of a small bell being struck for a single moment. Albus turned around on the spot, sure that it had come from behind him. His eyes widened in shock, as did those of many around him: the arrow next to the elevator was glowing. It was soon accompanied by the sounds of the elevator mobilizing.

"That'll be them now!" the front Alliance member squealed with delight.

Albus pulled Mirra close. Whatever resistance had occurred had been futile. Matters were only going to get worse-

The noise stopped, and the elevator doors opened. Before Albus could catch a glimpse of anything inside he was forced to duck. A stream of brilliant blue light had issued from within the elevator chamber; people lowered their heads and screamed, others held their hands up against their faces. It mattered not however. The blue light maneuvered itself around them all like a homing missile, swerving and weaving in and out of heads until it finally hit its intended target-the man holding the hostage. He gave a wail of pain and fell over, pushing the girl to the floor as he did so and clutching his mask as if it were on fire. Albus did not need to hear what he heard next to realize what was going on.

"It's him!" the figure with the thunderous voice growled. "It's the Silver Wizard!"

Albus stared into the elevator shaft with his mouth wide open. Standing almost like a statue was indeed the Silver Wizard, just as described. Covered head to toe in gleaming silver robes with the hood up, completely free of markings or frays, a distorted silver mask that Albus knew at once hid a face that was nowhere in the proximity of looking anxious or fearful. Their wand was outstretched and firmly gripped.

For the first time it was the Dark Alliance members who looked panicked. "What are you waiting for!" the thunder voiced Alliance member roared. "Get him!"

Albus saw Aunt Hermione whip around on the spot and face the crowd. She pointed her wand at the floor.

"Terrakinisio!"

A bolt of moss colored light hit the floor, and at once Albus felt the very ground shake. Along with nearly everyone else in the crowd of people, he lost his footing and fell to the ground-from a sideways glance, it appeared that the only people who the spell had not affected were his mother, aunt, and Mrs. Vincent. Albus saw the strategy in his aunt's spell at once; it had been designed to get them all on the floor for the battle that was about to begin.

And begin it did. Streams of light in all different colors were being fired over their heads and towards the Silver Wizard, though Albus could hear none of the incantations due to the screaming muggles on the floor. He threw his body over Mirra's and turned his head upwards, intent on seeing every moment of it.

The Silver Wizard didn't even bother dodging the curses and hexes. They walked forward idly, slowly waving their wand in circles, magical shields and bubbles forming themselves out of thin air around their body, each one either deflecting or absorbing whatever hit it. Albus watched the Silver Wizard in awe as they whipped their wand around their head and aimed it towards the ceiling, firing bolts of crimson light into the air rapidly. These spells too seemed to have minds of their own, they were chasing down those wearing masks and colliding with them, knocking them each to the ground and making them instantaneously unconscious. His mother and Aunt Hermione had double teamed one enemy, but they ended up crumpled to the floor before any action was necessary.

"Aim to kill!" the Alliance member yelled. "Aim to kill!"

One of the scrawnier masked wizards raised their wand.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The Silver Wizard flicked their wand lazily. One of the circular tables previously used for dining flew into the air and met the killing curse; there was a loud explosion, and the next thing Albus knew the table was on fire hovering in mid-air. Another flick of the wand and the flaming table had soared towards the Alliance member, colliding with him and knocking him out of the open window and into the night sky, nowhere to be seen.

Proven effective, Albus watched as the Silver Wizard waved their wand in a large circular motion. At the next moment, all of the circular tables had been raised into the air and thrown into the fray, knocking the Alliance members around like paddles. It would have been quite comical if not for the situation.

While the Alliance members were preoccupied with either being slammed by the tables or blasting them out of the way, the Silver Wizard turned their head to the next order of business. Revolving on the spot to face the obstructed stairs, they jabbed their wand into the air.

There was a flash of light and a rumbling noise, and the blasting spell was so powerful that the wall had been reduced, not to rubble, but to dust. Another wave of the wand and the dust had been cleared, revealing the stairs as if nothing had ever happened to them. Albus watched as an Alliance member raised their wand at the unsuspecting Silver Wizard. He wished that he could help, but he had foolishly not brought his wand-

The wizard was knocked over by Uncle Ron, who had seemed to put every ounce of strength into his tackle. The man slid across the ground as though on ice, but was stopped by Aunt Hermione, who bound him with thick ropes with a single wave of her wand. Albus watched as his uncle turned to him, and it appeared as if the silencing spell on him had worn off, for he addressed his nephew.

"Albus, get the muggles downstairs and stay there, we'll handle this!"

Albus nodded. As he stood up and grabbed hold of Mirra he caught site of his mother and Mrs. Vincent, who had each taken on a cloaked figure individually and made quick work of them. The Silver Wizard had re-entered the battle and proven to be the deciding factor however. They fired spells of all colors with immaculate accuracy, and Albus noticed that they never did something as simple as stunning or disarming; every victim was on the floor moaning in agony, usually bound by thick belt like ropes or chains.

"Help me get these people downstairs!" he said to Mirra, and they both ran amok through the hall with their heads lowered, nudging random people.

"Get up!" he shouted at them. "Come on, it's safe downstairs-"

"What's going on-"

"Who are these people-"

"Are they demons?"

"Just get downstairs!" he responded. "Follow me!"

Scorpius and Rose were shepparding people downstairs as well, and Morrison was actually carrying a frightened child in his arms, Melonie behind him. He saw James standing up straight and looking back and forth between the stairs and the battle, as if he couldn't decide where he should be; though he eventually grabbed a girl up off the floor and led her away. They all followed Albus, who casted a backwards glance before descending down the stairs. The scene had not changed much, but it looked less severe. Most of the hooded figures were completely incapacitated; it looked now as though it were only the remnants of the attack that were being scrapped up. The danger was over.

"Come on, hurry now, don't look back-"

They all walked down the stairs in two or three lines, the same way that they'd came up. The noise had changed though. Everyone was now panicked and confused. Albus could tell that it was going to take a lot of Ministry interference to rectify the situation...

"Okay everyone just-just stay in the lobby!" Albus said as they entered it, though he himself gasped at what he saw.

The lobby had been destroyed completely. There were large craters in the walls and floor, furniture had been destroyed, and it was completely clear of conscious people. The only living things already there when they entered were the immobile bodies of Dark Alliance members, scattered across the floor as if a hurricane had hit them. The wizard nearest Albus was spread eagled on the floor, mask knocked from their bloody face; it looked almost as if he were still wearing one. He scanned the room in awe. Was this the product of the noises that he'd heard earlier? Had the Silver Wizard done this?

"O-okay everyone your safe now, just-just stay put!"

He ran through the annihilated lobby wildly however, looking for someone. Where was his father? He continued his search on the ground floor, but it amounted to nothing. Was he one of the bodies on the floor?

He felt his heart beat quicken, more so than at any other point in the night. He ran towards the stairs.

"Albus where are you going!" he heard his sister scream.

"Albus you promised!" came from Mirra's voice.

"Stay put!" he yelled back, jumping up the stairs three at a time. He nearly tripped numerous times, though he finally arrived at the scene of the battle, panting. He looked into the room-

Everything was quiet, the howling of the wind the loudest noticeable noise. Like the lobby, the floor was covered with hooded figures wearing red masks, all of them unable of doing anything more than squirm. The Silver Wizard had vanished. Aunt Hermione was nursing a cut on her husbands arm, Morrison's mother was talking his father, still on the ground, and his own mother was talking to-

"Dad!" Albus yelled.

It was indeed his father. He looked flustered, but free of injury.

"Albus get back downstairs! Keep everyone there, I've alerted the Ministry, they have Obliviators on the way..."

"How did- you weren't- the Silver- where were you...?"

"I was in the bathroom" he said. "Then I heard the noise, but by the time I'd checked it out everything was over. I ran up the stairs but they were blocked, so I took the elevator up" he said, jerking his head towards the elevator.

"But- but no, they weren't blocked! That's how we got down!"

"They weren't by the time I came up" he corrected him. "You lot were already on your way down the stairs when I was coming up on the elevator. Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine, just shaken up. But- but the Silver Wizard-"

"Gone" his father said. "Apparated as soon as the last one went down" he added, jerking his head towards a Dark Alliance member in the corner of the room. They were slumped up against the wall, head lulled to the side, body issuing steam as if they'd been electrocuted.

Albus could only stare intently at his father, lost for words.

Chapter 13: The Executioner's Veil

The days following the attack at the wedding reception proved to be among the blurriest in Albus' entire life. His earliest discernible memory after the event was the Obliviators; wizards swooping down in identical white robes on broomsticks, flashing beams of light into the eyes of the muggles who had attended and all feeding them the same story that they would feed those who had witnessed it on the street only moments later. Within hours everyone ended up speaking about the awful fireworks accident that had taken place in the hotel, Albus forced to nod his head and agree with what the Muggles all knew to be fact. Then there was Mike, who, along with his parents, had not had his memory wiped. There was the sobbing at the idea of his new wife coming from a family of real magic, the sight of him blowing his nose with two feet of multi-colored cloth taken from his sleeve (most likely meant to be part of an act later), and then his admittance of how he didn't care what Lisa and her family were because he loved her. And then, there were the newspapers.

Weasley And Ministry Stop Dark Alliance Ambush; Silver Wizard Helps

The picture underneath the headline showed Uncle Ron standing on top of an unconscious hooded figure's chest with one foot, grinning wildly and looking dignified. Albus was quite pleased to see that it was his father's side of the Ministry getting all of the positive attention, though it took a good talking to from Scorpius for him to understand why the Silver Wizard's activities had been downplayed.

"They can't have him looking like a hero" Scorpius said, staring into the Common Room fire. "The second everyone thinks he saved the day and that the Ministry just tagged along, the renegade movement will get out of control."

It was the day before break was over. Only the day after the wedding reception were Albus and his friends shipped back to Hogwarts by Insta-Floo into the headmistress' office, and his father had made it no secret why.

"The last thing I need is for Fischer to see pictures of you kids in the middle of a field of bodies" he had said. "Then I'm locked up for parental neglect, endangering minors, and a whole bunch of other crap."

Thus, they were spending the last few days of break in the warmth of the Common Room, eager to discuss the events of the last few days and, more importantly, pleased with the privacy necessary to do it.

"Pretty funny though, isn't it?" Morrison said. "I mean, whoever the Silver Wizard is, they made the Ministry look ruddy awful. They showed up sure, like an hour after all of the damage was done!"

Albus took this opportunity to voice one of the more pressing matters on his mind.

"My dad got us out of there awfully quick didn't he? Had a good grasp of the situation, despite not being there for too long. I wonder how long he was there while the Silver Wizard was too..."

Scorpius gave him a smug look, but Morrison scratched at his chin.

"Do you really want to do this, mate?" he asked.

Morrison and Melonie were now officially dating, and it had created some complications with what they could and couldn't talk about. Albus liked Melonie very much; she made Morrison happy, had no trouble with anyone, and mostly kept to herself. However, being in the same house meant that she was completely glued to her boyfriend, and it was rare moments like these- when she was in the library- where the three of them had to get most of their theorizing done.

Albus exhaled deeply. "I agree with Scorpius and Fischer" he said, a sour taste developing in his mouth as he said it. "I reckon that my dad is the Silver Wizard."

Morrison rolled his eyes, but what Scorpius did was much more hurtful.

"I'm afraid that you only agree with Fischer now, Al" he said. "I'm retracting my suspicions about your dad."

"*What?*" Albus spat, horrified.

"What happened over break has enlightened me a bit. I don't think that it's your dad."

"Thank you!" Morrison said, clapping Scorpius on the shoulder, though he knocked his hand away.

"As interesting as it is that your dad mysteriously vanishes once the Silver Wizard shows up, I think that there's more to be said about the battle than who was in it."

"Explain!" Albus barked.

"Well did you see what the Silver Wizard was doing?"

"Trying to say my dad isn't skilled enough?" Albus asked.

"No one doubts that your dad is a talented wizard" Scorpius said smoothly. "But the Silver Wizard was doing things with a wand I've never even heard of. And apart from that, it's not so much the skill as the brutality. Your dad has some morality to him Al; he'd stun and disarm first. Almost everyone that squared off against the Silver Wizard ended up howling in pain or bloody. Sometimes both."

"Part of his cover" Albus dismissed it.

Morrison chimed in next.

"And didn't your dad also straight up tell you-about fifteen minutes before it all happened, mind you- that he thought that the Silver Wizard should just stop while he was ahead? Hmmm, interesting..."

"Isn't it a little weird that he brought up the Silver Wizard the same day that he-"

"-Or she-" both of his friends said, chortling.

"-Shut up! The same day that we see them in public! Almost like he was setting me up because he knew what I'd end up thinking!"

"You know what I think, Al?" Scorpius asked, and Albus huffed. "I think that now that you've seen them deal some serious damage to Darvy's lot, you *want* your dad to be the Silver Wizard."

Sadly, classes resumed the next day and there were few more opportunities to have such lengthy discussions about the identity of the silver clad legend. Not that they weren't being talked about, however. With the school now filled with students eager for information on what had happened (how they knew, Albus could not even fathom) it became common place for rumors to spread and eventually get completely ridiculous. Most of them, Albus realized, came from Morrison.

"Scared?" he saw him saying to a couple of awe-inspired third years at breakfast. "You don't really feel fear when your life is on the line like that. There's no time to be afraid. Only time to act. Me and the Silver Wizard nodded at each other-we kind of had an unspoken agreement that it was going to be up to us- and went back to back. We started revolving on the spot; firing spells as fast as we could-"

"You hid under a table" Melonie said from next to him, shaking her head. "I watched you."

"I was using it as a shield Mel!"

While the rest of the Slytherins laughed and asked Morrison for more details, Albus asked his other best friend about something that he had not yet managed to touch on.

"So...you and Rose..."

"Didn't get the chance" Scorpius said, snapping his fingers. "So close too. Stupid Dark Alliance..."

"Yeah...yeah, damn them..."

Crashing the reception may have been an overall atrocious act, but it had benefited in this one way. Albus could not bring himself to tell Scorpius that Rose's bored expression and lack of enthusiasm towards him were legitimate signs of an impossible relationship, but at the same time, he didn't want Rose to be the one to say it either. He was sure that whatever bad qualities she may have, she would not be so callous to outright tell him these things, but the thought of

letting him dangle was even worse. Indeed, Albus sometimes considered the idea that it was perhaps best if Lance did divulge Scorpius' plan from the previous year to his girlfriend. Perhaps her being angry with him would be the best way to let him down.

He had little time to ponder on the Silver Wizard and the relationship problems of his friends however, teachers were holding nothing back as they started the second half of term. Intent on preparing them all for their O.W.L's, Albus was met with a slew of work unprecedented by any combined two terms in his life.

"Three feet of parchment seems deep, I know," Professor Verage told a class full of students ogling her with open mouths, "but I'm sure that you'll find that there is more than enough information on muggle entertainment. From their own kind of radios to the things that they watch-you'll find yourself writing too much!"

Professor Flitwick was teaching them spells a year earlier than necessary- they spent their first few classes back learning the Aguamenti charm, designed to fire powerful streams of water-and Transfiguration too was moving itself up a few months. Though they were not actually set to begin practicing it, a tremendous amount of writing was being done on human transfiguration, which, as Albus soon learned, was among the most complex forms of magic conceivable.

And then there was Potions. If Fischer had told her lapdog anything about the Silver Wizard's most recent appearance, then he was not permitted to say anything about it. Indeed, he had slowed down considerably on all assets of his position outside of teaching, and Albus was beginning to get something of a calm-before-the-storm feeling. No interviews and no sporadic meetings could only mean that there was something twice as diabolical planned.

"Or maybe they've completely given up" Morrison suggested, skimming over his most recent Potions essay and shrugging his shoulders. He'd received an Acceptable. "I mean, they didn't get anything from us when that Fischer hag was here, and obviously they're nowhere near capturing the Silver Wizard, so maybe they're just letting things run their course?"

Albus stashed his O paper away in his bag and shook his head. "You weren't there in McGonagall's office the day that Fischer came here. They were willing to tell me bold face lies to get this guy. That's an interesting point though," he added thoughtfully, "about them catching him. I wonder, do you reckon that my dad and uncle are in trouble for letting them get away?"

"Doubtful" Scorpius said, catching up with them. He had stopped a Gryffindor fourth year in the hall and confiscated what looked like an item from Uncle George's shop-it appeared to be a yo-yo that emitted some sort of gas with effects similar to Cheering Charms. "As much as the ministry would like to get their hands on the biggest renegade in the papers, they couldn't very well arrest them right after they'd just contributed. They're probably back to looking now though."

Their conversation stopped abruptly here; they'd just been approached by Garth Moone, who was looking quite eagerly at his captain and Keeper.

"Hey Al!" he beamed.

"Hey-"

"Practice this Saturday?" Garth cut him off before he could even ask how his break had been.

Albus gave him a slight frown. "I'm afraid not" he said. "Sunday though."

Garth walked away looking crestfallen, but it was Scorpius who rounded on him, interested.

"Why no practice?" he asked.

"Because," Albus started, grinning, "I have a date with Mirra."

Albus' date with Mirra ended up being one of the last things on his mind. Though he was eager to show her the Room of Requirement, which included actually having some privacy with her, he found that his mind was wandering too much for his own good. Flashes of memory including the Silver Wizard kept popping into his head at odd moments, each time accompanied by a fictionalized end that included his father removing the mask. And though he was quite sure that his suspicions were correct on the identity, he realized that he needed to be a tad bit more discreet on how often he let the images enter his mind.

"Paying attention, Mr. Potter?"

"Huh? Yes" Albus said quickly, throwing Puckerd a disgusting expression. His potions professor gave him a smug look before he continued.

"Well I'd certainly hope so, as it includes you as well. Because we are drawing even closer to the end-of-year exams-that as I'm sure you all know are your most important academic tests yet- I have decided that it would be beneficial to give you each a little extra help. Even those of you doing quite well already-" his eyes lingered intensely on Albus, "-could use a little extra preparation. Thus, you will be randomly assigned a tutoring session with me within the next few weeks. During this session you will be able to ask for any assistance in any assignment, you will be given helpful hints and tips for both the theoretical and practical portions of the exam, and, of course, will have free reign to comment on things not necessarily about the tests themselves. Being healthy and happy is important. If you are feeling stressed, or anything of the sort, I would be delighted to help. Consider this a thank you for all of the effort you've put into this year!"

There was some murmuring at this, but on the aggregate it seemed to be a well liked idea. Albus cringed at it however; it only confirmed his suspicions. If students required excess assistance, they should be allowed to do it at their leisure. Randomly assigning an appointment seemed like a very weak way to help everyone- but perhaps, a strong way to further interrogate them.

"I don't like Puckerd either, but I wouldn't go that far" Scorpius said as they left Potions. "They're done with asking around Hogwarts, I'm sure of it. Chances are he really does just want to help."

"You can't be serious" Albus said sternly.

"I agree with Scorpius" Morrison yawned, stretching so much that one of his gangly arms nearly collided with a seventh year Ravenclaw's face. "The Ministry is never going to figure out who the Silver Wizard is by asking the same people. I reckon he's been slacking a bit as a teacher, and wants to make up for it."

Albus mouthed wordlessly at them, but decided to drop it. It was Scorpius who brought it back to his attention however.

"It is odd though, planning this meeting now. In a few months we all have a personalized meeting with him anyway."

"What?" Albus said as they entered the Slytherin Common Room; he planned on jotting down some History of Magic homework before dinner. "Why?"

"Career advice" Scorpius said icily, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Before our O.W.L's we meet with our heads of houses to discuss career options. It helps us to realize which O.W.L's we can completely disregard."

Albus groaned. Yet another thing for him to not look forward to. He imagined sitting in a room with Puckerd, arms crossed while he watched his professor scribble out all of the potential careers that Albus would never pursue. Morrison's question jogged him back into reality.

"Any ideas what you guys do want to do after we get out of here?"

Scorpius answered almost immediately. "Something in the Ministry" he said. "Good money, and a prominent position. The fundamentals to an overall good life."

"Yeah but *where* in the Ministry" chimed in a new voice, this one belonging to Melonie. She'd approached and given Morrison a swift kiss (a sight that Albus was not yet used to) and turned to Scorpius. "There are a lot of places."

Scorpius shrugged. "Doesn't matter, as long as it's not something stupid like the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department."

"I'd like to work with muggles" Morrison spoke up, and they all turned to him.

"They why aren't you taking Muggle Studies?" Albus asked, bewildered.

"Too boring" Morrison said bluntly. "But to be honest, it would probably be a far cry better than Divination. But yeah, muggles aren't so bad. I've lived with them. How about you Mel?"

Melonie tapped at the side of her mouth with her finger. "I really don't know" she admitted. "I'm kind of hoping to clear it up once I see Professor Puckerd though. I suppose I wouldn't mind being a Healer."

"How about you Al?" Scorpius said, turning to him and looking intensely interested.

Albus went red. He had been trying to think of a suitable career to name the entire time that they'd been talking, but nothing was coming to mind. His first thought was that of an Auror, like his father. But it was extremely dangerous, required skill that he didn't have, and, to be honest, he thought that his experiences had greatly ruined the moral integrity necessary. He next wildly thought of an almost Silver Wizard like lifestyle, but then realized that he again lacked the talent. There also probably wasn't a lot of money in it either.

"I guess I'd like to be a Potions professor" he said nervously, saying the first thing that he felt comfortable with. They all ogled him, though their faces seemed to indicate that they agreed. "I mean...I am good at it. And we change professors here so much, I'm sure it isn't too difficult to squeeze my way in."

"You could definitely do it" Morrison said reassuringly. "Then you could pass all of our kids too."

There were scattered laughs here, but soon after Albus got down to business and began his History of Magic homework. He skimmed over the questions, distracted. Would he mind having a position as a professor? The same position as Puckerd, and, to a more extreme dislike, Darvy?

He ended up getting very little done, and by the time that he'd went down to the Great Hall for dinner he'd exhausted his thoughts on the matter. He felt like what he really needed was sleep. He planned on having a good time with Mirra on Saturday, and then a vigorous training session the next. With homework in between, he couldn't allow himself to exert his mind or body any further. Sitting down at the table, he started to scarf down his ham and potatoes at an almost Morrison-like rate.

Two minutes into dinner and heads were turning. For a single wild moment Albus thought that his table was rounding on him, but he then noticed that a silence had overtaken the entire hall. He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. Was Fischer back?

People soon started muttering.

"Why's it coming around dinner?"

"A galleon that it goes to one of the professors-"

Albus too looked, and what he saw excited him rather than frightened him. Circling over head was a lone barn owl.

Morrison nudged him with his foot and gave him a knowing look, and Scorpius exchanged a glance with him. On one end, he had enough to be going on with. On the other end, however, he was deeply curious as to what this next letter would say. Would it comprise of only three words, like the previous?

For a single disappointing moment it seemed as though it wasn't his letter. The barn owl stayed fluttering in mid-air as if lost, and Albus had the strange suspicion that it was examining everyone in the room. There was probably a very poor description of the addressee. Soon enough, however, it was hovering only over the Slytherin table, and a thin envelope had been dropped at his plate. His entire table gawked at him while the other three houses turned their attention back to their food, no longer interested. Albus stashed the letter inside of his robes and glanced around, allowing his eyes to inexplicably glare over to the high table, where the professors sat. Only Puckerd was still looking at him, eyes narrowed. Albus waited until he was quite sure he was done to tear into the letter.

"Aren't you going to wait?" Scorpius started, but it was too late.

The envelope had absolutely no information on it at all, and Albus was quite astonished that the letter had even reached him. Indeed, he could not even be sure he was the intended recipient; he was only going off of previous incidents. Still, he read the short letter with his breath held.

The Veil. I'm so sorry. I tried using it. I'm sorry.

And that was it. Albus stared at it, startled at both the brevity and the format. It didn't even have the spaces that indicated who sent it or who it was sent to, and the grammar was...fine. The handwriting still retained some child like properties, though Albus was sure that he only recognized it because he'd seen it before. What he had on this paper, it was clear, was either written by someone different than the previous two letters, or by someone who had improved dramatically in all aspects of their writing.

"The Veil?" Morrison asked. "What?"

"Keep it down" Albus said, tense. Nothing made sense. Not that it ever had, of course. But this was very unpredictable. Was this letter even meant for him? And if so, was he supposed to know about this "Veil" that the person spoke of?

"What does it say?" Melonie said from across the table and two seats down.

"Nothing" Albus said, stashing the letter away and returning to his dinner half-heartedly. Half of an hour later, however, he was pacing in his dormitory.

"You're putting way too much thought into this" Morrison said, picking his head up from his stretched out position on his bed and shaking it. "I mean, there's not even a description of you on the envelope this time!"

Bartleby Bing entered to get a book from his bag, stopping Albus from immediately rebutting. Once he'd left Albus threw his arms into the air.

"But everything else is the same! The common owl, the lack of signature, all of it. And the handwriting *is* similar. Just not identical."

"Well we have two things to solve here" Scorpius said from behind his bag, which Albus saw was entitled *The Hogwarts Prefect Handbook*. "We have the sender, and what exactly it is that they're trying to convey."

"Theory!" Morrison shot out, standing up straight. "Here me out-ready-whomever's sending them is...insane?"

Albus stared blankly, and Scorpius looked up from his book.

"I'm serious!" Morrison said. "I mean, whatever they're saying isn't making sense, the handwriting switches back and forth, and they don't even seem to know who it is they're writing to!"

"The only person insane in that theory is you" Scorpius spoke up.

"Hark who's talking" Morrison said. "You're the one going over the Prefect manual when you got the job months ago!"

"For your information," Scorpius started, closing his book, "I have a very good reason for going through this book. I want to see if there are loopholes that will allow me to give Lance a detention for next to nothing..."

"Ah" Morrison said, smiling.

"But anyway" Scorpius continued, clearing his throat, "I agree with Albus that these letters are extremely peculiar. Thankfully, though, I think we've got our first clue."

"You recognize the handwriting?" Albus asked breathlessly, though he couldn't continue. Dante Haug had just entered.

"Hey, have you guys seen-"

"Out!" Scorpius barked. "We're busy."

"It's my dormitory too" Dante Haug said, eyebrows raised, though he did indeed leave.

"Well, do you?" Albus asked the second that the door had closed.

"No, I don't" Scorpius said flatly. "But we now have something to look for."

"And what's that?" Morrison said, taking a seat back on his bed.

"Hand over the letter" Scorpius said, sitting up himself. Albus whipped it out of his pocket at once and gave it to him; the next second all three of them were crowded around it. Albus scanned it once more to see if he could catch whatever it was Scorpius had caught, but he was unable too.

The Veil. I'm so sorry. I tried using it. I'm sorry.

"The 'Veil'" Scorpius said. "There it is."

Albus frowned. "I noticed that mate."

"But it's capitalized" Scorpius said. "Which is very important."

Morrison gave a hollow laugh. "No it's not" he said. "The previous letters had random letters capitalized too."

"This isn't random!" Scorpius spat. "Now pay attention! This letter, for some undetermined reason, is written better than the previous too. The grammar is correct throughout the entire thing. Capital letters are used when referring to *proper nouns*. This isn't just some regular veil that belongs to someone. This is a special one."

There was enough truth to this for Albus to seriously consider, and for the next few days, Albus did just that. *Veil*. He knew what a veil was-or it least he thought that he did. It was some piece of cloth or clothing, definitely something meant to cover, and the fact that it was made to be special in the letter led Albus to believe it was some kind of magical object. Whenever he tried to think passed this, however, it came to nothing.

He tried the library, but this did nothing for him, something expected considering how little of use the library was to him usually anyways. He was, however, surprised to see nothing on it in the Room of Requirement. Though he spent all of Wednesday night pouring over books in its confines, he couldn't quite reach anything important enough to be mentioned in a letter.

And again, he didn't have time to contemplate it. All of his classes were now expecting twice the work as usual, and they were all starting new things. Neville had them feeding truly awful plants called Cacticrooners, green cactus like plants that were capable of firing their prickly thorns about twenty feet, and this was only the beginning. Soon they were to begin helping the thorny monsters mate, a process so disgusting and dangerous that Albus had almost fainted just hearing about it. Hagrid had moved them passed thestrals and over to griffins, which was probably the most dangerous creature that they had studied so far. The entire class was forced to stand back about fifty feet from the paddock that housed two of the great creatures, examining them from afar and drawing them with little accuracy. And what's more, Defence Against the Dark Arts was not focused on nonverbal magic, as promised before the break. Instead, they were focused on dark creatures.

"I know, I know, you're all eager to learn to hex without moving your lips!" Professor Handit said while the class groaned. "But some people-like both the Ministry and the school and everyone else- seem to think that it wouldn't be a bad idea to become a little bit more familiar with dark creatures. So, who knows what this ugly slow creature is?"

He aimed his wand at a newly hung picture on the wall, which contained a flesh eaten man with sunken eyes. Albus knew it to be an inferius, a topic quickly covered throughout the class. He then learned that they would soon be learning about Dementors, a creature that's dangerousness was only outclassed by its obscurity.

"Why do you reckon we're learning about this stuff instead of nonverbal magic?" Morrison muttered to him as Handit did an awful impression of an inferius reaching out to attack.

"One word" Albus muttered back. "Silhouettes."

It was a relief when he finally made it to the weekend, though he had not forgotten that his Saturday night was meant to be romantic, rather than informative. His mysterious letter could wait.

He had arranged to have Mirra meet him at the statue of the scholar with a monocle on the fifth floor at ten o' clock exactly, and it was all too easy for him to get there with the combination of his cloak and map. He saw her waiting patiently, still dressed in her school robes, with her shiny badge still pinned to her front. He quietly crept up behind her-

She jumped so high that Albus thought that her head may have only been inches from the ceiling. She spun around in a frenzy, her wand drawn.

"It's me, it's me" Albus said, removing the cloak and grinning at her.

She clutched her heart. "Don't do that!" she said, hitting his shoulder. "Is the Cloak really necessary?" she asked.

"For me it is" Albus said. "I don't have the right to be out here this late, remember?"

"That's right, you don't" she said sweetly. "I should put you in detention..."

"Just come with me" Albus said, keeping his eye on the map. "Hey the Head Boy is patrolling right below us..."

It felt weird to move through the castle at night with Mirra, especially considering that only he would get in trouble if caught. They were forced to stay quiet the entire time, though Albus could tell that she was deeply curious as to where it was they were going. She certainly threw him a surprised glance when they reached the seventh floor.

"This is a pretty impressive blank stretch of wall" she whispered, staring directly at the spot where the strangest room in the entire school sat.

"Just pay attention" Albus said, and he let go of her hand. He stuffed the map away and closed his eyes, then walked in front of the blank stretch of wall, focusing deeply on exactly what it was he needed. He walked back and forth-

"Al" she said, dumbstruck.

The door appeared. He caught a glimpse of his girlfriend's face and saw that it wore utter bewilderment. He smiled at her.

"Surprised?"

"How did- what-"

"You haven't even seen the inside yet" he said, and he pushed the door open. Her look of bewilderment turned to one of amazement, and even Albus was impressed with what the Room had done with his imagination.

It looked a bit smaller than what it usually was, but it was mostly filled with decorations. The floor was lined with an emerald carpet, the sides of the room occupied with large book shelves that made it look rather like a study. There was comfortable furniture loitered throughout the entire room, and there were scattered candles everywhere he looked. In one corner of the room was a neatly made fireplace that almost resembled the one from his common room. Most impressive of all, however, was the wall furthest him. It was a sheet of see-through glass showcasing the grounds and the black lake. It resembled the glass wall from Lisa Vincent's wedding reception greatly, which, Albus figured, is probably where he got the idea in the first place.

"Oh Al!" she said, sounding as though she'd never been more surprised in her life. "What is this place?"

"Like it?" he asked, discarding his Invisibility Cloak onto a squishy armchair...

"It's wonderful" she said, staring at him intensely. "But I don't get it. How did...?"

"It's called the Room of Requirement" Albus said. "It pretty much creates whatever you need. I've known about it since my first year-my dad told me about it."

"How many other people know about it?" she asked, and she sounded somewhat nervous.

"Not many, I don't think" Albus said truthfully. "I know that Morrison and Scorpius do. And my parents, and some of their friends from Hogwarts, probably."

"It's amazing" she said, strolling around the room and blushing as she marveled. "I feel under dressed" she chortled.

"Nah, you look great" he said, and he led her over to the large window. *It'd be nice if we had some kind of mat* he thought to himself, and sure enough, a silver mat appeared right in front of the window, perfect for sitting and admiring the view.

They both sat down on it. Albus grinned, pleased that his surprise had been effective and that he now had alone time with his girlfriend. He thought of two glasses of pumpkin juice, and sure enough, two glass goblets appeared. Strangely however, there was nothing in them.

Pumpkin juice, pumpkin juice he thought quickly, staring into the goblets. Nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" she asked him, leaning her head over onto his shoulder. "You look angry..."

"No!" he said quickly. "It's just-there's supposed to be-I can't get us anything to drink" he finished, confused. How odd. The room had never failed a personalized request before. But then again, he had never asked for anything to eat or drink. Mirra seemed equipped with an answer. She chuckled and took the goblets from his hand.

"That'll be Gamp" she said.

"What's a gamp?"

She continued her laugh. "He's a person. Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration. There are five exceptions to what can be created, and food and drink is the first one. I'd imagine that the Room-as amazing as it is-can't even do it. It's fine though. *Aguamenti!*"

She aimed her wand and each goblet, and clear water filled them immediately.

"It's not much, but it's something to drink..."

"Thanks" he said, smiling and accepting his goblet. He took a sip of the cool water and glanced out into the grounds. He could see the light on in Hagrid's cabin; the gamekeeper had not yet gone to bed. He next turned his attention to the lake.

"Do you remember the boat ride?" he asked suddenly.

"Hmm?"

"The boat ride here. As a first year."

She smiled. "Vaguely. I just remember being really nervous. I sat with Rose" she added as an afterthought, and her smile thinned at this.

"I sat with Morrison" Albus said happily. "I still remember seeing you, though" he added.

"Really?" she said, intrigued. "When?"

"Right in front of the doors to the castle" he said, and it was easy for him to say it, the memory was so clear in his head. "I remember seeing Scorpius and then you. Or maybe it was the other way around. But it was when we were waiting to be led into the Great Hall."

"What's the first thing you thought when you saw me?" she asked cheekily. "And be honest!"

"That you looked pretty. And sad."

"At age eleven, that's what you thought?" she asked, almost snorting into her water.

"Well it was accurate...why? What's the first time you really looked at me?"

She blushed. "When I bumped into you that day" she said, and Albus laughed. "The first thing I thought was that you probably thought I was an idiot for not looking where I was going."

"No," Albus started, really trying to wrack his brain now. "I think-I think I was a little scared. I was scared that *you* were scared, because I was a Slytherin. Weird how things end up, eh?"

She laughed and agreed, and soon enough, they were recounting practically every moment in their lives together. He talked all about how nervous he was seeing her during his return to Hogwarts their second year, and she admitted how she had went over how to apologize to him again and again in her head before finally meeting with him in the library; she even confessed to having had Scorpius leave on purpose to give them alone time. She divulged how afraid she was that their friendship would end when she began dating Eckley, and he in turn revealed how much of a struggle it had been to watch them be together for so long. They both cringed at their prematurely ended first date as well.

"-Just trying to have a good time, eating ice cream, and then your ears perk up like a dog!" she said crudely, and Albus chortled. "Next thing I know you're chasing some stranger down through the alleyways-"

"It wasn't a stranger!" Albus battled her. "It was Fango Wilde...and he's a criminal..."

"Oh that makes it so much better!" she said, roaring with laughter, though she fell silent soon after. Albus knew why. This next part was not a very fond memory for either of them to recount. It had been at this point that Albus had foolishly attacked Wilde, and the end result had he, Mirra, and Morrison all portkeyed into the Department of Mysteries. What happened after still gave him shivers: Darvy speaking to him in a maniacal slur. Being chained to a wall. Experiencing, for the first time, the odd tingling feeling and consequent bouts of uncontrollable power that still occasionally plagued him to this day...

The rest was hazy, but he still managed to catch glimpses of it. Eager to move through so as to find his next memory of him and Mirra, he sailed through his wanderings of the Department. He

saw his father duel Ares into a stalemate, the Foulest Book in the middle of their battle. There was James, gushing blood from his side. There was Fairhart, who led him to safety, through multiple different halls and after seeing numerous different rooms-

"And the Executioner's Veil. Don't worry about it."

Albus spilled his goblet over, drenching Mirra's robes.

"Al!" she said, standing up quickly and looking down at her robes. "What the-"

"Sorry!" he said quickly, looking around wildly for a rag that magically appeared. *It couldn't be.*

"I'm sorry, here-"

"It's fine" she said, and she'd already aimed her wand at her robes. *"Evaporis!"* she breathed.

"What got into you?"

"Nothing" Albus said, though his heart beat was pounding. "I just- I've just thought of something."

"Well care to share?" she asked, and Albus noted that she sounded slightly aggravated.

"It's nothing..."

Fairhart was all that he could think.

Even as he thought it the room changed slightly around them. The furniture switched from comfortable armchairs to sturdy looking tables, clearly designed for holding several heavy books. The shelves full of reading material greatly expanded as well. What he wanted now more than anything was the opportunity to do research.

"Albus, what's going on?" Mirra asked.

Albus exhaled deeply, deciding that there was no harm in telling her exactly what was on his mind. "Okay," he started, "remember a while ago I told you got a strange letter..."

He briefly explained all of his theorizing on the first two letters he had received, and then told her all that he knew about his most recent one. She didn't seem impressed.

"And that made you spill your drink?" she asked.

"Not so much that" he admitted. "It's just-it's going to seem weird-really fortuitous actually-but what we were talking about reminded me of something. That day, when we all got sent to the Department of Mysteries...There was a veil. Fairhart knew what it was. He called it the 'Executioner's Veil'."

"And you think that's the same one from the letter that you just got?" Mirra asked skeptically, though she did seem somewhat stunned.

"How many others are important enough to be talked about! And that means that-it's a long shot, I know-but maybe these letters-"

"Oh Al" she said, calming down and taking a seat back on the mat. "I know you'd like to believe-well..."

She trailed off, and Albus knew precisely what it was she was thinking. Like Scorpius, she assumed that his ideas about Fairhart's survival were brought about mostly as wishful thinking. But what if they weren't? If Fairhart was still alive- if he was still corresponding with him- then wouldn't that open up numerous other possibilities? The identity of a certain masked renegade?

They said nothing for quite some time, and it was Albus who broke the silence.

"I'm sorry" he finally said. "I just got taken aback; I didn't mean to ruin the moment."

She shifted her mouth to the side, as Albus now realized she was quite prone to doing. "It's okay" she said. "I understand."

There was more silence, this time ended by her.

"I did have a good time, though" she spoke up. "I mean, I still am."

He gave her a light smile. As glad as he was that the night had not been ruined, he also could not refrain from letting his mind soak in the thoughts that were now swimming around in his head. He did not know how to articulate it to her, but he somewhat wanted to just be able to think to himself...

"It's late" Mirra said suddenly.

"I'm sorry" Albus said, shaking his head as though he controlled the movement of the sun.

She smiled. "It's fine" she said. "I had a good time though, really" she said. "It was nice to reminisce..."

"Yeah" he said, standing up, and the candles started extinguishing themselves, as if aware that they no longer had a scene to set. He threw the Cloak over them both, and then she took his hand in hers. With his other hand he pulled out the Marauder's map. She tapped it with her wand, he said the words, and soon enough they had their guide for the entire castle.

It was a quiet walk back to her dormitory, and there was a light, though passionate kiss to end the date. He whispered a hoarse goodnight to her, apologized again, and then made off for his own dormitory. The trip comprised of seven flights of stairs with hallways in between, but he barely realized where his feet were taking him. By the time that he ended up in his dormitory his heart

was racing as much as it had when the Dark Alliance members had crashed their way through the window.

Scorpius and Morrison were completely knocked out, and there was no point to waking them to discuss something that would surely be dismissed anyway. Instead, he quietly dove through his trunk, easily finding what it was he wanted-it glowed blue in the dark, after all.

He examined Fairhart's silver ring underneath his covers to hide the glow, the words unchanged from all of the other times that he'd read them off.

To Sam, for showing me what true magic really is- San

Whoever Sam was Albus could care less about, he had an idea. He inched his lips close to the ring and muttered what was on his mind.

"Executioner's Veil" he said lowly.

Nothing happened. He sighed. He was sure that it all connected somehow. Was it Fairhart sending him letters? Dead people couldn't send letters. That would mean that his former professor was alive. And regardless of what the letters meant, this would give them an additional suspect when it came to the Silver Wizard. The ring was silver, after all. That had to mean something, didn't it?

He fell asleep with the ring in his hand.

Chapter 14: The Most Secret-Keeper

As Albus had predicted, his theories were rebuked almost immediately.

"You're putting an awful lot of stock in a single word, mate" Morrison said, yawning at the breakfast table on Sunday.

"Agreed" Scorpius said through a mouthful of eggs, and Albus choked on his pumpkin juice.

"You were the one-"

"Lower" Scorpius cut him off.

Albus dropped his voice. "You were the one who said how important the Veil was."

"The Veil yes, your prime suspect, no. Even if it is the same item that you remember Fairhart having mentioned to you, I *highly doubt* that he's the only person in the world who knows of its existence. You are drawing way too many conclusions from a single memory."

"But everything fits!" Albus hissed. "Fairhart's a brutal duelist, I've seen him myself. He's written me anonymous letters before. And he knows about the Veil!"

Morrison scratched at his chin. "He makes a point" he said to Scorpius, and Albus' heart leapt. "In fact, the only glaring hole in your idea is that he's dead!" he yelled, turning back to Albus and putting so much emphasis into the last word that several people turned to them, forcing the conversation to end abruptly.

About an hour later, Albus was still at it, only this time in the middle of a scrimmage.

"Well you've successfully eliminated my dad and Fairhart" Albus scoffed at Scorpius, hovering in the air next to him while the rest of the team practiced dodging Bludgers. "So then what's your guess?"

"Honestly?" Scorpius said, eyeing the team intently. "We've probably never even heard of whoever it is."

"Oh come on..."

"Occam's Razor" Scorpius said swiftly.

"Who's what?" Albus asked.

Scorpius rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. "Until further information debunks it, the simplest solution is assumed to be the most accurate. As we can't identify anyone personally, chances are that we can't figure it out because we actually don't know *who* it is. There are a million wizards in the world Albus. You haven't met all of them."

"Yeah, but the fact that they crashed Morrison's sist-"

"They were after Dark Alliance members, that we were at the wedding doesn't mean anything-"

"They were there awfully quick, considering that-"

"Apparition is, believe it or not, about as fast as the blink of an eye-"

It went on like this for at least another full minute, until finally interrupted by Barnabus Curder.

"Hey, we're just kind of, you know...flying around. Is there anything in particular that we should be doing?"

"Yeah you're doing great" Albus ignored him.

"You're not even listening-"

"No, tell Barry to keep up the good work..."

Barnabus flew away muttering under his breath; Scorpius watched with his mouth agape as he did so.

"You're the leader!" he yelled at Albus. "Maybe you should actually start leading!"

"They're doing fine" Albus said, and it was perfectly true. His team had drastically improved since their first match, and Albus could only assume that it was because the nerves were gone and there was experience now under their belt. Their next game was scheduled for early in February, just about a week before the Valentine's Day Hogsmeade trip in fact, and Albus was feeling something that he had never expected when he'd first picked his team-confidence.

"They've gotten better at flying, but they haven't gotten better as a team" Scorpius said darkly. "It'll still be my keeping and your seeking pulling us through. If I agree with you about this whole Silver Wizard thing, will you drop it and start being a Quidditch Captain again?"

It wasn't this easy however. Albus found himself becoming almost unhealthily obsessed with the Silver Wizard over the course of the next few weeks, and most of it was due to the fact that he was now so confident in his suspicions. He knew that it was viewed as pathetic and hopeful by his peers; knew that he seemed like a child, grasping at the idea that his former professor could still be alive and well, systematically destroying two separate factions all behind a mask. But he could not help but draw these conclusions the more that he pondered on them. Aside from Fairhart's apparent, unseen death, what was there stopping them from being correct?

Sadly, he had no further information to go by except for the letters. Ignoring the complications that arose from different handwriting and grammar, he decided instead to focus on what had helped him create his hypothesis in the first place- the Executioner's Veil. He was sure that the object from the Department of Mysteries was the same as the one mentioned in the letter, but this

didn't help very much. Neither the school library nor the Room of Requirement possessed any such information on the Veil, only further confirming its mystique and increasing his desire to learn what he could about it.

He spent many a night going over the three letters that he'd now received; the first, crinkled up message and the next, better kept two, but it was to no avail. As he examined each of them he could not help but feel as though they resembled three different pieces to three entirely different puzzles. Each one of them had slight characteristics resembling at least one of the others, but apart from the fact that they all lacked an actual signature; it was tough to make sense of them as a unit. The Veil wasn't even mentioned in the first two letters, and though Albus was sure they all had the same sender and intended recipient, he could not trace its relevance to them either. He even tried piecing together the misspellings and randomly capitalized letters of the first two scraps of parchment, but again, it did nothing.

The only person that he could talk to about his puzzle troubles was his girlfriend, who had accepted his apology for their ruined date and could clearly see the desperation on his face when the subject of the letters was brought up. Like Scorpius and Morrison, however, she made no attempt to spare his feelings.

"I just think that you're reading too much into things" she said lightly. "I mean, who's to say that these letters have any connection to the Silver Wizard at all? Does the person sending them have to be the same person who goes around taking out bad wizards?"

"Only if it's Fairhart" Albus said, tugging at his hair, his elbows digging into his closed textbook.

Though Mirra now knew of the Room of Requirement, she still preferred the library for all of her homework and studying, something that Albus didn't quite understand. Regardless, the conversation was a hushed one at a table in between an aisle of books.

"Well-" Mirra started, though Albus held up a hand.

"If this is another lecture about how Fairhart's dead, believe me, I've heard it before-"

"It's not" Mirra said sharply. "I'm going along with your idea that he's alive, for the sake of the conversation."

Albus let out a breath of relief. "Okay, keep going."

"If Professor Fairhart *was* alive," she started smoothly, "why would everything else be happening? Why would he be sending you letters? Why would he conceal his identity from you?"

"It wouldn't be the first time that he sent me a letter anonymously" Albus told her matter-of-factly.

"Okay, but was that letter legible? Did it have a clear purpose?"

"Yes" Albus said shortly. "But those aren't requirements for a letter!"

"Okay, fine" Mirra said, waving her hands. "Then why conceal his identity?"

"Well, because he doesn't want people to know he's alive" Albus said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"But why not?"

"I don't-I don't know-any number of reasons-"

Mirra sighed. "I want you to be right Al, I really do. But until you can answer these questions, I think that you just have to drop it."

Albus groaned and put his forehead on the cool table. Why could no one just toy with the idea like he was doing? Of course it wasn't logical from an outside perspective. But if they only messed around with the facts a bit...

"I really need to get going though" Mirra said suddenly, and Albus picked up his head and watched as she packed her things. "Prefect meeting, McGonagall wants to go over some things with us."

Albus stretched. "I guess I'm done here too" he said, throwing his untouched books into his bag and making a mental note to get cracking on his Transfiguration homework before the next day-now was not the time to start slacking.

Mirra gave him a swift kiss on the cheek. "I'll talk to you later, okay?" she said, and she walked away briskly while he waved his hand at her. As if to corroborate her meeting he saw two more Prefects walk out of the library at a fast pace, Winona Soreno and Milton Parish. He rose from his own seat, seeing no reason to be in the library, and headed out of the rows of books and more towards the community area, close to the exit.

He saw a peculiar sight. A wave of red hair was flowing on one of the long tables, and Albus knew at once that it was Rose with her head down and buried into her arms. At the seat next to her was Charles Eckley, who was patting her hand lightly as if to console her. At the next moment he'd risen from his chair and departed however; Albus had almost forgotten that he too was a Prefect.

Albus waited until Eckley had left completely to approach his cousin. He was not afraid of him, of course-indeed, they were on as good as terms as possible considering their history-but he also did not want to interfere with their conversation, as opposed to creating a new one. He slowly inched his way towards his cousin and then, quietly, sat down next to her. She didn't seem to notice.

Albus tugged at his collar. Was she sleeping? Without seeing her face he could tell that she was distraught, and this made him uncomfortable. He rarely spoke to Rose, or really any of his family anymore when inside the confines of the castle. Separated by multiple floors of magic and marble, it was a difficult task to keep up with everyone. And though he actually had classes with Rose, they were no closer now than they had been during her emotional struggles the previous year. But still, he was her cousin, wasn't he? Didn't he have some kind of obligation to ask what was wrong?

He coughed lowly, and then, without even waiting for a reaction, coughed again with more power. Rose slowly picked up her head, and Albus cringed when he saw her. Her eyes were blotchy and her cheeks red-she'd clearly been crying.

"You-you okay?" Albus stammered out.

Rose glared at him for a moment before squeaking out a sentence.

"She's *never* going to talk to me again, is she?"

And without waiting for an answer, she stood up, snatched her bag off of the table, and strode out of the library with her head hung low. Albus sighed as he sat motionless at the table. He had way too much to deal with.

The weeks stretched on, and the chill of January increased. Light flecks of snow accompanied each morning, but never amounted to much, and it became more and more common to see students huddled around the fire of the Common Room as though their lives depended on it. The cold weather, however, was not enough to put a damper on the Quidditch spirit in the air. Albus was fortunate enough to have a few extra weeks to train his team, but James and his lions ended up squaring off against Ravenclaw only a few weeks after Christmas. Albus got shivers as he watched the game, and they had little to do with the air biting into his flesh. In all of his recollections of having seen them play, Gryffindor had never looked more dominant.

"That's two hundred and twenty to fifty" the commentator's voice rang out through the icy air as Albus watched, his face peering through his fingers. "And Potter is showing no signs of anything other than defense..."

It was certainly true. The hour long slaughter ended with Gryffindor ahead by more than four hundred points, and Albus had seen why at once. Though his brother was vastly superior to the Ravenclaw Seeker, he had opted to only block him instead of compete with him. Gryffindor's chasers were so good that they managed to score almost every time that they took off with the Quaffle, and Albus knew that his brother was counting on this to ensure their way into the final. It was all about the points, after all, and James was here guaranteeing that he had enough of them to secure a spot in the last match. Albus watched as his brother walked off the pitch with his head held high, throwing a glance towards the Slytherin side of the stands as he did so.

Albus narrowed his eyes at the field, and the next day, it was back to vigorous practice.

"New techniques today" Albus was telling his team. They were all standing in a semi-circle around him, Scorpius smirking.

Some of them groaned, others sighed, and Albus gave them all a stern look.

"What? You guys don't like to improve?"

"We don't need new techniques" Barry Bryant said, his tone annoyed. "We whooped Gryffindor, didn't we?"

There was murmur of agreement at this, all but from Scorpius, who muttered "We?" incredulously.

Albus looked through them all like they were ghosts. "Maybe you guys forgot over the break, but the discrepancy in the score was only because I caught the Snitch. Now I know that Hufflepuff isn't looking like much, but we're going to end up playing Gryffindor in the finals, and they've only improved since last time! So what we're going to do now is practice new techniques, get some experience with them against trash like Hufflepuff, and end up standing on even footing with Jame-I mean with Gryffindor. So get up in the air and pay attention!"

Their first order of business was to address the Sloth Grip Roll, a fancy dodging maneuver that was a personal favorite of Albus', though he was sure that no one else on the team knew it. After having the Beaters submit the offense to more than twenty minutes of this, Albus switched for more team drills with the Beaters. One thing that he had noticed in their previous game was the lack of coordination between his two most dangerous players. He aimed to fix this as fast as possible.

"You shouldn't each be going after both Bludgers. There are two Bludgers, and two Beaters. When one misses their target, the other knocks it back into play from the opposite side. Now me and the Chasers are going to fly around, and I want both of you on either side of it, trying to kill us!"

It proved to be a very intense lesson, as Barry Bryant and Yin Luong were both getting more and more accurate with every swing. Albus managed to avoid injury, but everyone else in the air was hit at least once, bar Scorpius, who was hovering in front of the hoops idly, singing a song lowly to himself in boredom.

"What should I do!" he called over midway through the practice, right as Tiffani Garrett was nearly knocked from her broom.

"Just keep singing!" Albus called back, and this was all that he could really say; Scorpius had little to work on in terms of mechanics.

Twenty minutes later his team was trudging along the frozen grounds, muttering mutinously about the weather.

"Good stuff today guys!" Albus called after them, and they waved back half-heartedly.

"What's got you all fired up?" Scorpius asked, having hung behind to help put the balls away.

Albus only had one answer for him.

"James."

Though Albus wished to have more time focusing on solving the mystery of the Silver Wizard and training for Quidditch, the intensified schoolwork continued to get in his way. He managed to cope with it considerably well, at the slight cost of reduced time with Mirra, but there were a few occasional snags that cut into his time. Puckerd's surprise appointment (conveniently scheduled for a Saturday afternoon) was one of these things.

"Three papers handed in since we've gotten back, and you passed all three" Puckerd was telling him in the dungeon classroom, vacant but for the two of them. He was sitting across from Puckerd's desk as was typical of all of his interviews, and Puckerd's fiend of a notepad was out as well.

"Yes" Albus responded, not sure if he was meant to confirm or comment.

Puckerd cycled through papers in a folder with Albus' name on it.

"Yes yes, everything up to scratch. Though-curiously-your most recent paper received an 'E' as opposed to your usual 'O'."

Albus gave him a blank expression, not sure on what Puckerd could possibly do with this. Admittedly, he had rushed his last essay-fourteen inches of parchment on the properties of boomslang skin-but this was only because he'd spent that particular night having a nice long thought about who the Silver Wizard was. But Puckerd didn't need to know that.

"Yes" Albus said flatly, again not sure if there was a proper response to this.

"Now why would that be?" Puckerd said. His expression twisting into a leer.

Albus shrugged. "Quidditch game coming up" he said, and this was true, so it was an easy lie to tell.

"Hmm, I see" Puckerd said, jotting down a full paragraph into his notepad and turning a page. Albus had the sudden urge to vomit.

Puckerd leaned in close enough so that Albus could see the oil in his hair. He scratched his nose and spoke quietly.

"Is there anything else bothering you, Mr. Potter? I understand that you may feel uncomfortable speaking to me about topics of a personal nature, but it is my duty to make sure that you are prepared for your exams. I would not want you feeling stressed as we enter the final, crucial months of preparation."

"I'm fine" Albus said at once, almost before Puckerd had even finished speaking.

Puckerd exhaled deeply. "That may be the case, but I can't help but feel as though I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't check over what could be troubling you. Do you perhaps feel an increased sense of danger around you? Did the events that transpired over the course of the winter recess shake you? Perhaps if you could describe the scene for me, in detail, I could assist you with your troubles."

This time Albus actually did start before Puckerd could finish, but he didn't speak. He simply laughed. Loudly.

Puckerd gave him a stony look as he cackled. "Mr. Potter, I like a joke as much as the next--"

Albus continued to laugh. *He just doesn't get it*, was all that he could think. The pathetic attempt to segue into a conversation about the Silver Wizard, the fact that his tactics were easily spotted, all of it. He was laughing so hard now that his ribs hurt.

"Mr. Potter!" Puckerd hissed, his nostrils flared. "Keep this up and I will have no choice but to deduct ten points from Slytherin--"

This only made him laugh harder, if such a thing was possible. After a full minute of raucous wheezing he managed to string together a sentence.

"Sir, I'm going to leave now" he said, and he stood up.

"Excuse me?" Puckerd said. "I did not dismiss you."

"I don't *care*" Albus said, and his face was now straightened. "Don't you get it? You're not even being smart about it. Fischer's approach was better."

"How *dare you* address her as if one of your miscreant friends--"

"I don't know who the Silver Wizard is" Albus said shortly, and this made Puckerd almost fall out of his chair. "I really don't. I wouldn't tell you if I did, but I don't. I have an idea, but that's it; I figured I'd save you the trouble of another useless interrogation. I get it, okay? I know that Fischer sent you here to gather information on my dad, and I know that it transformed itself into you trying to pressure me for information that I don't even have. And I've figured all of this stuff out, not because I have information others don't, but because you guys make it so horribly *obvious*."

Puckerd looked as though he'd been slapped across the face. His fingers were rapping the table as if he was eager to jot in his notepad, but it didn't happen-perhaps he was too awestruck. Albus continued pompously-for the second time in two months, he was enjoying embarrassing Fischer's side of the Ministry.

"Take points from Slytherin" he said. "Give me a detention. Fail me. All you'd be doing is showing how negligent of a professor you are. You're not going to get anything from me, *or* my friends, so you can stop interrogating them too! Just stop!"

And with that, he strode out of the door. Only when he reached his common room did he let his actions sink in. Morrison was cuddled up with Melonie in an armchair, and Scorpius was again reading his Prefect's manual. It was Scorpius who he told first, but within ten minutes, the entire Common Room was circled around him.

"You really said he wasn't smart!" Denise Toils said in awe.

"You really told him that he could dock points from Slytherin!" A sixth year asked, looking angry.

Albus went over the story of how he'd lashed out at Puckerd at east three times before the comments and questions subsided, but each time, of course, he left out some of the things said about the Silver Wizard. The entirely authentic version was fed only to his two best friends, both of whom seemed pleased with what he'd done, if not slightly unnerved.

"That's a really quick way to get yourself kicked out of the next Quidditch game, Al" Scorpius said tensely.

Albus scoffed. "That'll make the house hate him" he said. "He wouldn't dare."

"I reckon you've got Puckerd figured out then, don't you?" Morrison asked him, grinning. "You're getting away with an awful lot."

"Not just Puckerd" Albus said cheekily. "Fischer's entire side of the Ministry."

Though the vast majority of his house was at least impressed with him, there was one person who had nothing nice to say about what he'd done. Word had spread quickly through his own house, but it was his own personal retelling that he gave Mirra in the library, and she kept her face in her hands the entire time.

"Well that's great Al" she said, turning her head side to side in disappointment. "But you know what would have been better? Hitting him across the face with a broomstick. *That* would have gotten you expelled pretty quick, much faster than throwing jabs at his intelligence-"

"Oh stop being so dramatic" Albus snapped. "I'm not going to get expelled. Honestly, you act like-"

"Like you are a student and he is a professor, yes that is correct" she said with gritted teeth.

Albus sighed. "Why can't you agree with me on anything recently?"

But Mirra was no longer listening. Her head had turned to the side, and an agitated expression had crossed her face.

"What's wrong?" Albus asked her, turning to see what she was looking at.

Rose was sitting by herself at a table, a single book opened in front of her. She appeared to be reading it, though Albus could not see her eyes moving. Mirra made an angry, low noise.

"She's here every day that I am now" she said. "I'm starting to think that she's looking for trouble..."

"Don't be so sure" Albus said, and his voice fell as well. "Not too long ago I saw her pretty bent up, and I'm pretty sure it was over you."

Mirra huffed and slammed her own book shut. "Well then she should say it to me directly!"

What Albus had said to Puckerd never made its way around the entire school, and only the Slytherins ended up discussing it for the next few days. Puckerd seemed to have recovered well- he was teaching as he normally did anyway- and he was now treating Albus as though he were any other student, which was an ominous relief. The last that Albus had heard, however, his Potions professor had slowed down considerably with his personal meetings and was now doing one a week at the most.

None of this mattered however. As February drew closer Quidditch became the most important thing in the castle. The Hufflepuff's, he knew, were not out of it by any means. They had beaten Ravenclaw badly right before the winter break, and as Gryffindor had ravaged Ravenclaw in their most recent contest, the bronze and blue were officially out of the picture. This meant that depending on the points, it would either be Albus and his team or the Hufflepuff's who advanced to play Gryffindor in the final. He knew that the school was mostly rooting for Hufflepuff, and not only because of the ancient stigma against Slytherin. If Albus did lead his team to victory, it would mark the fifth consecutive final match between the two, the start of a Hogwarts record and something that would probably irk the other two houses to no end.

This set the stage for a windy Saturday morning that had Albus in the locker room, pacing back and forth as if a general preparing to lead his troops.

"You're all young" he said, and he heard Scorpius give a loud cough, which he ignored. "But sometimes experience isn't as necessary as effort. We win this game, and we go to the Final. We win this game, and you all-for the first time in your lives-get to be champions."

"I won the championship of a Junior Quidditch League when I was seven" Barnabus Curder said quickly, and Albus stopped mid-step to slap his palm to his face.

"Just...just get out there and play!" he said angrily.

They marched out to the familiar booing of the past five years, but Albus made no comment to his team about this. They had experienced it last time, after all, and the way that he saw it, it was best that they got used to it if they were going to stay on the team. He glanced up at the Slytherin side of the stands and saw his emerald clad fans cheering vociferously. Melonie Grue, it turned out to an unsuspecting Albus, had proven quite talented at drawing; she had created a large poster with a picture of a snake wrapped around a badger, its jaw unhinged. She and Morrison were holding it up together.

He heard scattered applause from a different side of the pitch as well. A few Gryffindors had cheered at their arrival, mostly his family. He could see Mirra in the front row clapping so hard that her hands looked red. Eckley and Hornsbrook were next to her, tapping two fingers against their palms lightly and unenthusiastically. James was the easiest to see however. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, surveying the team with interest. Was he perhaps measuring them up for a rematch?

The Hufflepuff team emerged to a much greater applause, and Albus took to the center with the Hufflepuff captain, a blonde haired boy with a pudgy nose who looked as though he was only a year older. They grasped hands briskly as Mr. Wood stood beside them, ready to release the Snitch.

The whistle blew, and Albus kicked off. From the corner of his eye he saw Scorpius take off towards the goal posts, looking extremely stoic as he neared them. He watched his Beaters take off on either side of him as well, and he grinned to himself.

"And they're off!" the commentator said. Albus decided to tune out everything following this, intent on focusing only on the match. The wind whipped into his ears the second that he'd really started accelerating, but it was overall one of the nicer days of winter. He flew up high and scanned the pitch from above.

"And Potter is doing a familiar trick, examining the field from above to wait for an opening. Let's see if Gunner can properly combat this..."

Gunner, as it turned out, was both the Seeker and the pudgy nosed captain, and he couldn't seem to keep up. He tried elevating himself to Albus' level, occasionally chasing after him for a lead, but he was too slow and uncoordinated. Albus actually spent the first ten minutes of the game begrudgingly listening to the annoying commentary, something that he could not help as it was always in the favor of his team. Scorpius had saved four consecutive shots with relative ease, and two easy floppers from Garth Moone had put Slytherin ahead twenty to nil.

Albus tried to get a good glimpse of the Snitch, but it was a difficult task with some of the sloppy play on the field. Albus was not quite sure how Hufflepuff had managed to make themselves contenders; perhaps Ravenclaw was just abysmal. Those adorned in yellow and black looked as his own team had in their first game, only they didn't have the solid Keeper or Seeker to carry them. There were crashes every few seconds, and they typically involved the Hufflepuff players colliding stupidly, occasionally dragging down a Slytherin with them.

Ten minutes and five more goals for Slytherin later, Albus was starting to feel like the only member of the team not carrying his weight. His Beaters were doing everything as they'd practiced, his Chasers were putting up points, and Scorpius was his usual self. Albus could not quite shake the feeling that he would have little reason to pat himself on the shoulder unless he caught the Snitch soon.

He got his chance only minutes after thinking this. A glimmer of gold flashed slightly behind the Hufflepuff goal posts, and Albus bolted for it. The wind picked up in his ears, slightly nullifying the sounds of the audience, but what distracted him most was the groaning and panting of Gunner behind him.

"And Gunner can't seem to keep up with Potter! He's getting close now!"

The Hufflepuff Beaters tried to fly towards him and block him, but his own set of Beaters aimed two well placed Bludgers, one of them scattering the duo and the other hitting one of them square in the chest. Albus roared with excitement as he snatched the Snitch easily, the noise in the crowd now deafening.

"An easy win for Slytherin today" the commentator said, and though his voice was magnified he sounded disappointed. "Not a long game at all actually..."

Albus hovered down to the field, holding the Snitch high as his team crowded around him. This win didn't satisfy him as much as their previous one, but his heart was pounding nevertheless. It was he and his brother in the final once more. He had a streak to continue; a championship to defend.

"Party in the Common Room!" yelled a voice that he recognized as Morrison's, who had charged his way onto the field with Melonie and the rest of the Slytherins following along behind him.

Albus allowed the claps on the back and the words of encouragement to continue, but he directed his focus upwards. The rest of the stands were filing out, but he kept his gaze fixed only at the Gryffindor side. There were only a few people still standing where they were, and James was one of them. His hands were still in his pockets; his posture straight. He nodded his head slowly and smirked, which Albus returned.

The party was in full swing twenty minutes later, and it didn't slow down until nightfall. Albus had been asked to give a rousing speech about taking his team to the finals once more, but he had

instead given the honor to Scorpius, who had stammered his way through it with red cheeks. Morrison ended up being the life of the party, dancing wildly with Melonie the entire time, and the rest of the team was basking in the glory of having won two straight. He even saw Baranabus Curder talking to a few girls younger than him, giving them a detailed description of how exhausting their practices were.

Albus retreated to his dormitory. He appreciated the effort that had went in to the celebration, and he was certainly pleased that they'd won, but with the game done and officially out of his way, he could turn to more pressing issues.

Within seconds he had removed his collection of three letters, examining them each just as he had a hundred times before. His efforts proved fruitless. He could still make no sense of them.

Morrison entered, his hair ruffled and his face full of sweat.

"Where'd you disappear to mat-ah dammit Al!" he groaned, throwing his arms into the air.

"What!" Albus spat, scooping up the letters and shoving them away and out of sight.

"You're doing that *now*! Do you hear that down there?" he asked, pointing his finger downwards and towards the loud music and chatter. "That's all for you!"

"My team won, I didn't" Albus said crisply. "I can do as I please..."

"Well then can you at least bring those letters downstairs and do it down there? It feels weird without you..."

Albus groaned and put the letters into his pocket, rejoining the festivities a moment later. He refused to look over his contraband with prying eyes around, however, so he was forced to wait until the party subsided to give them another glance. It wasn't until a little bit after midnight that people starting going up into their dormitories, leaving behind a great mess and clutching their full stomachs.

"Here, let me help with that" Dante Haug offered as Albus picked up cups and plates from the ground and took them over to the trashcan.

"It's fine. I got it, just go to bed, we'll be up..."

"Alright, good night guys...and good game Al!"

"Yeah..."

Albus stayed cleaning up the mess with his two friends long after everyone else had went to bed, but he did this only to have an excuse to have the Common Room to himself. As they cleaned up the last remnants of the party Scorpius approached him.

"Where'd you go in the middle of the party?"

"Nowher-"

"He was looking over those ruddy letters" Morrison interjected, and Albus thumped him on the shoulder, hurting his own hand in the process.

Scorpius sighed. "I figured" he said. "Anything new?"

Albus looked over his shoulders about ten times before pulling the letters out and spreading them across the floor.

"No" he said bluntly, and he sat down in front of them.

His two friends did the same, creating a triangle around the letters as they all took turns peering at them. Once or twice Morrison made to speak, as if he'd discovered something, but he ended up chuckling at realizing that he'd simply read something twice. Scorpius remained absolutely silent as they scanned the writings, and Albus ended up muttering to himself, reading aloud to see if anything changed. It didn't, of course.

The light in the room grew dim, and Albus realized that it must have been close to or even possibly after one in the morning. He was just thinking that he'd better put out the fire when he heard a voice.

"You boys playing spin the bottle?"

Albus spun around. There, in the fireplace, was the floating head of his grinning Uncle Ron.

"Uncle Ron!" he hissed, and Scorpius and Morrison had jumped in surprise as well.

"What are you lot crowded around?" his uncle asked, though Albus ignored him and asked his own question.

"What are you doing here?"

"Your dad will explain" he said, his smile sliding off of his face. Albus watched as the image of his uncle slowly sank back into the fire, replacing itself with one of his father.

"Dad!" Albus said at once.

"Hello Albus, boys" he said, nodding to each of them in turn. Albus noticed that his father looked almost identical to how he had over winter break, only his skin was a bit paler than usual; he'd been keeping mostly inside.

Before Albus could ask anything his father had asked his own unusual question.

"Who did you defeat today?"

"Huh?" Albus said, confused, but it was Scorpius who answered.

"Hufflepuff" he said. "And we crushed them."

Albus' father grinned. "Good job."

"How did you know we played Quidditch today?" Albus asked, wondering if perhaps James had sent an unusually fast letter.

"Me and your Uncle Ron have been taking turns popping in all day, we saw the party. This is the second time that I've managed to catch you relatively alone so late at night-I'm beginning to feel extremely lucky. But what were you doing up?"

"It's a Saturday, you know" Albus said nonchalantly. "We were just talking. Why? What's up? What are you doing here?"

His father blinked a few times, then made to speak. He was cut off by muffled yelling from inside of the fire however. He turned his face partially so that Albus could only see his left side.

"Top shelf Ron. No? None? I'll pick up more tomorrow..."

"What's going on?" Albus asked.

"Me and your uncle are having a bit of a sleepover; we have some things to discuss. I fear that he's gone and eaten all of the cookies again however...but before we digress, are you okay? You seem on edge."

"Fine" Albus said, a little too quickly. He was not sure why he felt nervous. Part of him thought that he may be in trouble for his words towards Puckerd-his father had, after all, asked him to hold a civil tongue. Apart from that, however, he had an interesting opportunity here. He had three letters on the floor behind him, two of which he had not yet told his father about.

"How's your sister doing, Morrison?" Albus' father asked.

"She's okay I think" Morrison replied. "Her and Mike are on their honeymoon now, I heard. He's warming up to the whole magic thing too-"

"Dad," Albus started, his fists clenched and his lips quivering, "what's the Executioner's Veil?"

Whatever reaction he was expecting, it was not this. His father had begun choking uncontrollably, and it wasn't until seconds later that Albus realized that he had inhaled ash from the fire.

"Dad! Dad! Are you okay-?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine-" his father stammered out, still coughing. Albus could see beads of sweat formulating on his brow, and he could again hear his uncle's muffled speaking.

"You okay Harry!" came loudly from beyond the fire

"Fine" he replied, again turning his face slightly. He turned back to his son at once however, and saw that he was still waiting for an answer.

"Albus where did-where did-who-Albus..."

"Well," Albus said slowly, "what is it?"

His father was staring at him now, mouth wide open. When he spoke there was an unnatural chill to his voice, one that Albus recognized from his childhood. He suddenly felt as if he was about to be sent to his room.

"Where did you hear those words Albus?" he asked sternly.

Perhaps sensing an imminent reprimand, Morrison turned away at once and returned with the third, newest letter. He held it up to the fire and allowed Albus' father to read it. His expression hardened even further as he did so.

"I don't understand..." he muttered under his breath. "Who sent this to you?"

"I don't know" Albus admitted. "It didn't say-"

"Just like the last letter" his father said, his tone dark. "I asked you to alert me-"

"This one's brand new!" Albus said quickly, and both of his friends nodded in compliance. "I got it after the break!"

"And this is the only one?"

"Uhhh..."

"Albus!"

"But the other one was just gibberish!" Scorpius said, rushing to the defense of his friend. "There was just one more, and it was scribbled nonsense like the first. This is the first one to have grammar and everything..."

"Get me the other note" Albus' father said at once, and again it was Morrison who brought it over. He held up both the second and third letter, and Albus cringed.

"Not so close to the fire..." he said.

"Alright, the other one is nonsense" his father said, though he still continued to stare at the newest letter. "But I don't understand. Besides the anonymity of the note, where are you getting your question from? This letter mentions a veil, nothing more."

"It's capitalized though" Albus said.

"That may be true, Albus, but you asked about the *Executioner's Veil*. Where did you learn that first word?"

Albus hesitated. "I-I-I remembered it from somewhere."

"Where in the *world* did you hear that!"

"Fairhart" he blurted out, and his father's face turned to the color of milk.

"What?" he practically gasped.

"Maybe we should go up to bed" Morrison said. "Come on Scorpius..."

"Please stay here boys" Albus' father said, and they both stood as still as statues.

"Yes, sir" they said in unison.

"Albus, explain" his father continued. "When did you hear San say those words?"

"In the Department of Mysteries, two years ago" Albus answered at once. "He just mentioned it once though, honestly, and I randomly remembered..."

His father exhaled deeply. "But you haven't-you haven't—never mind."

"*What is it?*" Albus asked, curiosity burning in his chest.

"It is unimportant-"

"That's not fair! I was honest with you-"

"Albus I am your father! You will not talk to me like that!" he spat, and Albus fell silent at once, completely in disbelief. His friends also exchanged a fearful glance.

"Why did you want to talk to me" Albus muttered, deciding not to press the issue. "Why are you here?"

"I-I-erm-I wanted to ask a favor of you" his father said rather weakly, and Albus gave a derisive laugh.

"It's late dad, I really need to go to bed-"

"Albus stay where you are!" his father said quickly, and he no longer sounded weak. "Do you really want to know everything that I know about the Executioner's Veil?"

"Yes" he said immediately.

His father eyed the three of them. "Boys..." he started towards Scorpius and Morrison.

"We know" Morrison said.

"Completely confidential" Scorpius added.

Albus' father sighed. "Here's what we know. The Executioner's Veil...is bad news."

And he stopped there. Albus rolled his eyes.

"Thanks a lot, dad."

"I'm serious" his father said strictly. "That's about all that we know."

"But what is it exactly?" Morrison chimed in. "Erm, if you don't mind me asking, Mr. Potter."

"It's a veil" he responded hoarsely. "As simple as that. A giant black curtain, attached to an arch."

"Sounds scary" Morrison said, and Albus thought that he detected some mild sarcasm in his voice.

"Well...it's a veil on the surface. But it goes deeper."

"Like what?" Albus asked.

His father cleared his throat. "Hold on a second" he said, and he disappeared into the fire, leaving the three boys to stand still in the silence. He came back a minute later. "Sorry" he said. "Making sure Ron was the only one up...incidentally, is it just you guys awake?"

"Everyone's drained from the party" Albus said. "It's just us. So go on!"

His father exhaled once more. "The Executioner's Veil is a veil...but it's an extremely ancient and very magical object. It's so old that its creator can not even be identified-the Ministry simply refers to him as the Grand Architect."

"Couldn't it have been a girl too?" Morrison asked quickly, and Scorpius eyed him, annoyed.

"Again with this Morrison..."

"Yes, they could have" Albus' father said. "But I doubt we'll ever know, and I personally didn't come up with the back story. He or she is simply known as the Grand Architect. But that isn't important. What is important is that the Executioner's Veil-known as such because of the

translation written on the top of the arch- is, along with the Foulest Book, the oldest known relic associated with the magical art of Necromancy. That is to say, magic pertaining to communication with the dead."

"So it just contains information then, like the book" Scorpius said.

"No" Albus's father replied briskly. "It is a portal."

"*What?*" all three of them said collectively, and Albus' mind began racing.

"The Executioner's Veil serves as a gateway between this world and the world beyond. Whatever that world may be, we will never know. All who pass through the arch never return on the other side of it, only on the other side of life."

"How can you confirm that they're really dead?" Scorpius asked.

"There have been experiments performed in history" he answered. "Wizards who passed through with current enchantments active had their enchantments end, something which occurs when the wizard who casted a spell expires. This is all old information however. The Executioner's Veil is scarcely studied today. It is kept in the Death Chamber of the Department of Mysteries only for careful observation."

"Have you ever seen anyone go through it?" Morrison asked excitedly.

"Yes" he replied, and Albus raised his eyebrows. "And I will speak no further of that particular subject."

"Well...okay" Albus said. "But that still doesn't explain-I mean, why is the Veil such bad news if the Ministry has it."

"Because they don't" his father said, and they all gasped.

"Was it stolen?" Scorpius asked.

"No. Well-well yes. Well no. Well probably" Albus' father answered, rocking his head back and forth as he argued with himself.

"Huh?" the three of them all asked.

"The Ministry of Magic does not know the current location of the Veil."

This jogged something in Albus' memory. What had his father said the day that he'd almost been arrested by Fischer? That there had been a particular item that the Ministry did not know the location of?

"How long has it been missing for?" he asked, and his father gave him a wry smile.

"I see you've caught on, Albus. The Executioner's Veil is the very item that I spoke of months ago."

"Well what happened to it? How long has it been missing for?" Albus asked again.

"It's complicated."

"Go on then, it's not a school night" Albus said, and his two friends nodded.

His father sighed. "Okay, but I'm only going to go over this once, so pay attention. I had the Veil moved."

"Why?" Albus asked.

"When?" Morrison threw in.

"Just listen! A little more than a year ago I was not as prominent in the Ministry as I am now. I'd lost my reverence, and I knew that I was not going to be taken seriously. I feared, however, that the Veil was not safe. Ares was alive at the time, and he already had both the Book and the Wand, two items that we know to be associated with Necromancy. Ares never gave any indication that he was interested in the Veil, but it's such a mysterious object that he most likely didn't think it important enough to attempt to seize. But I did know that he was building an army, and I felt that precautionary measures needed to be taken. Ares had shown himself capable of entering the Ministry and leaving unscathed before. The Department of Mysteries was not a challenge for him; I could not risk it being held there."

"But why does it matter?" Scorpius interjected. "Sorry" he added. "I just mean-what's there to do with the Veil anyway? Doesn't it only work one way? There's no reason to have it."

"I don't know that for sure" Albus' father answered. "The truth is, Necromancy is a very obscure and very imprecise realm of magic. No spell can bring the dead back to life, but as you've seen with Silhouettes and Inferi, it is not impossible to come close. The Dragonfang Wand has shown itself capable of creating creatures that have their roots in death. Earthbound monsters, neither living nor dead-almost like Dementors. I can only speculate that the Veil does not work both ways only because those who have passed on do not wish or do not know how to come back. I do not know the extent of the Dragonfang Wand's power, but if it *could* conceivably control the dead to some degree, then the Veil may end up being a two-way Veil. Ares-or now even Darvy-may have been able to amass an army in a matter of hours. And what's more, we know of other, less human creatures existing, being tested by Darvy. What comes from the Veil may be even more dangerous. It was imperative that the Veil be hidden."

"So you hid it and just...what? Misplaced it?" Albus asked.

"No" his father said simply. "I did nothing. I was not even in the Ministry at the time. I had your Uncle Ron remove the Veil."

"And then what?" Albus asked, waiting to find the flaw in the plan.

His father now looked more nervous than he had all night. He cleared his throat and blinked furiously a few times. When he spoke, he looked downwards into the fire.

"For safe-keeping, I gave the Veil to someone who I trusted would protect it."

"Who?"

"I lied to you Albus" his father said quickly, and Albus turned his head to the side in confusion.

"Just now?"

"No, months ago. In Diagon Alley."

"When?"

"When we went to Gringotts" he croaked. "You asked me, if you recall, whose vault I had inspected. I lied and said that it was no one important. That I was just doing my job. That was not the truth. The vault that I inspected belonged to Sancticus Fairhart."

"What!" Albus bellowed, so loudly that Morrison clapped a hand over his mouth to prevent him from waking anyone up. He too looked shocked however, as did Scorpius. Albus could feel his breathing quicken, his mind making connections every second now, as it tended to do when a crucial piece of information was presented to him.

"We needed someone to watch over the Veil. Someone skilled and someone well protected. At the time, I had already asked San to infiltrate Wands and Redemption. I believed that his status as a Renegade would have provided him with safety from the Dark Alliance, or the Disciples of Change, as they were then known. I felt horrible endangering him like that, but he asked for it. Personally requested the Veil, in fact. He actually seemed rather interested in it..."

"But as you know, it backfired. After failing to hear from him for an extended period of time, I checked his residence and found it in ruins, bodies loitering the floor, all of them belonging to WAR members. Waddlesworth had discovered his deception and taken action against him. At the scene I found his ring buried in rubble. But not the Veil. It seems callous, but I had hoped that he would have had the chance to secure the Veil before-before-it happened. It was not in his Gringotts vault however. Sancticus Fairhart was the last person to have the Veil, and with him gone, we can only speculate as to who has it now."

There was silence following this. Albus was bursting to say that it might still be Fairhart, that his former professor and friend was alive and well, but he somehow knew this would only cause trouble. Scorpius, however, ended up putting a damper on this thought process.

"Erm, Mr. Potter-considering-considering that we know how the Veil works-and considering how they never found Professor Fairhart's body-can we-can we assume...?"

"It is never smart to make assumptions, but deductions are valuable tools to solving any mystery. Wands and Redemption did indeed show up at the residence of Sancticus Fairhart. Considering that we never found a body...yes, we can deduce that Fairhart was killed by either falling through or being pushed through the Veil. There is no doubt in my mind that he kept the Veil under an extremely close eye, and as he has no other residencies on wizarding record, we can also deduce that the Veil was present during the attack, which makes his fate almost a certainty. Sadly, this also leads me to my next deduction."

"That WAR has the Veil" Albus said sadly. "That's why you're so suspicious of Waddlesworth, that's why you believed me when I told you that I saw him around Gringotts, and that's why you want to get into WAR headquarters so bad."

"Yes" his father answered briskly. "WAR having the Veil is the only reasonable answer I can give to its disappearance. Thankfully, I highly doubt that Waddlesworth even knows what he has-he may have only taken it to hide the evidence of the deed. I do not know where exactly the Veil is, but I believe that we can safely say it to be under the surveillance of Wands and Redemption. Their headquarters would be a very good place to start looking, and it is very necessary that I get it back under my possession. If Darvy is after it, he will have no trouble sacking his army on Wands on Redemption and obtaining it himself, whatever Waddlesworth may think about his own personal foot soldiers. And what's more, if we do manage to find the Veil, we will have a crucial piece of evidence in our fight against WAR. We will have proof that they have Ministry property, as well as proof that they murdered San, who had it at the time. We may finally be able to prosecute Waddlesworth."

"Then you need to get in there!" Albus said.

"I want to, but that letter you received scares me, Albus" he said, nodding his head towards Morrison's hand. "Whoever wrote that has some idea about the Veil, and though I can't say much for the other two letters, I feel that this one may be some kind of trap. But either way Albus, I am here for a reason. Before we began all of this, I had a favor to ask you."

"What is it?" Albus asked. "Does it involve this?"

"Yes" his father said bluntly. "And it's dangerous."

Albus exchanged looks of mingled curiosity and glee with his two friends. "What is it?"

"First, you must make two promises to me, understood?"

"Yes" Albus replied irritably.

"One, you will put serious thought into this request, especially as to whether or not you are prepared for it."

"Got it" Albus said carelessly.

"And second," his father continued, his expression even more severe, "you will never, ever, ever, ever, *ever*, tell your mother."

"Got it" Albus said yet again. "Now what is it?"

"I need you to take me and your uncle to WAR headquarters."

"What?" Albus said, taken aback, and his friends too seemed confused. "How? Don't you need the Secret-Keeper for that?"

"Yes. *You* are their Secret-Keeper Albus. The most secret one of all, in fact, as I'm not entirely sure that WAR even knows it."

"H-how?"

"For you to have entered into their headquarters last year, it would have had to have been the Secret-Keeper who led you there. From what we know of a Fidelius Charm, any person who a Secret-Keeper divulges the location of the protected location to can access that location. They can not, however, bring others there. Because you were brought there personally, the position of Secret-Keeper was, inadvertently I'm sure, passed on to you. You say it was the Hammer who brought you there, correct? If that is the case, then both you and the Hammer are Secret-Keepers. And as an official Secret-Keeper with free passage in and out of the designated area, you can lead others there just as he led you."

"Are you sure that's how it works?" Albus asked, scratching at his forehead in confusion.

"I am certain. Years ago, there were a group of dark wizards who could not access a house that me, your uncle, and your aunt were using. When your Aunt Hermione accidentally apparated with one of them attached to her, however, she brought him there, and we were forced to never return-he had become a Secret-Keeper and had undoubtedly led others there. The same applies here, only we now have the distinct advantage that Waddlesworth most likely does not know you can lead us to him."

"Then yeah!" Albus said, his mouth curling upwards into a smile. "Of course I'll do it!"

"You will be well protected" his father said. "But I still advise you to think carefully. If you decide-"

"No! I want to do it! Really! It's just-well-when?"

"WAR's headquarters are in Hogsmeade, are they not?" his father answered him. "Don't you have a trip to Hogsmeade soon?"

"Yeah I do!" Albus said. "Only-well- it's on Valentine's Day."

He was suddenly not as ebullient. Mirra...

"Ah. You already had plans" his father said. "No matter. We will find another way-"

"No!" Albus said quickly. "No, I'll think of something to tell her. I definitely want to do this" he added, the excitement returning. He was no longer thinking of the Silver Wizard, or even of the mysterious letters. All that he could think of now was that he was going to help; going to contribute. To atone for every mistake he'd made so far...

"Well Valentine's Day is little more than a week away" his father said. "We will make arrangements before then. But for now, you boys should get some sleep. You don't want to be up all night, it will collide with school come Monday..."

They murmured in agreement, Albus' mind still racing.

"Good night Mr. Potter" Albus' friends said lowly. "Good night dad" he added.

"Good night" he said. "And Albus-before I go-I want to make it quite clear that you have every opportunity to change your mind-"

"I know" Albus said. "But I won't."

His father grinned. "I know you won't. But I do feel awful that your schedule has collided as such. Do me a favor, won't you, and apologize to your girlfriend on my behalf? If there's one person you can tell what's going on, it's her. Mirra is a sweet girl; she deserves to know what her boyfriend is doing on the most romantic day of the year, if not spending it with his girlfriend."

"Will do, dad" Albus said, and his father gave him a curt nod.

There was a whirling noise, the light of the fire dimmed, and for the second time, his father's head had vanished, leaving behind only embers. Albus scooped up the letters and marched up the dormitory steps quietly with Morrison and Scorpius, but it was a long time until he finally got to sleep.

Chapter 15: The Elusive Warren

The next few days seemed to drag along unusually slow for Albus. Classes seemed downright dull in comparison to what else was going on in his life, and he found himself wolfing down meals and forcing sleep upon himself, as though a change of speed in his daily routine would somehow let Valentine's Day come faster. The only thing that he wished he had more time for was his explanation for Mirra, which proved to be a worthy obstacle to precede what he would face with his father and uncle on Saturday.

"No, it's fine, really" she said slowly, flipping the pages of her notebook absent-mindedly. They were in the library once more. "What's one day right? We have all of the others to spend together..."

"Don't do this" Albus said, resting his face on his hands.

"I'm not doing any-okay maybe I am-I'm sorry!" she hissed. "I was just really looking forward to it! And besides, I don't even know what to do with myself this Saturday now..."

"Spend it with Morrison and Scorpius" Albus said simply. She gave him a sour look that he did not expect.

"I'm not going to intrude on Morrison and Melonie's special day!"

"Scorpius is..."

"That's completely different; he's good friends with them both-"

"Well he'll be a third wheel!" Albus whined, intent on getting his point across. "Join him and even things up..."

"You want me to go out on a date with Scorpius?"

"Kind of, yeah...not like that though!" he added, seeing the offended look on her face. "Look, it's just-this-this is really important to me, okay?" he said sharply, a tone of finality in his voice that he rarely used.

Mirra blew hair out of her face, her expression softened. "I know" she said. "I really do. But I admit, I'm a bit worried too..."

Albus gave a short laugh that earned him an annoyed "shh!" from a student near them. "Worried about what? I'll be with my dad. Come on, nothing to worry about."

"How can you say that?" she asked, surprised. "These people once wanted you dead!"

"Didn't succeed though, did they? And this won't be like that. My dad sent me a letter with the details already. I just take them there, lead them around a bit, they arrest the bad guys, and then that's it. I'll probably still have time to meet up with you..."

The truth was though, that he was looking forward more to the first half of the day than the second half. He loved spending time with Mirra, and he certainly wanted to do it in the romantic cheer of Hogsmeade on Valentine's Day, but what he'd been craving as of late was both answers and action. His father's new information on the Executioner's Veil had been a large blow to his theory that Fairhart was alive, but it did confirm his original suspicion that the two were in someway connected. If they did indeed find the Veil in WAR's headquarters, then this would be more than an important tool to getting Waddlesworth locked up. Whoever was sending him letters knew of the dark object, and this meant that there was a very good chance that he'd be at least one step closer to solving the identity of his one-way correspondent.

This didn't, of course, help with any of his Silver Wizard theories, but these seemed to be fizzling out as time went by anyway. There hadn't been anymore Silver Wizard articles in the *Prophet* since right after the break, and though Albus was sure that it would come soon, he could no longer find a solution that linked the masked vigilante and the letters together. Besides, the Silver Wizard was becoming old news anyway. On the mind of every Hogwarts student now was the Quidditch Final, set for just a few days before Albus' first O.W.L.

As he'd expected, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had been sorely agitated with the result of Slytherin's victory, which put them again in a match against Gryffindor for the title. Even with these bitter feelings, however, it was impossible to not be excited. Albus knew that the final was being hyped up as one of the most evenly-matched in years, with Albus leading fresh, young recruits against his older brother's team full of experienced players being the primary focus. Even deeper was Albus' desire to deny James a proper Quidditch Cup during his time at Hogwarts. As James had never caught the Snitch in a finals game himself, Albus still remained the only brother to have held this distinct honor, and he planned on keeping it this way.

It was this anticipation that set the stage for an odd scene on Thursday afternoon; a gaggle of younger students cornering Albus on his way back from the bathroom after Herbology, all talking about something that he knew nothing of.

"I've got ten minutes in-"

"I reckon it smarts hearing that from your cousin, doesn't it-"

"What? Get out of here!" Albus said, wiping sweat from his brow with a dirty hand and shooing them away. He noticed that none of them were Slytherin students however-they were all Gryffindor supporters, regardless of what colors they had on.

"I have faith in you Al!" said a voice from the middle of the crowd, and this student-a second year by the looks of him-was wearing emerald and silver. He had a small cluster of coins in his hand. "I reckon Fred doesn't knock you off your broom once!"

"What? Fred...?"

His thoughts cleared as the crowd dispersed slightly, two red headed figures making their way towards him through the clearing. The first was his cousin Fred; behind him was Lily.

"How's it going Al?" Fred said, and Albus noticed that he had an absurd amount of galleons in his hands.

"Fred, what is this?"

"Nothin'" he said nonchalantly. "Just taking bets as to how early in the game I knock you off your broom."

"Cute" Albus said, though he grinned at his cousin's audacity. "You know the game isn't for a few months though, right?"

"Oh I know" his cousin replied. "But you know what my dad always says-if you can guarantee yourself some money, then get it quick!"

"Ahh" Albus said, shaking his head and turning to his little sister. "And what are you doing here? Making wagers on how soon Mirra and me split?"

"Actually, I'm here to give you a message" Lily said.

"From James?"

"From Rose" she answered, and Albus felt his skin crawl slightly. What could this be about?

"Erm-what did she say?" he asked cautiously.

"She wants to know if you guys would all be up for hanging out on Valentine's Day" Lily told him, and Albus' jaw dropped.

"What does she mean by 'all'?"

"Well that would be you, Mirra, Scorpius, Morrison, Morrison's girlfriend who was at the wedding..."

"Tell her I'll get back to her" he said quickly, and within moments he was in the Great Hall, Scorpius next to him and Morrison across from him. He explained the situation briefly, and was bombarded with questions at once.

"Well what are you going to do?" Morrison said, lightly knocking away Melonie's hand, which had put a forkful of roast beef up against his lips.

"Well I'm not going, obviously" Albus muttered.

Scorpius moaned. "Please don't make me hang with them alone! It's going to be Rose and Lance on Valentine's Day..."

Albus cringed, though he thought that what he had in his mind in regards to the situation would be far worse than what Scorpius seemed as though Rose was willing to at least talk to Mirra, and as his girlfriend was refusing, this did not fair well for the situation with Lance's threat. He had denied that such a thing would occur before, but the new circumstances may have changed something...

"Well it is Valentine's Day" Albus said, playing with the corn on his plate. "And you said that things were going well with her at the wedding, right? Maybe it's time to finally move in?"

Scorpius stopped whining at once and gave him an expression of powerful surprise. "Really?"

"Really" Albus said, and he truly did mean it. He knew that it would probably not end well, but he had realized not too long ago that it was best Scorpius hear it outright than over an extended period of time. "Just put it all on the line. You'll have Mirra and Morrison there for support too, and I'm sure that they'll find some way to give you alone time with her. Maybe they'll convince Eckley and Hornsbrook to take off somewhere..."

Scorpius looked over at Morrison, who nodded rather than spoke, as he was chewing his food. Scorpius' face quickly turned to one of determination.

"Then that settles it!" he said, his head held high. "This Saturday, I tell Rose!"

"Well that solves your problem" Morrison spoke up. "But what about yours, Al? Rose is planning on having the entire group together, including you."

Albus rolled his eyes. "A simple alibi will do while I'm away with my dad. We'll just say I'm sick."

"And if you end up showing later on?"

"People don't stay sick forever..."

It turned out to be slightly more complicated than this. The next day his father had sent him a scribbled note with instructions on where to meet he and Uncle Ron, as well as the fact that he would need his Cloak as well. Albus could not, however, hide underneath his Invisibility Cloak while Neville was checking to see that they all had permission to go. Knowing how nice their Herbology professor was, Neville would probably end up bringing soup to the Slytherin

Common Room in an attempt to make Albus feel better when he wasn't even there. Albus was thus forced to hide behind random students to conceal him from Rose and her group, all the while leaving the ground under the eyes of Professor Longbottom.

"That was needlessly difficult" Albus muttered to Scorpius and Morrison, throwing the Cloak over himself clandestinely. "I'll catch up with you guys later" he said, and he watched as they strode over to Rose's party. Mirra and Melonie had already joined them. Albus could see Lance looking immaculate, dressed in scarlet for the occasion and with an arm around Rose. Scorpius was walking unnaturally close to the pair. Mirra was looking prettiest of the girls; she was wearing pink, uncharacteristic of herself, and her hair was tied back in ponytail. Her appearance made Albus' stomach do flip-flops-he sincerely hoped that he'd end up spending some time with her later.

Because he had to separate himself from the group, the walk to Hogsmeade ended up being a dreadfully boring one. The cold weather didn't help either, and Albus had never known the trip to take so long when he wasn't occupied with idle chat. He pressed on with a smile though, knowing full well that it was worth it. Soon, he knew, he'd be able to say that he had truly helped his father with the war. Today, they were going to put a powerful dent in Wands and Redemption.

He arrived at the village and saw that its mystique had dropped slightly since his last visit. The surprise of its beauty and draw of the new shops were no longer present, and it became more of a hassle than anything to navigate his way through the crowded streets full of shoppers. He lost track of his friends and their group immediately, and assumed that they'd went to the Three Broomsticks straight away to warm up. His destination was rather far from it however; his father had requested to meet him outside of a pub known as the Hog's Head, a place that he was unfamiliar with and actually needed directions to reach.

He did find it-it simply took him a bit. The pub was so dingy and unnoticeable that he probably would have walked right by it had it not been for the two familiar figures standing in its shadow. His father and uncle were leaning against the pub casually, neither of them dressed in robes typical of Aurors and both of them chuckling at something. Albus tugged at his father's robes to get his attention.

"Dad" he hissed, and the chuckling stopped at once.

"Al? You can take off the cloak now, I don't think that there's anyone around here who would notice you."

Albus did as he was told, and his uncle snatched the Cloak from him almost at once.

"Oh man do I remember this baby" he said, grinning. "How's it fit, kiddo?"

"Like a charm" Albus said.

Uncle Ron looked at his brother-in-law with a hopeful face. "Can we take her for a spin, Harry? Just once more, for old time's sake-"

"No" he replied sternly, snatching it and handing it back to his son. "Safety is a top priority; I want Albus to have it on him at all times. Besides, we wouldn't both fit under it anymore anyway..."

"Ugh, fine..."

Albus' father swooped down upon at him once, his face brisk.

"Albus, you understand that you can still back out-"

"I know-"

"And I must make something very clear to you. I do not believe that we will be in any danger, but if it seems as though me and your uncle are in trouble, you *must* get yourself out of there as quickly as possible-"

"I know-"

"And in your attempts to escape, I give you permission to use any hex, jinx, or even curse that you can think of-"

"Dad I know!" Albus blurted out. "You make it seem you really are expecting me to have to fight though..."

"No, I don't" his father said. "But you can never truly be sure. Dealing with Renegades is tricky business. They have more pride than your common Dark Alliance member-they feel as though they have a right to attack first and answer questions later. And though I feel as though me and your uncle can handle whatever may happen, I need to know that you can act appropriately."

"He'll be fine Harry" Uncle Ron said placidly. "We'll be there..."

But he was silenced by a single look. Albus' father was right about to continue when his expression turned fearful. "Under the Cloak, quickly!"

Unsure if this was a training exercise or not, Albus looked around in bewilderment, despite his father's insistence. What he saw made him comply and toss his Invisibility Cloak over himself clumsily. Puckerd had just turned a corner. He stopped abruptly when he saw the three of them (though of course, he could not actually *see* Albus) and curled his lips into a smile. He strolled over to them with a confident gait.

"Mr. Potter" he said, nodding his head at him.

"Wendell" he replied curtly.

Puckerd turned his attention to Uncle Ron. "Ron" he said, smiling.

"Wendy" Uncle Ron muttered, eyes narrowed.

"What brings you two to the village of Hogsmeade on such a romantic day?" Puckerd asked, and Albus backed away from the three of them slightly.

"Forgot to get the wives presents" Uncle Ron said. "So we figured we'd shop around early and surprise 'em later."

"Ah" Puckerd said, and Albus had to admit, this was an impressive lie for one on the spot.

"What brings you here Wendell?" Albus' father asked, and he sounded sincerely curious.

"Well there is a Hogsmeade trip today for the students, and naturally the teachers accompany them. I must say, however, that this is an interesting run-in. I was just meaning to speak to you about your son."

"Oh yeah?" Albus' father replied, and Albus' heart dropped. "How is James?"

Puckerd opened his mouth as if to say something witty, then closed it and smiled. "James is doing well, one of my top N.E.W.T students, actually. I expect him to ace his exam. I was referring more to Albus, however."

"And how's he doing?"

"Well he's sick, for starters" Puckerd said, sounding overjoyed. "I was just in The Three Broomsticks and I heard his friends talking about it."

"That's too bad..." Uncle Ron said.

"But I was more concerned with his behavior, actually" Puckerd continued, and Albus flushed so deeply that he was sure that the Cloak was now useless.

"His behavior?" Albus' father said, and he too now seemed concerned. "Elaborate."

"Albus seems to be very much against the idea of cooperating with authority figures. He seems troubled, however, and on the numerous occasions that I have tried to reach out to him he has not only denied me, but has actually become aggressive towards me and even went as far as to *deprecate* me in my own office!"

"Really?" was all that Albus' father could reply, and for a single fraction of a second his eyes had danced towards where Albus stood, invisible. Uncle Ron was grinning wildly however. "Well I'll have to speak to him about that, then. Maybe he just has a lot going on. It's his O.W.L year."

"Perhaps" Puckerd replied. "But he also seems to have an unusual fascination with a very famous figure-the Silver Wizard. In my most recent attempt to speak to him he randomly brought the vigilante into focus and accused me of trying to pry him for information-curious isn't it? How strangely your son seems to think that I would be coming to him and him alone for information on a national issue? It's almost as if he'd been purposefully told to be so defensive..."

"The Silver Wizard is big news" Uncle Ron interjected. "A lot of kids are talking about him. And you know the imagination on fifteen year-on teenagers" he changed his sentence at the last moment to make Albus seem less mature.

"Indeed I do, it merely troubled me" Puckerd said, his tone acidic, as though he loathed it when Uncle Ron was speaking. He turned back to Albus' father. "I was merely letting you know" he said.

"Well thank you" he said, his teeth gritted. "I'll certainly discuss it with him when I next get the chance."

Puckerd smiled. "Good to know-he is very proficient in Potions, I should add-and I wish him a speedy recover. But anyway, I must be carrying on. Good luck with acquiring your gifts!"

"Thank you, have a Happy Valentine's Day..."

Puckerd turned on his heel and left. The second that he'd turned the corner Uncle Ron gave a wail.

"I hate that guy, I really do..."

Albus removed his Invisibility Cloak and saw that his father was eyeing him intently.

"I just had an interesting parent-teacher conference, Albus" he said strictly.

"Yeah I-I heard. Look, dad-"

"We'll discuss it on the way" his father cut him off. "Now put your Cloak back on, I never said to take it off."

Albus did as he was told, and though no one could see it, he kept his head hung low as they began walking down the street. He was now feeling extremely glum; things had not gotten off to the start that he wanted. Only when they reached the end of the road and all came to a complete stop did he realize that his father and uncle were looking both ways to see where to turn next.

"Well?" his father said, loudly enough for Albus to hear but low enough so that people walking by wouldn't wonder who he was speaking to. "Where do we go from here?"

"Huh?" Albus said. "Erm-you mean-you don't know?"

"How would we know?" Uncle Ron said. "We're not the Secret-Keeper's..."

"Oh" Albus said, and he now felt extremely nervous. He was not sure of the exact directions; the only times that he'd ever been there he had either been escorted there by the Hammer or had randomly arrived there in a frenzy. He racked his brain for some semblance of a cognitive map-some familiar place that he could hold on to as a starting point...

"Erm-do you-do you guys know where the Hog's Penn is?" Albus asked, clinging to the few words that the Hammer had said to him last year as he'd led him there.

"You mean the Hogpenn" his father said, and he shivered.

"Yeah, we know where it is" Uncle Ron added, as though a bad taste were in his mouth. "That's where creepy blokes like Pentinhouse shop, isn't it Harry?"

"Who's Pentinhouse?" Albus asked curiously.

"He does the paperwork in our office" Uncle Ron moaned. "And he's just *awful*. Can't spell worth a damn, always smells a bit like tuna fish-"

"The Hogpenn is a term for the very broad outskirts of Hogsmeade. We can take you around that area, but you'd have to pinpoint things."

"Okay, let's do that then..." Albus said, pleased that they were making progress but still somewhat down. He was just waiting for his father to mention Puckerd...

"I thought I told you to keep a civil tongue around Puckerd?" his father said sternly, five minutes into walking.

"I know" Albus said quickly. "And I've really been trying! But he's getting downright evil! He's interrogating all of my friends, he even ruined a date between me and Mirra, and then-"

"I understand that it is a difficult situation that you're in" his father cut him off, his tone hardened. "But I also expected you to be able to cope."

Albus narrowed his eyes and sneered; his Invisibility Cloak was coming in more handy than he'd ever imagined.

"Well if you think I can't cope then I'll just be turning around then. Good luck finding WAR" he added before he could stop himself. He had not meant to sound so authoritative, but his bad mood, coupled with the idea that he was being scolded moments before entering danger, had caught up to him. Surprisingly, Uncle Ron chuckled.

"He's got you there, Harry. Well played Al."

His father stared directly at where Albus was walking. "You're becoming much too Slytherin for my liking" he said, a small hint of a smile on his face as they turned the corner.

They continued walking, twisting along a random path every few minutes or so. Slowly, the bustle of the crowd grew thin, and Albus knew that they were heading towards less tread on territory. They eventually reached an area with numerous different roads to take, and one look at the shady crowd around them told Albus that they'd gone as far as they could go. Wizards in patched up robes holding firewhiskey bottles or rambling to one another stopped what they were doing and looked at his father fearfully. This was the crowd of the Hogpenn, alright.

"Where to now, Al?" his father mumbled.

"Ummm, this way!" he hissed, and he realized at once that jerking his head did nothing underneath the Cloak. "I mean, the street straight ahead and to the left..."

They walked through it, Albus pleased to simply be away from the frightening group of individuals. To his immense surprise, he had picked the right one. A couple of dingy shops surrounded a boarded up building with a battered sign on it.

"*Quality Quidditch Supplies*" Uncle Ron read off of the sign. "Does it look like a piece of crap to you too, Al?"

"Yup" he replied. "So you guys can see it?"

"Yes" his father replied. "But I expected this. Most magical places have enchantments to disguise themselves to be less aesthetically pleasing. Even to a Secret-Keeper it would appear this way. Albus, however, must open the door and lead us in. Where we go from there I do not know."

"Should I take my Cloak off?" Albus asked, and his father thought about it for a moment.

"It may actually be best. I'd like to keep my eye on you."

"Okay then" Uncle Ron said, removing his wand and holding it up high. "Let's do this! Albus, open it up!"

Albus removed his cloak and pushed the door open. With his father standing by his side, they both walked through, Uncle Ron right behind them.

The headquarters of Wands and Redemption looked virtually identical to how it had during Albus' initial visit. The dilapidated outside appearance could not have been further from the interior. They were standing in a room the size of the shop from the outside numerous times over, the entire place magically expanded. They had entered into the beautifully furnished sitting room, complete with a crimson, impeccable looking carpet and several comfortable looking armchairs and sofas loitered throughout. Albus took his eyes away from the paintings hanging on the walls and the fireplace to pay better attention the occupants of the room.

The faint chamber music that he hadn't even noticed at first stopped abruptly. About twenty or thirty wizards and witches dressed in identical black robes were staring at the three of them with their mouths agape, some of them even wiping at their eyes as though they could not quite believe what they were seeing. One person, a young looking wizard with pierced ears and a flat nose who may have even been a new recruit, had dropped their glass of wine on the floor in surprise.

"What's going on-"

"Warren didn't say-"

"How did they-"

"The boy!"

All of them were muttering in terror, and those that had been relaxing all stood up and were now shaking on the spot. Some of the tougher looking members, however, were standing firmly, looking irate.

"What are you doing here!" yelled the Renegade nearest them, and Albus could barely see his lips because of his tangled black beard. The person next to him, Albus recognized, was Donovan Hornsbrook's father. He was one of those looking more angry than scared.

"Do you have a warrant!" a tall, wiry looking woman from the back yelled.

"Actually, no, we don't" Uncle Ron said, grinning wildly with his wand still raised. "We're not actually here on official Ministry business, so we don't need one. We're just passing through. That being said though, we *are* still technically Aurors, so attack us and you're locked up in Azkaban for...what, like fifty years, Harry?"

"Something like that" Albus' father replied, and Albus could not help but marvel at how bold and brave his uncle and father looked. Then again, he supposed that he shouldn't be too surprised. This probably wasn't the worst danger that they'd ever been it.

"This is outrageous!" the Renegade in front barked, spit flying out of his mouth. "This is breaking and entering!"

Uncle Ron gave a hollow laugh. "Probably yeah. I'll pay the four galleon fine though..."

"We're not here to arrest any of you" Albus' father said, and he was staring directly at the Renegade in front as he spoke. "We're here to see Warren Waddlesworth."

"For those of you who don't know him" Uncle Ron said, "he's about yay-high, long red hair, a bit like my daughter...kind of lanky too, real slim, a bit like my daughter...kind of a womanly face...a bit like my daughter..."

"He's not here!" one of the Renegades spat, but the one in the lead yelled back to him.

"Shut up, Wallace! There's no point in trying to hide him...they're going to search the place anyway..."

"Right you are, you blast-ended skrewt" Uncle Ron said. "So if you could kindly point us in the right direction-"

Before he could even finish however, an intimidating figure had worked its way down the stairs at the end of the room. Walking slowly and always bearing an angry expression, the tall, balding figure of WAR's other Secret-Keeper had arrived.

"You may see him now" the Hammer said, and the entire room went quiet. Albus watched as the Hammer's eyes lingered on him for a moment, though he did his best to show no fear as he stared back. He noticed a slight change in the appearance of Waddlesworth's right hand man as well. There was a noticeable scar on his chin and down through his neck-no doubt a souvenir from his short battle with Ares.

"Well then we'll be getting right on that" Albus' father said, stepping forward. "Come Albus, behind me now..."

Albus followed after his father, Uncle Ron brining up the rear. The Hammer led the way, but he was walking slowly, something which Albus considered slightly strange. He almost appeared cautious.

"Mr. Waddlesworth was not expecting you" the Hammer said fiercely from ahead of them. "You'll forgive him if he seems disheveled."

"No matter, no matter" Albus' father said, and he thought that he could hear the eagerness in his voice.

They reached the long white hallway that led to different rooms, and Albus cringed when he saw the door at the end of it; the battered wooden door that led to a chamber that Albus knew had at least once been designed for interrogation and torture. The last time that Albus had ever seen Fairhart had been in that room, in a memory that he would never, ever forget...

They stopped one door short of this one however, and the Hammer instead opened the wooden door to its left, leading them into Waddlesworth's office.

It too looked identical to how it had the last time Albus had been there, with the same decor of the sitting room below, only more condensed and showing more hints of business. The most prominent item in the room was the large desk in the middle that had, sitting behind it, Warren Waddlesworth.

"Thank you Zydrunas" he said, beaming at him, and the Hammer, rather than dismissing himself, moved to the corner and stood pressed up against the wall as though a statue.

Waddlesworth did indeed look slightly unkempt, but he still had the air of importance to him that Albus was used to. He was wearing an all white suit this time, with a red tie clashing together with his hair extremely well. Albus noticed, however, that he strangely sipped from a brown coffee mug. Last time he had commented on the sophistication of wine, and had then drunken it from a glass for their entire conversation.

Waddlesworth cleared his throat and addressed his guests.

"What a fantastic surprise!" he announced, smiling wildly at them. "What brings you all here?" he asked, turning to look at each of them in turn.

"We're here to have a look around, Warren" Albus' father said.

"Oh?" he replied. "Well dear me, I must say that there's very little to look at, though there are some truly wondrous works of art hanging downstairs-"

"We're looking for something in particular" Uncle Ron spoke up.

"Yes" Albus' father replied. "And it isn't a painting."

Waddlesworth looked at the three of them in confusion. "May I ask how you all got here, before we proceed?"

"No" Albus' father said, and Albus moved closer to him, almost instinctively.

"Look, let's just get right down to it" Uncle Ron said loudly, his wand still head aloft. "We're going to tear this place down looking for it, and I know you don't want me to wreck your precious works of art-"

"Looking for *what*, might I ask?" Waddlesworth said, a frown formulating on his face, and Albus was almost taken aback by the sarcasm in his voice. He had always known Waddlesworth to stay cool, calm, and composed regardless of what was going on. He'd given in to his anger with extreme ease.

"The Veil" Albus' father said, and Albus looked up at him in surprise. His father's face was stony-he was not here to play games.

Waddlesworth gave him a look of his own immense surprise, and Albus saw that it did indeed look genuine.

"I'm afraid that I don't know what you're talking about" he said, taking a sip from his coffee. "I have never heard of such-"

"Just tell us where it is!" Uncle Ron roared, and he stepped forward and aimed his wand across Waddlesworth's desk and at his face. Albus gasped, and in that same moment the Hammer had stepped forward and, with great audacity, grabbed his uncle's arm. Uncle Ron looked at him as though he'd never seen anything quite like him.

"You've got until the end of this sentence to get those greasy, fat sausages off of m-"

"Ron" Albus' father said strictly, though he too withdrew his own wand aimed it at the Hammer. Albus withdrew nothing, but he did let his hand wander to his pocket. He had a feeling that things were very close to getting out of control.

"Take your hand off of him" Albus' father continued. "I'd rather no spells be fired today."

The Hammer looked over at Waddlesworth, who nodded his head. He removed his hand from Uncle Ron at once. Waddlesworth spoke next, and it was in a tone that suggested both fear and agitation.

"I do not know of your intentions" he said to the three of them as a whole. "I do not know how you entered here, I do not know what this 'veil' is that you're looking for, and I most certainly do not know what makes you think that you have the right to barge in here and make demands of me! I have yet to see any warrant, or anything at all would possibly give you the right to be here! You say that you are here to search for something, so then do it and be on your way!" he yelled.

They all stood frozen, and Albus had to admit that this was a suspiciously innocent suggestion. If the Executioner's Veil *was* here, would Waddlesworth really give them the option of searching for it? His father seemed to be thinking along these same lines. His wand had been lowered, and his lips were thinned as though he were deep in thought. They all stayed frozen for so long that Waddlesworth addressed them once more.

"If you have no reason for being here, however, other than to grace me with your presence that is, that I must ask you to leave. Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter" he said, bowing to them all shortly in turn.

Something hit Albus like a ton of bricks. What had he just said?

"What did you just call me?" he asked, speaking up for the first time since being in Waddlesworth's office, and his father and uncle both looked at him in shock. Waddlesworth seemed most perturbed of all however.

"Excuse me?" he said. "I have spoken to you as a gentleman speaks to another gentleman-"

Albus whipped out his wand and pointed it at Waddlesworth, and everyone in the room now gasped, including the Hammer, who grunted in confusion.

"Albus what are you doing!" he barked, though Albus ignored him and kept his wand pointed straight.

"What's the most dangerous piece on a chessboard!" he spat.

"I-I-what-"

"Answer me!"

"Albus!" his father yelled again, though upon seeing the intense look on his son's face, he too turned to Waddlesworth. "Well! Answer him!"

"I-what?" Waddlesworth stammered out, looking as though he was about to fall out of his chair. The entire room went silent, and everyone, even the Hammer it seemed, waited for his answer.

"The-the queen, of course-"

That was all that Albus needed to hear. "*Accio cup!*" he shouted, flicking his wand, and the coffee mug soared right off the desk and into Albus' hands. Waddlesworth made to grab at it but missed it by a fraction of an inch. Albus caught it and turned it over, spilling its contents on the ground.

"Polyjuice Potion!" he said, watching the bubbly, murky liquid seep into the carpet. "This isn't the real Waddlesworth at all!"

The fake Waddlesworth shrunk in his seat while his three guests rounded on him. Albus could see sweat trickling down his neck, and the Hammer too looked worried.

"Now see here!" the fake Waddlesworth said, holding a single finger up. "I can-I can exp-"

But before he'd even finished his sentence he had leapt over the table. Albus staggered backwards, and his father was forced to grab his arm to hold him steady. The fake Waddlesworth exited the room and brandished his wand, aiming it over his shoulder as he did so.

"*Colloportus!*" he shrieked, and the door slammed shut and locked itself magically, leaving the four of them in the cramped room together.

Uncle Ron spun around on the spot and aimed his wand at the unsuspected Hammer's face. There was a jet of red light, and their first opponent had been knocked out cold. Albus' father slashed at the door and it flew off of its hinges. The three of them made their way through the door frame just in time to see red hair flying down the stairs.

"After him!" Albus' father yelled, and they all ran in a straight line through the hall. Albus realized that his Quidditch prowess did little compared to the athleticism of two fully fledged Aurors; he could barely keep up.

They reached the stairs, and Albus could see a group of Renegades at the foot of them, wands brandished, creating a barrier to slow them down. Albus' father gave a roar of rage and fired a series of multi-colored spells at them all; they either scattered or were rendered useless.

"Split up once we reach outside!" he called to Uncle Ron. "Albus, head out of here, go to your friends, we'll handle this-"

"But I want to help-"

"Head out and return to the safer parts of the village!"

They all ran through the door of the old shop, Uncle Ron turning around and firing hexes through the entrance for good measure. Within seconds his father and uncle were out of sight, but Albus had no intention of retreating like a good boy. He had been the one to start this chase, and he was not going to take no part in it now. He threw the Invisibility Cloak over himself and began dashing through the dirty streets, heading in the same direction as his father and uncle. Where could the false Waddlesworth have ran to?

Probably somewhere with a lot of people, to obstruct those chasing him. He would not be hiding in the Hogpen then; he must be going towards more populated places, like around the Three Broomsticks.

Now having remembered the way there and back, Albus slipped through a few twisted alleyways and worked his way back towards the more crowded areas. He could see his Uncle Ron looking around frantically, stopping random shoppers and asking them if they'd seen anything.

Albus did. A snack stand had been knocked over several feet away, and Albus knew at once that it must've been someone in a hurry who'd done it. He moved in that direction, and then again cut through an alleyway as a shortcut.

He grinned. Whoever was parading around as Waddlesworth was moving through the same alleyway, his pace slightly slower so as not to draw attention or make noise.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Albus said, aiming his wand right at him, and the oblivious imposter fell over forward, rigid as a board. Albus gave a squeal of delight and removed his cloak.

"Over here!" he yelled through the alley. "I got him!"

Within seconds both his father and uncle had entered, wearing identical expressions of surprise and glee.

"*Well done Albus!*" his father said, and he looked truly impressed, in addition to relieved.

"Nice work kiddo" his Uncle Ron added, winking at him. "You've got Auror blood in you, that's for sure."

"How did you know he was a fake?" his father asked him.

"Long story" he replied, smiling widely at his praise.

Uncle Ron strode forward to the incapacitated man on the ground, and restricted him further by firing thin cords around his body. Another wave of his wand and Albus' body-bind jinx had been removed, which Albus knew was done so as to let the man speak. The second that he could do so he took full opportunity of it.

"He made me do it!" he spat like a lunatic. "I swear I didn't want to! He's been sneaking off, he needed someone to cover, and I got picked-

"Settle down" Albus' father said slowly, flicking his wand and silencing him on the spot. "You'll be administered Veritaserum once we get you to the Auror office."

"Can you arrest him dad?" Albus asked, excited.

"Oh yes. There are many laws about the regulations of potions. Amortentia, Felix Felicis, Polyjuice Potion, these things have several restrictions to them. If he's been consuming a potion made illegally and without Ministry authorization, I think that we'll have plenty to get him on. Unless he's willing to cooperate, of course" he added, looking down at the Waddlesworth imposter, who nodded his head up and down vehemently.

"So then what- what do-"

"Now, you enjoy the rest of your day" his father said, and there was an odd tone of finality to his voice.

"Why-"

"It's all boring from here Al" his uncle admitted sadly. "Really."

"I'll let you know everything that we learn, honestly" his father said. "You deserve it. But I think it best that you get out of here before Puckerd shows up."

Albus nodded, though he kicked at the dirt as well. The fake Waddlesworth was still struggling on the floor, yelling silently.

"Go find your friends Al, and thanks again" his father told him, clapping him on the shoulder. His uncle winked at him, and he departed from the scene. The second that he turned the corner he allowed a whooping noise to escape him.

He had truly helped today. No, they hadn't gotten exactly what it was they wanted, but they had done *something*. And he, Albus, had been the deciding factor in it all! He kept a grin on his face as he walked, never more pleased with himself. He barely even recognized where his feet were taking him. Every few steps he was allowing a new fantasy to slink its way through his mind,

each one of them involving he and his father kicking down a door and firing spells, enemies dropping before them like flies...come to think of it, maybe being an Auror wouldn't be so bad. You didn't really use your wand that much as a Potions professor...

He entered the Three Broomsticks in high spirits, and he knew that he'd be telling his friends what had transpired the second that he saw them. No, they had not found the Veil, or learned anything more about the mysterious letters for that matter. And no, it had nothing to do with the Silver Wizard, the most prominent topic of their discussion for the last few months. But it did have one of his own personal triumphs, and that made it a tale worth retelling over and over in his opinion.

To his very great surprise, however, his group of friends were not there. He could not spot Morrison's gangly figure anywhere he looked, and could only assume that this excursion with his father had taken longer than it had seemed. Something caught his eye however. In the corner of the crowded pub he could indeed see some familiar faces.

Rose was looking furious, her cheeks flushed and her hair tangled, as though she'd been pulling at it. Albus was sure if he got any nearer he could feel the steam radiating from her. Lance had an arm around her and was shaking his head, crooning to her softly as if to soothe her. Hornsbrook and Eckley were simply having their own conversation, but they seemed somewhat disturbed. Albus approached the table cautiously.

"Hey, do you guys know where-"

"You!" Rose shrieked, pointing a shaky finger at him, and Lance had to wrap both arms around her to restrain her. Eckley and Hornsbrook's conversation stopped abruptly.

"Me what?" Albus said, feeling his excitement and good cheer seep out of him.

"You-you-I can't believe-" she stammered, and she actually made to stand up. Surprisingly, it was Eckley who spoke to him.

"Your girl and your mates left back to the castle a couple of minutes ago" he said. "You should probably head out too" he warned.

Albus cast a quick glance at Lance, who avoided his eyes suspiciously. He turned on the spot and ran out of the pub.

Scorpius. Things had obviously not gone as his friend had hoped, but he had not expected the group to sever itself. Why was Rose so irate? Could Lance have...?

Albus tore through the streets, nearly colliding with pedestrians as he did so. If they had only just started the walk back to the castle, then he could catch them before they got there.

He exited through the entrance to the village, running so fast that there was a pain in his side. He could see Scorpius in the distance, walking slowly and alone. Unsure as to where Morrison, Melonie, and Mirra were, Albus caught up to his friend quickly, grabbing him by the shoulder and turning him around on the spot.

"Scorpi-"

"She knows" he croaked, and Albus saw that his eyes were wet, his cheeks pink from having been smacked around by the wind.

"She-what-she knows what?"

"Lance told her!" he screeched, and Albus' heart sunk. "He told her about what we did last year!"

"*What!*" Albus asked, completely in disbelief. He looked around. "Where's everyone-"

"They went back already, I wanted to be alone" Scorpius said, a slight stutter to his voice, whether from the cold or sadness Albus did not know. "He told her...everything..."

"When?" Albus barked, furious, both at Lance and at himself. It had been he, after all, who had ignored the Hufflepuff's threat.

"Just now" Scorpius said. "With me right there."

Albus' jaw dropped. He realized at once the awful predicament that his friend must've been in. Being forced to sit there and watch as the girl that he liked was informed of his treachery...a truly diabolical move on Lance's part, and one that Albus had certainly not expected.

"And then what?" Albus asked, his lips quivering.

"I tried explaining" Scorpius said, and a teardrop had now noticeably slid down his cheek. "I tried telling-I tried telling her-telling her why-"

Albus braced himself, putting together the rest. He had tried telling her about his feelings for her, in an attempt to justify his actions. It had not gone well.

Scorpius proved incapable of finishing his sentence, he simply lunged at him, flinging his arms around Albus in a hug that he was not familiar with in the slightest. Unsure of what to do, he held his friend close in the cold, listening to him sob into his shoulder, his mind now racing about other things, all thoughts of his father and uncle and Waddlesworth completely gone from his head.

A single candle hovered just underneath the ceiling, the little bit of light that it gave illuminating only what was below it. A single brown, square table sat beneath the floating candle, two chairs on opposite sides, occupied by two men who could not look more opposite. The man on the right was a bored looking man with a tuft of brown hair and a face virtually void of expression,

dressed in a black cloak that blended in perfectly with the surrounding darkness. Across from him sat a man with long, tomato soup red hair flowing over his shoulders; his skin pale and his facial features pointed and edgy. He too was wearing a cloak that appeared as though it was meant to conceal.

"What do you have for me today, Fango?" Warren Waddlesworth asked, his voice oily and smooth.

Fango Wilde got right to the point.

"The Dark Alliance has infiltrated the Ministry of Magic."

"Big surprise" Waddlesworth drawled sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "How did they accomplish such an unimaginably difficult task?"

"I should have been more clear" Wilde said. "They've infiltrated the lower departments-they're nowhere close to the Aurors or the Minister or anything of the sort. But Darvy picked up a few tricks from his brother. He is using the Imperius Curse effectively. For instance, he has managed to breach the Underage Magic office. He now has access to the Trace."

"I see..." Waddlesworth said, scratching at his chin. "That explains how his miscreant subordinates made it to that wedding from the papers. They can follow the children."

"One child in particular, actually. As I'm sure you've deduced, they were there for the Potter boy. With access to his Trace, they are always in position to strike, so long as the boy is not well protected. Knowing he is in Hogwarts, for instance, does little to help him bust into the school."

"But why is he after the boy anyway?" Waddlesworth asked, narrowing his eyes in distrust. "I thought that he wanted this 'Veil'."

"He wants both" Wilde answered him. "But for different reasons. He believes that the Executioner's Veil will help him create and control his army much better than the Wand can. As for the boy, he wants him dead almost on principle. Apart from that, however, he seems to connect the two frequently. The Potter boy is prone to getting himself in trouble. He no doubt expects that he will lead him to the Veil. Darvy is lazy; he'll want to take both simultaneously."

"So he keeps track of the boy in the hopes that he'll lead him to the Veil...and that is when he will make his move?"

"Yes" Wilde said dryly.

"And I can assume, then, that if his plan does work, and he does manage to get the boy and Veil in the same place, I will be alerted?"

"Yes" Wilde replied again.

"Good...I could care little about the boy anymore, but I always like to stay a step ahead. Obtaining the Veil before Darvy does will rob him of months of hard work. I only wish I had the slightest clue as to where it was."

"As do we all" Wilde sighed. "All that we know for sure is that it was removed from the Department of Mysteries more than a year ago. We can only speculate from there."

"Incidentally," Waddlesworth started, as if ignoring Wilde's words, "Will it not strike Darvy as odd when my men appear at the scene only seconds after his own? He will begin to suspect a leak, will he not?"

Wilde didn't answer him. He merely glanced upwards, towards the floating candle. Waddlesworth smirked, but did not press the issue.

"We have something else to address, however. The Silver Wizard."

Wilde spun around wildly, peering through the darkness and clutching at his heart. When he brought his eyes back to the man across from him, he saw that he was almost laughing.

"So jumpy Fango" Waddlesworth said. "I was not followed. How strange though...you seem unusually frightened at the mention of the masked figure."

"I have heard many stories" Wilde said. "I-it doesn't matter."

"It's not him, Fango" Waddlesworth said, and Wilde stared at him icily.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. But you can breathe easy. It isn't him."

"And how do you know that!" Wilde asked, a quiver in his voice.

"Because I have an eyewitness account of his murder" Waddlesworth said simply.

"Didn't that same witness turn her back on you and flee!" Wilde roared, banging on the table.

"Yes, but at the time of his murder she was certainly under my employment. Besides, she was administered Veritaserum. She admitted to having killed him under its influence, even though she did also admit that she'd done it begrudgingly. We're still looking for her, actually, and she will of course be killed. If you'd like though, we can torture her for details beforehand to corroborate it."

Wilde seemed to have no answer for this. He still looked unnerved. "I was merely-the Silver Wizard has proven that whoever they are, they are *extremely* good at tracking- it reminded me of-"

"I understand your worry" Waddlesworth said. "But if Sancticus Fairhart *was* the Silver Wizard, I can assure you, he'd be more interested in killing me than you."

"I highly doubt that" Wilde muttered, though he didn't elaborate. "Anyway, what do we have to speak about? You said that we had an issue to address?"

"Somewhat" Waddlesworth said. "The Silver Wizard picks off people at random, and I have a feeling that some of my men are next. I can not afford to be shorthanded. Is there any chance that you could go back to what we were doing originally? Convincing Darvy to send men out into the open on menial tasks? Such fodder would certainly serve as a distraction."

"I'll see what I can do" Wilde said, nodding.

Waddlesworth nodded as well, and he then pulled a small leather bag out of his robes. It jingled as he slid it across the table to Wilde.

"Your payment" he said briskly.

Wilde slid it back. "You can keep your gold" he said hoarsely, and Waddlesworth's face fell. He tucked his dark red hair behind his ears.

"I beg your pardon? You've never neglected to be paid before."

Wilde reached into his own robes and pulled out four identical leather pouches. He slid them each across the table one at a time, and they all seemed as full as the fresh one in Waddlesworth's possession.

"I never wanted the gold. I only asked for it because I knew that you wouldn't believe me if I wanted to meet you for free. I am here because I oppose Darvy, and I think that WAR has a better chance of stopping him than Fischer's excuse for a Ministry. Darvy's world is not the same one that Reginald Ares envisioned; I will have no part in it."

Waddlesworth gave a loud, cold laugh.

"Fango, you understand that I'm going to kill you right? That nothing, not even a few benevolent acts, can stop that? You're a *criminal*. The second that you are no longer needed my men will-"

"Don't threaten me" Wilde said icily. "You're the one disguising yourself to meet me. If your precious followers knew where you were right now, your entire organization would crumble. You'd lose every ounce of credibility. That being said, however, I understand my fate."

"Do you really?" Waddlesworth asked sharply.

"Darvy despises me, and like you, he keeps me around only because I am an effective worker, and because I have Ministry information from my time there. If the Dark Alliance wins the war,

he will kill me. If you stop him, then you and your men will kill me. I'm dead either way-all that I have left now is the choice of what I do with my remaining time."

"Well I'm glad that you've accepted it" Waddlesworth said, a wry smile on his face.

Wilde returned the cynical expression, and he then removed something else from his robes; a flask of murky liquid.

"More Polyjuice Potion" he said. "To continue your ruse."

He slid it across table and Waddlesworth pocketed it at once.

"Excellent" he said. "How much more do you have?"

"Enough" Wilde replied. "Ares had Darvy create several cauldrons of it for me two years ago, when I was still under Ministry surveillance. Have you had any more close calls since you were seen near Gringotts?"

"Thankfully no" Waddlesworth said, pleased with himself. "But I'm afraid that it may not be long before my lack of activity is noticed. I'll have to give this particular flask to someone who can play me very well. My usual stand-ins are horrible, from what I've heard."

"I see" Wilde said, and he then rose from his chair. "Well I think that we are done here, then. I will alert you when Darvy launches his operation to obtain the Veil."

"Very good" Waddlesworth said, beaming. Fango Wilde pushed his chair in and began to walk away through the darkness, but Waddlesworth called out to him before he could get very far.

"Oh Fango!"

Wilde turned, his eyebrows raised. Waddlesworth cleared his throat. When he spoke there was noticeable malice in his voice.

"I feel that I should apologize to you."

"And why is that?"

"For having had Sancticus killed, of course."

Wilde narrowed his eyes, bemused. "Why would you apologize for that?"

Waddlesworth gave him a smug look. "Whatever you may think, Fango, I was at one time very close with Sancticus-his betrayal and subsequent death was an unfortunate one. In our talks together, he eventually grew comfortable enough around me to divulge a few secrets."

"And?" Wilde said, his teeth bared.

Waddlesworth gave him a hateful look, one completely contradictive of his previously cheerful expressions. "Your death, Fango, will be a personal one. I'm sorry that I had Sancticus killed, because I am sure that your single greatest regret now is having not finished the job you started, and taken the other half of his face before he moved on!" he spat viciously.

The color drained from Wilde's face in a heartbeat.

"There are many things that I regret about my past with Sancticus Fairhart" he said. "But that is not one of them..."

And with that he strode off into the darkness quickly, not giving the closest thing that he had to a friend the chance to insult him any further.

Chapter 16: Once Written And Never Spoken

A flurry of emotions carried Albus through his daily routine for the next week or so. Ecstatic and excited at his contribution to his father's work, Albus had wasted no time in filling in his friends of his heroic deeds in Hogsmeade. When he wasn't smiling at this memory however, he was frowning at the present Scorpius.

Scorpius was a *wreck*. Albus had seen his friend in dire straits before-he had witnessed him be seriously injured, had watched his reaction to Puckerd's tempting words-but never before had he appeared broken. He mustered smiles only to encourage Albus to be pleased with his actions, keeping his mouth straight at all other points in the day. His voice grew more hoarse and crispy every time that Albus heard it, and his studies were falling behind as well. For the first time in five years, it was Albus doing Scorpius' homework for him.

"Run me through what happened again, one more time" Albus asked Mirra, in the privacy of the Room of Requirement this time. Far from a romantic getaway, Albus and his girlfriend were now using this room to avoid confrontation with Rose, who was still in the library whenever they were.

Mirra cringed at him. "Please don't make me go into detail again."

"Just-just fill me in on the first things that Lance said..."

Mirra sighed, and her pale face turned even whiter, if possible. "He cut Scorpius off mid-sentence, asked him to retell his tale about Rose's ex-boyfriend for laughs, and then asked him why he was stuttering."

Albus felt his fingers curl themselves into fists. "And what started this?"

"Me ignoring Rose trying to speak to me" Mirra said, frowning. "I'm sorry Al; I really had no idea-"

"No, it's not your fault" Albus said, shaking his head vehemently. "Lance gave me abollocksultimatum and I didn't take it seriously. This is my fault. But further than that, it's his."

Albus could not recall ever feeling so much displeasure towards another student at the school. Even in his numerous quibbles with Eckley and Horrnbrook, including a fist to the face, he had never generally wanted to provoke a fight. This was, of course, a fool's thought however. Lance was two years his senior and by no means a slouch of a wizard. Albus was sure that James would have his back, but that was not what he wanted-someone to defend him.

The only thing that kept Albus in high spirits was the news that he'd been regularly receiving on Waddlesworth. A *Daily Prophet* article the day after Valentine's Day had revealed that Waddlesworth was missing, and that his band of Renegades either didn't know or were being very tight lipped as to his whereabouts. Albus had made sure to have marginal correspondence

with his father as well over the course of the next few days, and he could not help but feel reasonably satisfied with the answers given.

To address your first question, Albus, no-we didn't arrest the Hammer. He didn't technically attack us, your uncle got to him too fast. Apart from that however, all is good. The man you caught was named Barney Lumberg, and he was a low level Renegade who got stuck with a big job. Turns out Waddlesworth has been using decoys for months now, though no one-not even under the influence of truth potion-knows why. Either way though, this confirms that he's up to something big. Hope you're well-

Dad

"You don't think that Puckerd's reading your mail, do you Al?" Morrison asked him at breakfast the day that he'd gotten his father's message.

"Why would you think that?" Albus asked, jumping out of his seat and looking around frantically. "Did you see-"

"Well I mean, if Puckerd really wants to know what you guys are talking about, wouldn't it be easiest to just intercept letters?"

"Highly unlikely" croaked a voice from next to them. Scorpius had spoken, his face aimed at a full plate of food.

"Huh?" Albus said, looking over at his friend.

"Not allowed" Scorpius grunted. "Puckerd's only a professor; he'd need a bigger title than that to read mail. Only McGonagall can do that."

Albus breathed a sigh of relief, but he still shot a glance up at the high table, where Puckerd was sipping a cup of pumpkin juice with his pinky extended. He suddenly felt queasy however; was it that easy to get information?

Even with his thoughts preoccupied over an assortment of different things, Albus found himself buckling down greatly as they passed into the latter days of February. Jotting down homework for Scorpius was keeping him up to date in all of his classes, but he had still been shocked to learn that their O.W.L's were only ten weeks away.

"And it goes by awfully quick, too" Professor Handit was saying as they all settled down into the classroom. Albus took a seat in between Morrison and Scorpius in the back, with Melonie just in front of them. "We've managed to cover a collection of dark creatures, and that means that we can officially get back on track. Now, who can recall what our initial plan was for after the winter holidays?"

Nearly every hand in the class shot into the air, and Handit grinned at them.

"Right then, partner up!"

Morrison partnered with Melonie, leaving Albus with the disgruntled Scorpius, who stood almost slouched against a wall, wand dangling loosely at his side.

"Now, who can tell me the greatest advantage in nonverbal magic?" Professor Handit asked.

Albus instinctively looked over to his partner, but as was now usual in their classes, Scorpius had not bothered to raise his hand. Thus, Albus did it.

"Yes, Albus?" Handit said, pointing at him and smiling.

"Erm-it-it gives you an advantage over whoever you're dueling, because you normally get your spell out first."

"Quite correct, take five points to Slytherin. Nonverbal magic is almost universally used by older wizards, not just for combat as Albus just said, but for a variety of tasks that would involve things done in secret. Wizards working with muggles, for instance, use it quite frequently.

"We will, however, be focusing more on the defense portion in this class. In an actual duel a fraction of a second can make all of the difference in the world. Now, who can tell me why nonverbal magic is typically more difficult to use than regular magic? Anyone? This one's a little tricky..."

Anastasia Anifur, the Hufflepuff Prefect, raised her hand slowly.

"Because we use incantations as mnemonic devices. When we can't say them, it becomes harder to concentrate."

"Well said!" Handit beamed. "Take ten points to Hufflepuff! As Anastasia here said, wizards and witches use incantations to help focus on what it is that we're trying to do! Once we eliminate these words, magic becomes more about the feeling than the words. Over time, you will become so well experienced in nonverbal magic that you may even forget the actual incantations used—such is the case with a spell used often—but for today, we will start by *saying the incantation in our heads*. So now, you're all in pairs. One partner is to attempt to nonverbally jinx the other one, lightly of course. The other partner is to defend, and then switch. Remember to say the spell in your head only! You could mutter of course, and I wouldn't know the difference, but you would...and this is important stuff, my students..."

Albus was so eager to try it out than he offered to go first at once. Scorpius merely shrugged.

"Okay, ready?" he said. "On three. One...two...three!"

Expelliarmus! he thought in his head, concentrating as hard as he could at Scorpius' limp wand flying out from his fingers. No such thing occurred however. Far from deterred, Albus tried once more. And then once more after that, and after that...

After ten minutes he'd made no progress, and he was beginning to grow agitated. Deciding that it was best to let Scorpius have a turn with actually attacking, he extended the invitation.

"Wanna' give it a go, mate?"

Scorpius sighed. "Whatever" he said, standing up straight.

Scorpius too proved unsuccessful, as did the entire class as a whole actually. Handit seemed far from flustered however.

"Nonverbal magic is not meant to be practiced until your sixth year!" he called to them all, despite the fact that they weren't making any noise at all. "If you're struggling now, understand that it comes with *practice!* Carry on; every failed attempt is a step towards nailing it!"

Albus was furious by the end of the class period. Whereas one or two of the Hufflepuff students had managed to make something happen, he had had no luck.

"I reckon I'm at square one with that" he told his friends, and Morrison nodded his head in agreement, his hand locked with Melonie's.

"I'm nearly there I think. I mean, I can't really jinx my girl, so that was hardly a good way to practice-"

"I think it had less to do with me being your partner and more to do with you being terrible at magic" Melonie chimed in, smiling.

Morrison gave her a highly offended look. "I'll have you know I'm quite the duelist! Albus saw me last year, didn't you Al! Go on and tell her about how I tripped that ugly skeleton thing-"

But Albus had stopped walking abruptly. Coming up the stairs at a corner was Lance, with two of his older Hufflepuff friends. Albus' lips curled. He was angry at his own inability to perform magic without speaking, but he could not properly funnel his anger in that regard. With Lance, however, he had something to lash out at.

"Go on without me" he said lowly, and his group stopped dead in their tracks.

"What's up?" Morrison asked, but it was his girlfriend who tapped him on the shoulder and pointed towards Lance. Scorpius looked most fearful of all.

"Don't mate" he said, his voice raspy. "Please don't, just let it go-"

"Just go down, I'll catch up with you later" Albus said, his eyes still focused on Lance, who was telling a joke to his laughing friends, his bag slung over one shoulder to make him appear as the epitome of cool.

"Al-"

"I'll catch up!"

Scorpius groaned, but he, Morrison and Melonie all went by him, heading down the stairs and giving Albus alone time in the hall. He strode towards Lance and his friends briskly.

"Hey Lance!" he called out. "Can I see you for a sec'?"

Lance gave him a stony expression, and his friends stopped laughing at once. He mumbled something to them, and then approached Albus, speaking low enough so that it was only the two of them in the hall.

"What's up?" Lance asked grimly.

"What the hell is your problem!" Albus spat menacingly, and Lance almost recoiled in surprise. "Why'd you go and ruin Scorpius' friendship with Ro-"

"Back up!" Lance said, and Albus noted that he didn't seem fearful at all, but rather prepared for an argument. "He wasn't aiming for a friendship, as you very well know-"

"That's beside the point!" Albus snapped. "That was low. You also ruined *my* friendship with my cousin. And all over what? Because you were sick of hearing your girlfriend complain!"

Lance snorted. "I asked you to do one thing" he said. "And that was to help Rose and Mirra become friends again. And you didn't even *try*. I personally wanted it to be an empty threat, but then I saw your mate try and chat her up, and I knew right away that you had no intention of helping fix Rose and Mirra."

"Well what gives you the right-?"

"Gives me the right!" Lance yelled, and those passing by in the hallway stopped to look. "What gives *me* the right? What gave *you* the right! I'm not an idiot. I know what happened last year. Who are you to decide who your cousin ends up with? You think I didn't see, after a while, that you and your mate had concocted some scheme to keep me from being with someone that I really did like! And for what...so that your pal could move in instead!"

Albus stared at him fiercely, though he had no rebuttal that he found worthy of using. Lance continued seamlessly.

"And I let it all go too. Why? Because one, you're James' brother, two, I generally liked you, and three, I sympathized with your blonde haired friend. So I let it all slide; held no grudges, nothing.

And then, I ask you to do one thing, and all that you do is twist it to try things all over again!
That's what gave *me* the right to tell Rose everything!"

And with that he stormed off, leaving Albus to stand in the corridor alone, wondering if he'd ever even had the chance to win that particular argument.

Albus spent the next few days fuming to himself, somewhat unsure of his mental stability. He had been in such high spirits following his contribution to his father's duties, but things had slowly spiraled out of control from there. Between his inability to properly perform nonverbal magic and his personal epiphany that what had happened to Scorpius could be perceived as karmic justice, he found his focus dwindling. The first day of March, things took an even more dramatic turn towards confusing.

"Today's my uncle's birthday" Albus said, nibbling on toast at the breakfast table. "I wonder what they'll be doing..."

"Which uncle?" Morrison said through a mouthful of bacon, eggs, and toast. "You have like fifty."

"My Uncle Ron" he replied, sighing. It was a Monday, meaning the start of a fresh week of school with no chance of a break. He had scheduled a Quidditch practice for later, but one look at the Great Hall's ceiling told him that it was going to be a stormy day. He'd give anything to skip over it and celebrate a birthday.

"Stop looking so glum!" Morrison said, spraying everyone in the vicinity with made a noise of contempt.

"Morrison! Swallow first!"

Morrison gave a tremendous swallow. "What! He looks really down. He's starting to look a bit like Scorpius, actually" he added, as though his friend was not there. Scorpius, who was sitting across from him, grunted to acknowledge that his name had been mentioned.

Albus took another small bite of his toast, but at the next second he'd turned his head up towards the murky gray ceiling. A flutter of multi-colored owls had arrived, lowering themselves and dropping letters to every couple of students. Albus went back to his breakfast, but a nagging noise of flapping wings persisted in his ears.

"Again?" Morrison said from next to him, and Albus looked up so fast that he hurt his neck.

A common tawny owl was encircling right above his head, clutching an averaged sized envelope and peering at the table.

Albus felt his heart beat quicken; if this was what he thought it was, the contents of this letter could do an immeasurable amount of good or bad to his mood.

The letter dropped down quickly, knocking over his pumpkin juice and spilling it all over Morrison's front.

"*Scourgify!*" Melonie said quickly, brandishing her wand and instantly cleaning the mess on the table. Morrison remained wet however.

"Thanks Mel!" he said sarcastically.

"What! You have a wand..."

Albus ignored them and picked up the envelope with shaking hands. He peered at the front to see if there was any indication as to whom it was for this time, and what he saw made him turn his head to the side with curiosity.

The Head of Slytherin House

"Why would you be getting Puckerd's mail?" Morrison asked, but it was Scorpius' who choppy voice made Albus jump.

"Don't open it" he said lowly.

"Huh? Why not? 'Cause it's addressed to Puc-"

"Just don't do it" Scorpius said. "Even if it's the same sender as the last three, it's only going to confuse you. Chuck it in the fire the first chance that you get."

"No way!" Morrison said excitedly. "It could be more information on the Veil!"

"What veil?" Melonie asked curiously, but her boyfriend shushed her.

"Mel, this is important!"

Albus stared at the envelope, and over its top he could see Scorpius staring at him darkly. The Executioner's Veil was a key item in what was going on in the outside world right now-and he knew that his father was hungry for information. The last letter had been written with perfect grammar, like this one seemed to be, and it had discussed the Veil. Would this letter have similar contents?

"Can't hurt to look" Albus said, and Morrison whooped as he tore into it. What he saw he couldn't even read.

"Well, what's it say?" Morrison asked.

"It's-it's scribbled out" Albus said, disheartened.

There was no other term for it. In its entirety the letter consisted of a single sentence that looked as though it had been crossed out repeatedly with dark, horizontal lines. He could barely discern a jumble of numbers and letters, though the first character appeared to be a "2". But that was it.

"What a letdown" Morrison grumbled, and he returned to his food at once.

Albus kept the letter stashed away in his bag throughout the duration of the day, his mind wandering during class as he tried to interpret it from memory. This was not a good idea however. His first class was Transfiguration, a class in which his steady progress had finally made him average, and his lackluster performance had Professor Bellinger eyeing him warily the entire time. He was able to skim his way through Charms with the letter on his mind, and then it was back to the Great Hall for lunch and another quick peek at the newest item in his collection of the incomprehensible.

"Maybe there's some kind of magic to it" Albus asked aloud to no one in particular, the chattering of the table masking the importance of what he was saying. "An incantation, or something-"

"What are we talking about!" Melonie said furiously, though Morrison shushed her again.

"I don't think that it's anything magical mate. I mean, unless there's a spell that can erase scribble marks."

Albus was unwilling to attempt such a thing however-for starters, it seemed unlikely that a spell meant to solely erase scribbling would even exist. If anything, it would erase the entire thing. And for another thing, the scribbling itself could prove to be valuable; all in all, he assumed that the letter was best kept as it was.

Lunch proved to be a waste of time overall, and by the time they entered the dungeons for double Potions a very hungry Albus had grown cranky with his lack of results. Puckerd welcomed them all with an air of superiority and immediately had them get to work on the Shrinking Solution. Strangely, Albus wished that they could take a nonsensical survey instead; it would give him more opportunity to think about what was really important.

"Just go to your dad" Scorpius said lowly from next to him, tossing ingredients into the cauldron lazily. Albus fished them out with a ladle while Mirra went to get more daisies-it was three to a potion today.

"Careful" he said. "It only needs one rat spleen. And I will go to my dad if I can't get it myself. Maybe I'll just send him the letter with another letter attached, explaining it."

Albus sincerely hoped that it would not come to this though. He had been such a great factor in the arrest of Waddlesworth's double that he was sure solving this mystery would only increase his reverence to his father, and as Albus was never one to simply let go of his assiduous

intentions, he was also going to do everything in his power to attain this notice. If worst came to worst and he proved unable to decipher the letter, however, he would be forced to outright admit his futility. He'd give it some time though.

Together with Scorpius and Mirra he managed to create an immaculate green potion, and after giving a slight laugh at the purple concoction that Morrison had made with Denise and Melonie ("Sorry!" he was repeating in between cackles) he gave Mirra a quick kiss good-bye and fled to his dormitory.

"So this is how it's going to be all night then, huh?" Morrison asked from the floor as Albus laid back on his bed, holding the letter up.

"Basically" he said. Scorpius was on his own bed, sitting with his legs crossed and his hands supporting his face. He was staring at an open textbook, his eyes moving slightly as though he was reading much slower than he was capable of.

"I'm really curious as to who this is meant for" Albus said, gnawing at his fingernails. "If it's meant for Puckerd, does that mean that the last one was too?"

"Well it says Head of Slytherin House..." Morrison said.

"Yeah, but the first two were addressed to me" Albus said. "So does that mean the first two were meant for me and the last two for Puckerd? But that would mean that someone's writing to Puckerd about the Veil..."

"It would explain the difference in handwriting" Morrison added in. "If the first two were for you and the next two for Pucky, then it's pretty obvious that it's two separate senders as well. The four letters might not even be connected..."

"But then why did they all come to me?"

"Can't say" Morrison shrugged, and he turned to Scorpius, who had just flipped a page. "Any suggestion, mate?"

Scorpius sighed, and his lack of enthusiasm made Albus sit up straight with agitation.

"Look, this is important!" he barked at his friend. "The last letter had to do with the war, didn't it! It mentioned something that both Darvy and Waddlesworth want! This letter could have the same importance! So can you please just forget about Rose for one second and voice an opinion!"

Scorpius stared at him with a cold glare on his face, though when he turned back to his book he said an interesting word.

"Address" he mumbled.

"What?" Albus and Morrison both asked.

"The letter" Scorpius said. "I think it's an address."

Albus stared down at the sheet of parchment in his hand while Scorpius continued.

"It's numbers and letters, yeah, but the numbers are in the beginning. Only thing that really fits is an address."

"That's brilliant mate!" Albus said, smiling widely. "An address! But then-wait-could maybe...?"

Morrison was looking excited too. "What! Keep going!" he said in confusion.

Albus stood up. "If this is the same person that wrote about the Veil, and this is an address, then maybe...maybe this is the location for *where the Veil is!*"

Fireworks exploded in his mind as both of his friends looked at him; even Scorpius managed a grin. But Albus' face fell.

"What's up?" Morrison asked him. "We're on the brink of a discovery here!"

"Why is it all crossed out?" Albus asked. "Did the sender do that? Or did someone else get to the letter first...?"

Both of his friends frowned as well. Morrison rubbed at his chin and opened his mouth to speak.

"Well if that is an address...and the person who sent it does know where the Veil is...than that means one thing: whoever crossed it out is the biggest git in the universe!"

Chapter 17: Puckerd's Promises

For the next few days Albus did his best to avoid the eye of his Potions Professor, intent on showing no conspicuous behavior while simultaneously trying to maintain his excellent grades. He no longer frequently glanced up at the high table during meal times, he barely spoke during class, and he even made sure to take shortcuts around him with the help of the Map. All in all, he thought, he was keeping his secret well.

"Not really a secret" Morrison said to him in Charms one day. Flitwick's class was usually the best class to converse in due to the hustle and bustle of the coursework, and today was no different. With O.W.L's approaching, they were doing a review on the Banishing Charm. The flurry of cushions provided a safe, loud cover for them.

"Of course it's a secret" Albus said. "I have a letter addressed to him!"

"But there's no evidence to suggest that Puckerd even knows he was supposed to be getting it" Scorpius quipped up, his voice slightly softer than it had been. Discussing the contents of Albus' latest anonymous mystery had brought him out of his shell slightly; he was talking in greater intervals at least.

Albus scoffed. The mere fact that Pucker's title was written on the envelope served as a preponderance of evidence as far as he was concerned-more troubling was the fact that the letter seemed to have been written by the same person who had written the previous one-someone who knew about the Veil.

"Well toy with the idea for a second" Albus placated them, stopping to banish a purple cushion in front of him and moving it neatly to the top of the stack. "If Puckerd is getting regular notes from whoever is sending them, then he'll be expecting an answer won't he? I mean, *someone* is expecting an answer, obviously. The letter wasn't sent to nobody."

"It was sent to you" Scorpius said. "Regardless of what's written on the front, owls give what they're carrying to the intended recipients. The one beforehand made it to you, as did this one."

Albus sighed. He could honestly make no sense of what was going on. He still didn't like the idea of Puckerd knowing about his clandestine scraps of paper, and thus, he was still careful not to interact with him. On a Monday near the end of March, however, Albus encountered a snag in his plan.

"Your O.W.L's are rapidly approaching" Puckerd said oily, piercing the small conversations fluttering throughout the room.

Albus looked up from his bubbling cauldron-he and Mirra were brewing Agonentin, a poison meant to inflict pain that worsens as time without an antidote continues. He watched as Puckerd paused briefly and slid his eyes across everyone in the room.

"With these tests so close, it is now time to put serious thought into your future beyond Hogwarts. Though it seems unwise to add stress to this time period, I cannot lie and say that the Ministry of Magic does not consider the results of your O.W.L's and N.E.W.T's when applying for top quality work, and the occupations that you can obtain following your graduation are greatly swayed by your performance. To be succinct; it is best to not take your upcoming exams lightly, lest you end up as some janitor in a pub somewhere."

Albus clenched his fists in fury as he saw Scorpius burn red next to him. A couple of Gryffindors snickered in the back, and truly sickening was that Rose was among them. He suddenly felt a rush of anger towards both Puckerd and his cousin.

"More importantly, however, it is now time to actually decide what it is that you will wish to pursue in your future. Gryffindors, I suspect that Professor Longbottom has already informed you of this. To my own house-I will be making arrangements to have personal audiences with each of you, starting in early April. I suggest that you put some time into thinking about these meetings. Though it is my job to give you career advice, I cannot make the selection of your N.E.W.T classes for you."

They left the classroom fifteen minutes later, Albus placing a flask with his perfect potion in it on the tray and hurrying out before he said anything bound to get him in trouble. He saw Rose talking to Eckley as they left, but he didn't approach her. After his private loss to Lance, he didn't think it to be in Scorpius' best interest.

The next day they were flooded with pamphlets at the breakfast table; it seemed as though overnight every single employer in all of Britain had decided to swarm the students from afar. Albus peered through them all, seeing none that really caught his eye. Morrison, however, seemed to be open to all of them.

"I like to consider myself as someone who's not really *great* at anything, but kind of *good* at a variety of things" he told them all, and Melonie chuckled.

"Well the Ministry isn't looking for someone who can just barely do a bunch of jobs. You should really try and focus on one thing in particular."

"Well who said anything about the Ministry?" Morrison asked, almost offended. "I'd like to enter business, personally."

"All you, mate" Scorpius said from across the table, sliding him a pamphlet that had a picture of Honeyduke's Sweetshop on it. Albus did his best to read it upside down.

Got a total sweet tooth? Think that large amounts of gold are totally sweet? Honeyduke's is the place for you!

"I don't fancy stacking shelves" Morrison said, grimacing.

"Don't be silly!" Melonie said. "That's perfect for you, and you could work register too! Like you said, a variety of things..."

Morrison mock scoffed at her, but then kissed her on the cheek. "You have so much faith in me!"

"What N.E.W.T classes would you even need for that?" Denise Toils piped up from next to Melonie, snatching the pamphlet up.

"Probably the absolute minimum amount" Albus said, sidetracked by a letter that had just fallen into Scorpius' hands from a handsome eagle above. "And really just something random like Charms or something..."

"Still up for a Potions Professor, Al?" Morrison asked, and Albus went red.

"Something tells me Puckerd's not going to go for that" he said with a shudder, and this was completely true.

"Well, I just got a letter from my mum" Scorpius said, folding the piece of paper neatly and placing it back inside of the envelope. "She's heard about career advice, and she reckons that me going for anything less than Minister of Magic would be shameful. Well that's just great..." he added sarcastically.

Albus gave him a weak smile, though in the back of his head he knew that this was no laughing matter. Scorpius had enough on his plate as everything was; he didn't need Puckerd laughing at his career ambitions.

For the most part the pamphlets proved useless, though Melonie did pocket a St. Mungo's one. They went to Defence Against the Dark Arts straight after, Albus sighing deeply as he entered the classroom.

In all the time spent practicing, Albus had finally managed to perform a spell nonverbally. Once. Three lessons ago. Unsure as to how he could be so bad and even fluctuate towards the brink of competency with it, Albus was left in dire straits as the rest of the class strode forward.

"Nonverbal magic isn't even on the exam mate" Morrison said reassuringly, and at the next moment he had magically blocked Melonie's equally quiet jinx, one that was purple in color. "But I admit, it looks *really* cool doing magic without speaking..."

Albus was partnered with Scorpius, but this proved to be a very bad idea overall. Scorpius had gotten so good at it that he could fire just about any moderately dangerous spell without saying a word, but as Albus was better off ducking than creating a shield spell without speaking, he always left the class with some sort of mild malady. Today, Scorpius was making his nose swell up like a balloon.

"Really, mate?" Albus asked, his voice nasal as his friend gave a light chortle and shrunk his nose down to regular size without saying an incantation.

"Look," Scorpius started, "I don't like jinxing you when you can't defend yourself, but as I *do* need to practice..."

Fifteen minutes before the end of class Professor Handit walked among them, giving small tips but pleased with their progress overall. He beamed at Albus when he saw him.

"How are we doing today, Al?"

"Excellent" Albus said, his voice again nasal due to a nose that resembled a sausage.

"Well I don't mean to be nosy-"

"Haha, good one Professor!" Morrison called from two pairs away.

"-But I've noticed that you're putting a lot of concentration into you wand movement when attempting to block Scorpius' spells."

"Well I still need to do the wand movements, don't I?" Albus asked, his voice returning to normal as the sentence progressed; Scorpius had removed the jinx.

"Certainly. But remember, you say the spell at the same time, don't you? When not speaking, you must *think* at the same time. Don't let the change of idea behind the spell change the fundamentals."

Albus nodded, and though his next several attempts failed, he managed to successfully disarm Scorpius without speaking right as the bell was going off.

"Nice one, Al" Scorpius said. "Though admittedly, I was in the middle of putting my wand away..."

"Yeah yeah, I know" Albus said, grinning. He was pleased at how like-himself Scorpius was being today. Albus noticed that he tended to revert back to usual most when he was succeeding at something.

Still, he swelled with pride at his improvement, hoping that it would amount to something in the next lesson. Professor Handit was not the only professor aiding him and his fellow students in any way possible however. His teachers had always been effective at preparing them for exams, and even the more strict ones had always attempted to make additional time for the students falling behind. This year, however, every single professor was announcing their willingness to help during every class period, allowing students to schedule tutoring times as well as staying behind after class to answer any questions. Albus assumed that this was because it was O.W.L year, but Scorpius had a more realistic idea.

"It's Puckerd" he said simply in the Common Room one day. "They reckon he's keeping tabs on the school kind of. You remember what your dad said, a while ago? About how when he was younger the school was infiltrated by the Ministry? I get the feeling that Puckerd is here to pick at the weaker students, and none of his colleagues are going to let that happen."

This certainly seemed true, as Albus noticed that it was typically the students poor in certain subjects that were catered to so often. Scorpius was merely average in Herbology (the only class that he did not excel in, in fact) and had been offered a tutoring time from Professor Longbottom if he wished to "brush up a bit". And Morrison, who frequently admitted openly to being abysmal at Divination, had also revealed that Professor Trelawney had "foreseen him" struggling on his exams, and had offered additional assistance as well.

"I wonder if she foresees me dropping her rubbish class next year, too" Morrison spat as he mentioned it.

Albus in particular had received a boost from one of his teachers, though it was more in what was said than what was done. Professor Bellinger approached him at the end of a particularly grueling Transfiguration lesson to give him words of wisdom.

"Well done, Mr. Potter" she said, and Albus noticed that she had been watching him conjure from a distance for the last ten minutes of class. "You're officially up to scratch with everyone else."

"Only took me a year" he smiled weakly.

She cleared her throat. "I am proud of you, Mr. Potter, but you now have a decision to make. You've put forth a great deal of effort into catching up and becoming adequate. When someone reaches the level that they wanted to reach, they are granted two choices; to revel in their success and stay put, or to keep going further than they'd hoped from the start. That is the difference between one who succeeds and one who excels. Remember that."

Albus nodded, and fifteen minutes later he was in the Common Room, conjuring small things like quills and scraps of parchment out of mid-air gleefully.

"Are you seriously practicing?" Morrison asked him. "Like, outside of a classroom?"

"Yup" Albus replied, and he had to dodge the book thrown at him.

"Don't throw books!" Scorpius snapped quickly, but he then turned to Albus with a serious expression on his face. "I'm glad you're getting better at Transfiguration, but you need to get your priorities straight. We've got a game coming up mate."

There was indeed an extraordinary amount of truth to this statement. The Quidditch Final was less than a month away, and Albus knew that his usual amount of practices would have to be intensified. He was pleased with the way his team accepted this challenge however. They had

developed from the whiny brats afraid of the weather into a team that Albus was reasonably satisfied with, and their tenacity and perseverance were an indication of this. He had never seen them train so hard, and they were now doing everything that he said, apparently now aware that he knew what he was talking about. To some degree, however, he was afraid that they'd gone overboard.

"What's going on?" Albus was saying in the hallway in early April.

James was walking towards him, looking flustered. In each of his hands he had the ear of Albus' players-both beaters to be exact.

"Get off of me-" Barry Bryant was saying, his feet dragging along in the corridor as people laughed.

"If you rip my ear off you're the one that has to talk to Madam Clearwater-" Yin Luong shouted painfully.

"What is this?" Albus asked as James approached him. He released the two of them and pushed them over to him, where they promptly cowered behind their captain.

"Really Al?" James asked, smirking. "You sent spies?"

"I did not!" Albus said truthfully, turning on the spot and peering at them both angrily. He turned back to James. "What did- what happened?"

"I caught this one in this stands," he jerked his head towards Yin, "wearing shoddily charmed robes meant to make him look like a Gryffindor. Like I wouldn't realize he wasn't in my own house of seven years" he added with narrowed eyes. "And the other idiot," he continued, jerking his head towards Barry, "was dressed up in a big cloak, like he'd blend in with the dirt or something. What were you thinking stupid?" he added, and Barry stuck out his tongue as though he were a child.

"Look, I didn't send them" Albus said, embarrassed.

"Yeah yeah, I know" James said, turning to leave. "But if they're as good Beaters as they are sleuths it wouldn't matter anyway..."

And with that he walked away.

"Hey!" Albus called after him. "How's-how's studying for N.E.W.T's going?" he threw out, desperately trying to change the topic to something more benevolent before it ended.

"Don't try and change the subject, cheater!" James yelled back as he turned the corner.

Albus rounded on his team mates. "Well!" he barked.

"Sorry-"

"We thought that-"

"We were going to ask-"

But Albus smacked his forehead with his palm. "I *meant*, well, what did you see!"

They exchanged an ominous glance.

"They're good cap'n" Barry said.

"*Real* good" Yin added.

Quidditch training only intensified after this news, and it started to cut into Albus' other non-educational endeavors greatly. Though he was still managing to keep up with his studies somewhat, he could not always do so along the same pace as Mirra, who, as it turned out, was having troubles of her own.

"You study for about eight hours a day" Albus told her in the corner of the library one day. "What are you fussing over?"

Mirra sighed and sifted through scraps of paper. "It's just-I don't know-these exams are a little bit different, that's all."

"Well just because they're more important-"

"I mean, I'm studying for them differently" Mirra said, biting her thin lips and not bothering to knock the strands of hair away from her eyes. "Rose-Rose used to make color coded schedules. And they used to *really* help" she said lowly, as if trying to conceal it from herself.

Albus frowned at her.

"I can make your schedules" he said. "I color in between the lines and everything..."

Mirra chortled, but her relaxed expression didn't stay for long.

"It's just weird to me, going through this whole process without her. For the first time ever."

"Ahh. Well I'm sure it's just as weird for her" Albus said, avoiding her eyes, as he didn't even believe himself. Lance was studying for his N.E.W.T's as well, and thus, it was highly unlikely that Rose did not have an excellent studying schedule.

Mirra heaved another sigh. "I'm all over the place right now. I don't even know what I'm doing on which day-sometimes I end up losing track of what's going-you're usually out practicing and I end up stuck here alone-"

"Hey!" Albus started, offended, but Mirra gave him a lopsided smile.

"Well its true...I didn't mean like *that*."

"Well-if you did-we're both busy you know. Sometimes you have Prefect duties" he said quickly, which was perfectly true; both his girlfriend and Scorpius, he knew, had even less time than everybody else. Just the other day Scorpius had ended up chasing down three mischievous first year Gryffindors on the seventh floor ("The audacity of those little gits!" he'd said angrily) and had not returned to the Common Room until sometime after one in the morning.

Mirra seemed to have no legitimate answer for his accusation, and thus, Albus was forced to ease the tension himself. He slid his own Transfiguration textbook and leaned across the table to her.

"If you need to relax, we could always head to the Room for a bit..." he said slyly, and she giggled.

Even with the conflicting schedules of a Quidditch captain and a Prefect, Albus and his girlfriend always seemed to find time for a heavy snog in the Room of Requirement. Though the library remained Mirra's choice place to study, the Room had developed itself into a part of Hogwarts away from the hectic castle life; an always changing but perpetual romantic setting with which they could relax. With so much going on Albus was finding himself in the room more and more often, his frequent visits with Mirra the most important thing to him now for two reasons. First, it helped him get away from the combination of his team mate's constant nagging, the awkward glances with Rose and Lance, and of course, the upturned nose of Puckerd. And second, he thoroughly enjoyed them.

Sadly however, it was one of these usually passionate and exciting moments that delivered Albus his worst news yet. Waiting outside of the blank stretch of wall and waiting for Mirra to arrive, his fell face when he saw the stoic look on her face as she turned the corner.

"What's up?" he asked her, and she raised a small, cut out slip of paper to show him.

"I've had my appointment made" she said anxiously. "For career advice. It was posted in the Common Room. I have mine at noon on Thursday!" she added, her teeth almost chattering.

Albus smiled at her. "You'll be fine" he told her. "Neville's awesome-"

"*Professor Longbottom*", she corrected him icily, "isn't the subject of the advice! I have no good career plans!"

"Oh come on, you could be loads of stuff..." he told her, though as he said it a realization dawned on him. "Wait-you said-you said the times have been posted?"

She nodded, and he groaned.

"Well maybe we'll pop in the Room for a little bit and then I'll go and check-"

But Mirra had given him a stern look. "Go find out your appointment!" she said, clearly distraught from worry of her own appointment but unable to project it accurately.

Albus hung his head as he moseyed away slowly. The entire walk he hoped that Puckerd was not as up to date as the other Heads of Houses, though one look in the Slytherin Common Room told him that this was not the case. There were tons of students crowded around the bulletin board.

"Nine-thirty on Friday" Barnabus Curder said with a smile. "Nice, I'll miss Ancient Runes..."

Albus looked around first for his friends and saw that Scorpius was already by his side. "I'm in two days" he said dryly. "Excellent."

Albus next heard Morrison yelling from the front of the crowd.

"I'm first!" he announced. "Tomorrow! I'm number one!" he added excitedly, pointing at the miniature one next to his name. "Number one! Number one, number one, number one..." he chorused cheerfully, and many of the younger students applauded as if he'd actually accomplished something. Albus watched as Morrison strode over to Melonie and wrapped her in a bear hug, leaving her an inch off the ground. "Hear that Mel! Number one, number one!" he barked into her face playfully, and she laughed as she turned her head away.

Albus was not as giddy as he neared the board. He scanned the entire list for his name and caught a pleasant surprise; his meeting was to take place at two o' clock on Thursday.

"Not bad" he mumbled to himself, thinking that he'd have a few days at the least to come up with a good career option that would get him out of Puckerd's grasp quickly.

Unfortunately, however, he ended up drawing a blank. For three days he was unable to come up with a single solid idea outside of being a Potions professor, which, he realized, was because it was the only thing he really excelled at outside of knew that the chances of Puckerd agreeing on this were slim, but he also realized that there was a chance he could word it differently to get a better for clues, he sought help from those who had already been interviewed.

"So did he ask you questions, or did you just come right out and say whatever was on your mind, or what?" Albus asked Morrison the second that he'd finished.

Morrison tapped his mouth with his finger pondering. "Well I'm kind of a special case actually. He seems to consider me a lost cause all the way around, but I think he's not allowed to say that

so he basically lied to my face while we were talking back and forth. Said that maybe I'd like to work at Gringotts, because I seem to like adventure. Said that all I'd need to do was touch up a bit on a few classes. Charms, Transfiguration, Defence, Potions..."

Scorpius actually had good things to say, which didn't help Albus in the slightest, as he didn't expect Puckerd to greet him with a smile.

"I was actually really surprised" his friend told him. "We just went over which classes I was doing best at, and he asked me if I'd ever really considered working internationally with wizards. He said that if I kept my grades, became Head Boy, and did reasonably well on both major exams, I'd be able to secure a high ranking position in the Ministry less than three years out of Hogwarts!"

No one seemed to have the information that Albus required though, which was regarding whether or not Puckerd was quick to shoot someone down. He knew that this was going to be a particularly nasty discussion if it ended up being opinionated. He had said too many foul things to Puckerd in the past to expect unbiased treatment, and beyond that, he couldn't be sure that this wouldn't end up as some ridiculous conversation about the Silver Wizard, whose lack of recent appearances had helped calm the rage but also most likely increased the suspicion of certain suspects.

Albus knocked on the door of the Potions classroom on Thursday with an incredible sinking feeling in his gut; he knew that the best he could hope for was that it was quick. He reminded himself that not only did he need to keep a civil tongue as his father had constantly reminded him, but that there was much more at stake when subject to Puckerd's probing.

Don't mention the letter, don't mention the letter he thought in his head repeatedly as he knocked at the door. Strangely, there was no answer. He knocked again with the same result. Curious, he pushed the door open and saw the classroom completely empty, absent even of his instructor. He went over to his usual seat and sat still in confusion. Had he misread the time?

For ten minutes he waited, and he was right about to leave when the door opened, revealing a sweaty looking Professor Puckerd whose glasses were close to falling off; he'd been running. He took his seat behind his desk without saying a word, and Albus now noticed scraps of parchment clutched in his hand.

"So sorry, Mr. Potter" he said breathlessly, wiping at his forehead with a dirty handkerchief created from mid-air. "I was just at the owlery-I was rather hoping to receive these papers before today, and they were nearly late."

"Is your owl usually unreliable?" Albus blurted out, mentally kicking himself for being an ignoramus.

Puckerd gave him a bemused look. "No, not really. Why?"

"I just- I don't know. Some owls deliver letters to the wrong people sometimes."

Shut up Albus, you idiot! He told himself.

Puckerd seemed to have no idea what was being discussed. "Perhaps, but, maybe we should get started...if you would be so kind as to give me a second..."

Albus waited patiently while Puckerd organized himself. After a minute or so of settling himself in, Albus saw him remove his demonic notepad from his pocket and puff up his chest. When he spoke his voice was no longer exasperated, but oily and swift.

"Well Mr. Potter, I have here a list of your current progress in your classes" he said, glancing down, not at his notepad, but a random paper from a stack that he'd pulled out.

Albus nodded, tugging at his collar.

"All seems to be somewhat up to scratch. You were scrapping 'Acceptables' in Transfiguration for several years, but Professor Bellinger has here included a note that your improvements are enough to merit you into her N.E.W.T level class should you keep this up-she seems to judge based on where you are at the present, not the overall average. Professor Handit has you at "Exceeds Expectations", as does Professor Flitwick...Professor Hagrid has you hovering between this grade and an "Outstanding"..."

On and on this list went, Albus becoming more and more surprised with his good grades as it continued. There were, of course, the notable low grades in History of Magic and Muggle Studies to be dealt with, but apart from this Albus could not help but glow red with each analysis of his coursework.

"And in Potions" Puckerd finished, "you've had few qualified professors, but Professor Handit-who apparently taught in your third year, not sure how that happened- considered you excellent. And your work here has also proven itself to be far above the average..."

Albus felt the corners of his lips curl into a smile. This was going much better than he'd thought. Whatever grudges Puckerd may have against him-whatever conflicts between them-it appeared as though they were irrelevant when discussing a matter as important as his future.

"So, Mr. Potter," Puckerd continued, "now is the portion of the discussion where I find out from *you* exactly what it is you have in mind for yourself. And I, at that point, will tell you whether or not your academic achievements thus far meet those requirements, and, of course, what classes you'll need to take on the N.E.W.T level. I should have you know, however, that some teachers require almost perfect scores to have their classes taken."

Albus sat up straight at this; he had not even known that he was slouching. Folding his hands over in a professional manner, he immediately launched into his ideas.

"Well I love working with Potions, so I figured-somewhere down the road maybe-ending up as a Potions professor. Obviously, I'd need an O.W.L in Potions, but what other-"

"Ah" Puckerd said, his teeth bared and his expression suddenly grim. Albus stopped in the middle.

"What-what's wrong?"

"Well Mr. Potter" Puckerd said, his tone serious. Albus could see a shadow of a smile on his face however, and he didn't like it one bit. "I'm going through your records here," he continued, cycling through papers, and Albus noticed that he was now looking at the scraps of paper that had been clutched in his hand when he'd entered, "and it seems to me that being a Potions professor is, at this point anyway, impossible. It would take some serious changes to accomplish such a task as that."

Albus stared blankly, not sure if he was accurately registering what was being said. "Didn't you say...?"

"Your grades!" Puckerd said loudly. "Yes, your grades are exquisite; you're quite the proficient potioneer! But it's the *behavior* that seems to be the primary problem here."

"Behavior?" Albus asked, the word sliding out of his mouth with disgust. "What are-?"

"The Ministry of Magic has always put a great deal of effort into ensuring that the education of young witches and wizards remains as well handled as it always has. Your *talents* may be commendable, but I'm afraid that with what I have here...it seems as though your unruly behavior has put an end to any aspiration that involves teaching. You see here," he kept on going to a repulsed Albus, turning the scraps of paper around to reveal official looking handwriting and a ministry seal, "there are words like 'uncouth' and 'belligerent', and sentences like 'unwilling to cooperate'...characteristics that don't really apply to those in the position of a professor."

Albus stood at him transfixed with his mouth agape. Puckerd was smiling at him mischievously, a cold and knowing expression set firmly on his face. He looked incredibly satisfied with himself.

"You!" Albus barked, rising from his seat. You-you did- *you!*"

"I have here," Puckerd spoke up loudly, holding his notepad high, "a full transcript of the discussion that we had during our last little chat, sometime before Valentine's Day, if you don't recall? Immediately recognizable is your insults to my intelligence, your vehement attempts to accuse me of being more interested in my Ministry occupation than the one here, and various other statements that show your disregard for those with authority. The things that I was sure to include, not here on your school record, but on the Ministry file that is kept to help our good government decide which promising youths should be given such grand opportunities. Fret not,

however, Mr. Potter, the position behind a counter at some shop is not beneath you. I believe you have an uncle who works at a joke shop, perhaps that would be a good start following your graduation-"

"He has more money than you'll ever have!" Albus roared furiously and stupidly, simply eager to insult now rather than argue.

"That is certainly true," Puckerd agreed, "assuming that one does not consider the exchange rate between gold and dignity" he muttered. "But as I just said, there are plenty of opportunities for a young man unstable as you are-"

"This is all personal" Albus said, shaking his head in disbelief. "*Unbelievable*. All because of- because of- because of what? Because I wouldn't tell you stuff I didn't know?"

"No, Mr. Potter" Puckerd said nastily, and his pleasant facade was now extinguished completely. "Because someone needs to inform you that status is not tantamount to achievement. I'm sure you remember that conversation very well, and I'm sure that you remember the little feeling of power that you must have had as you raised your voice at me? As you denied me a simple conversation? I know what goes through your head, Potter. You think that because I'm in with the good graces of the students, that I can't touch you. I can't go and give the Slytherin team captain a detention, not when he's supposed to play a foolish game! Certainly, I can't complain about your behavior when your father is slowly but surely returning to prominence in the Ministry! Why, I can't *do anything* to combat your awful behavior, can I? Not here at Hogwarts, perhaps, but therein lies the benefit of being both a professor *and* a member of the Ministry of Magic!" he spat gleefully.

Albus was now shaking with fury. Puckerd continued with a sneer, his spectacles halfway off of his face.

"I can't touch you here at Hogwarts, but your future is in *my grasp!* So long as I remain directly underneath Ms. Fischer, I can assure you that you will *never* attain a position with as much reverence as the one that I hold at this school now, and *certainly* not the very same!"

"As long as you're under that Fischer hag, huh?" Albus said, teeth gritted, and Puckerd widened his eyes in surprise. "Well that shouldn't be too long, seeing what an awful Auror she is!"

Puckerd let loose a derisive laugh. "Delude yourself all that you wish, Mr. Potter. Ms. Fischer is here to stay. If you *truly* want to know the future omittance of the Ministry of Magic, I suggest that you look just a bit closer to home! The second that your disgraced has-been of a father is behind bars for parading around in some ridiculous mask, you'll be even further away from a proper future that you are now!"

Now it was Albus' turn to laugh. How could Puckerd be so idiotic? How could he still assume his father to be the Silver Wizard, when Albus and his friends had debunked this theory weeks ago!

"You're off your rocker!" Albus uttered with contempt. "Fischer high up in the Ministry and my dad behind bars, that'll be the day..."

Puckerd cleared his throat, apparently unwilling to discuss the matter much further. Still, it appeared as though he wanted to be the one to have the last words.

"Be sure of these two things, Potter. So long as Ms. Fischer is alive and well, she and I will remain in the Ministry, keeping rabble like you from ever snatching the occupations of the more disciplined and hard-working! And as for your father...rest assured that he *will* be caught and captured as the Silver Wizard, and you'll only be able to survey him through dusty bars from then on!"

"And those are guarantees?" Albus snorted cockily.

Puckerd leaned forward and whispered his next word viciously. "*Promises.*"

Albus nodded his head, refusing to lose eye contact. After a moment of staring with intense dislike he rose from his seat and headed for the door.

"Oh, and Mr. Potter!" Puckerd hollered after him lightly. "Good luck on your O.W.L's!"

Albus went to slam the door behind him, but not before turning and making the rudest one fingered hand gesture that he could. Puckerd gave a gasp, and Albus began his walk back to the Common Room with the closest thing to a grin that he could muster set firmly on his face.

Chapter 18: The Final Contest

"Git, git, git, git, git" Albus hissed darkly in the dungeon corridor, this now his fifth chorus in the last week. Puckerd had just walked by.

"I don't reckon he can hear you, mate" Morrison said, his voice also hushed.

"He doesn't have to hear me" Albus said, eyes narrowed. "He knows what I'm thinking..."

It had been several days since his career advice meeting with the oleaginous professor, and Albus had still not quite recovered. It was one thing that Puckerd had crushed his aspirations of being a professor at Hogwarts, but it was an entirely different concept that brought out the majority of his ire. No matter which way he twisted it, Puckerd had won.

"You're using 'win' and 'lose' like it's some kind of game" Scorpius said offhandedly on a Sunday morning in the middle of April, right as Albus had voiced his opinion on the matter yet again.

"It's not a game, it's true!" Albus said, pounding his fist on the table.

"Puckerd won't 'win' anything until your dad is in Azkaban and you're begging for sickles and knuts in Knockturn Alley, both of which are pretty unlikely to happen."

Albus sighed and made to argue, perhaps just to have Scorpius correct him, but his friend cut him off quickly.

"If you're going to stay on this all day, don't even bother coming to practice" he said with a smirk, as though he were the captain. This shut Albus up promptly, and within fifteen minutes they were out on the field.

The Quidditch Final was in two weeks, and Albus had pushed aside all studying in preparation for it. Mirra had almost fainted when he told her this, but she was among the few who thought it to be so out of the question. Everyone in his own house was all for it, and indeed, the same thing was happening with the Gryffindors. Even with N.E.W.T's coming up, Albus noted that James had booked the field for practice every day that he hadn't.

"We should have clear skies, so visibility won't be a problem" Albus announced to his team as they all hovered in mid-air around him. "Don't let this comfort you though; this means that Gryffindor will have no problem either. Now, let's practice our ducking and dodging again..."

Albus was being very careful about the way that he instructed his team now. Though he was reasonably pleased with their improved skills, he still did not want them all over the place strategically. Gryffindor was an older and more experienced team sure, but they were also bulkier. Albus knew that in a game of aggression they would be demolished, and he thus made sure that all of his players were focusing primarily on divisionary tactics and evasive maneuvering. As the days pressed on, however, it became apparent to Albus that there was more

to it. Though he had had no say in his beaters spying, he had the strange feeling that James was not beneath reciprocating with his own branch of deceit and espionage.

"I've got good news!" Barry Bryant said, running into the locker room five minutes late for practice on Tuesday afternoon. He stopped abruptly and hunched himself over, panting heavily.

"What's going on?" Albus asked. "Why are you late?" he added sternly.

Barry took a few moments to catch his breath before speaking. "I have Arithmancy last, with the Gryffindors. And I overheard this Gryffindor girl say that Liam Finnigan is injured! Messed up his hand bad in Care for Magical Creatures apparently...they're going to replace him with a smaller choice!"

There was murmuring of relief and excitement at this; Finnigan was Gryffindor's best Chaser.

"Injured his hand, you say?" Albus asked, and he and Scorpius were the only ones not joining in with all of the smiles. "We'll see about that."

That night, he met with Mirra, and by practice on Thursday afternoon, Albus had an announcement to make in the locker room.

"Okay Finnigan's not injured" Albus said immediately, and there were shudders and gasps. "I have something of my own private spy in the Gryffindor dormitory, and Liam Finnigan is doing just fine. My brother leaked false information on purpose to mix up our strategy."

"How do we know that your source is telling the truth!" Barnabus Curder spat.

Albus rolled his eyes, not even bothering to justify this question with an answer. "Here's the new rule" he continued. "Anything that you see or hear is possibly a trick. I wouldn't put it passed them to dress themselves up in bandages either. Nothing about our strategy changes. Now let's head out there, we've got to practice our dodging again..."

The next time Albus saw James in the corridor he made sure to call him out.

"Heard your star Chaser had himself a miracle recovery!" he said, and James shrugged.

"What can I say, Madame Clearwater knows the remedies for chimera bites..."

Albus kept up his pace of Quidditch practices so that they would be plenty prepared physically, but he had a slight internal battle going on inside of his head as well. Puckerd was the head of his house, and thus, any championship that he won would go on Puckerd's personal list of achievements.

"Don't. Even. *Think about it!*" Scorpius breathed mercilessly at him one week away from the game, when Albus had mentioned this slight conundrum.

"Don't even think about what?" Albus asked, but it was Morrison who answered. He had one arm around Melonie's shoulders and the other organizing his third helping of food.

"Throwing the game" he said thickly, potato in his mouth.

"I would never do that!" Albus said, aghast. Scorpius pointed his fork towards him, cheeks flushed.

"I'm serious!" he spat. "Don't you go throwing away an opportunity at a joint accolade all over some grudge..."

"Never!" Albus said earnestly. "But it's not just a simple grudge, you know. He's messing with my future..."

Melonie interjected at this point. She was now comfortable enough, it seemed, to offer advice to Morrison's best friends.

"Al, if Professor Puckerd is really being that unfair, then maybe you should go and tell the Headmistress. There will be a record of your career advice meeting somewhere, I'm sure..."

"Maybe" he placated her, though he knew that this was not going to happen. Not only did he refuse to give Puckerd this satisfaction, but he could not be sure that the main topic of his battles with Puckerd was appropriate information to be divulged, not even to McGonagall. The vast majority of his conversations with Puckerd had ended up being about the Silver Wizard, a topic that was almost dead due to lack of new information and, more importantly, an issue that would lead back to the accusations about his father.

Albus was just thinking about if things could get any more complicated for him when Morrison spoke something clearly into the ceiling of the Great Hall.

"Oh man, this is going to be hilarious..."

Albus looked up at once and felt his skin crawl. He had been too preoccupied in his thoughts to hear the fluttering of wings that signaled the mail, but now that he could see a bored looking barn owl hovering above him, the reality of the situation became all too clear.

"No way..." he muttered as the barn owl circled lower and lower. "It's too soon..."

It had not been long at all since his last mysterious letter, and Albus, now sick of being unable to solve the mystery of the sender, was not looking forward to the contents of this next message. For a single fleeting moment he thought back to what Scorpius had said about the last one-about

burning it before opening it, that is- but upon seeing what was written on the envelope he thought twice.

The Head of Slytherin House

The script was perfectly neat, written identical to how the last one had been. Albus hastily tucked the letter into his robes and casted a suspicious look up at the high table, where an unknowing Puckerd was talking to a rather bored looking Professor Bellinger.

"Oh, just go on and open it already!" Scorpius spat out at once.

"Is anyone ever going to tell me about these letters?" Melonie piped up, but Morrison threw her a look worthy of a parent.

"Mel! Adults are speaking!" he said, and she pinched his arm, causing him to whimper in a puppy like fashion.

Albus used this ado as a cover while he removed the letter from his robes, leaning forward to conceal it as he gripped it in his hands. No one was really looking. He could open it now. But the question was, did he want to?

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Scorpius asked from across the table while Morrison and Melonie bickered playfully.

"This letter is meant for Puckerd" Albus said. "Just like the last one. Last two, probably. But all it's done is made things worse..."

"There's still that fireplace idea" his friend replied simply.

Albus' hands shook as he considered his options. These last few letters had done little to clear his head, and he already had enough on his plate as it was. At the same time, however, there was still evidence suggesting that the sender of these letters had information on the Executioner's Veil. Also, he realized, opening it up could give him dirty information on Puckerd.

He opened it up coyly, removing the slip of paper inside and unfolding it with baited breath.

"It's scribbled out!" he blurted. "Again!" he added acidly.

Morrison and Melonie stopped their spat at once, and Morrison turned to him laughing.

"That would only happen to you mate..." he said.

Albus stared blankly at the piece of paper. It looked almost exactly as the previous one did, only with one exception. Though both of their contents had been scribbled out, this one did not even have the visible number two in the beginning. Scorpius took the letter from him and mentioned this at once.

"That's very interesting..." he said.

"Why's that?" Albus asked.

"Because, this means that this letter wasn't created by a Protean charm."

"A what?" Morrison asked, and it was his girlfriend who answered him.

"A replication spell. And what's going on?" she asked, but she was ignored.

"This isn't a copy of the last letter that you received, Al" Scorpius said, and he sounded as though he was deep in thought. "It's a separate letter entirely."

"But does that mean that someone sent the same thing again, and it got scribbled out again?" Albus asked tensely.

"Possibly" Scorpius said, handing him back the letter. "But I think that you're missing the point here. If we work under our theory that these letters are meant for you, and also that it's an address, then the fact that the same thing was sent twice would mean that whoever is sending these *really* wants you to go somewhere. And that whoever's crossing them out really doesn't want that to happen."

Albus scratched at his chin as he examined the letter, numerous hypothetical situations entering his head. The silence was only punctuated by Melonie's irritated growl.

"Is *anyone* going to fill me in on what's going on here!"

With the Quidditch Final only days away and the amount of practices increased, Albus had little time to spend with Mirra outside of the few studying periods that she'd allotted for them. Though Albus was completely willing to push off his exam preparations until after the game, Mirra would take no part in this, and he was thus forced to sit by her in the library for nearly an hour every night as they went over five years worth of work. Albus, however, used this time to discuss his situation with Puckerd and the letters.

"There's a very simple solution for this, you know" Mirra said, her eyes transfixed on the paper she was looking over.

"There is!" Albus asked excitedly.

"Yes. Tell your father."

Albus groaned. "We talked about this already..."

Mirra snapped one of her books shut and immediately withdrew another one from her bag. "All of this anonymous letter rubbish is cutting into time that could be spent on more important things! And you're not making any progress with your little mystery, so you might as well hand it over to your dad..."

"Well if I can't make anything of it, how's he supposed to!" Albus asked, and Mirra chortled.

"Because he's the Head Auror, and he's been doing stuff like this for twenty years."

"Co-Head Auror!" Albus corrected her, and he immediately felt sick with himself. "But anyway, I have the feeling that these letters are more than just clues about the Veil for my dad. This is the second consecutive letter with Puckerd's title on it that ended up crossed out. I have a feeling that there's some bad stuff about him in there..."

Mirra yawned widely and gave him an expression of doubt. "Albus, I think that's what you *want* to think, because of what happened during your last meeting. Not that what happened could have really been helped, considering that you provoked the whole thing weeks ago."

"Are you seriously siding with Puckerd!" Albus said, breathless.

"No Al, I'm siding with your dad, who *told* you to watch your tongue around Puckerd, and you didn't listen, and now you've got no future and I'm going to end up married to some guy who sells hair clips for a living-"

"Did you just say married?" Albus asked cheekily, and Mirra threw a quill at him, embarrassed.

"Ouch! That stung!" he said, though he maintained his grin. He was right about to make another comment about her choice phrasing when she slid a notebook across the table to him.

"Quiz me" she said. "We can laugh after O.W.L's."

Albus was thankful that he had someone close to him who was trying to keep his studies on track, but what he was more thankful for was the amount of support he was getting going into the Quidditch Final. The last few days leading up to the match he was greeted with applause from his table as he made his way down to breakfast, and the excitement in the air was helping to alleviate some of the tension of the upcoming exams as well. For the first time in months, Albus' professors were talking to him on the side about something other than his schoolwork.

"Don' have favorites, me" Hagrid said, chatting with him while they reviewed flobberworms out in the grounds on a sunny Wednesday. "But between me an' you, Al, James is prancin' around like he's already got the game won. I'd knock the smirk off of his face this Sunday, if I were you."

"Good idea, Hagrid. I was thinking of just not putting up a fight at all..."

And of course, the students were talking about it constantly as well. As far as Albus knew Fred was raking in gold at an incredible rate, with a variety of people from different houses alike making numerous wagers as to when he'd crack his cousin's skull. The younger students were all brimming with anticipation due to the build up of a Quidditch Final, but the older students-or those who had experienced the perpetual rivalry of the two houses for so long- were the most anxious.

"I don't get it" Albus said aloud to his friends four days before the match. "We've had Gryffindor and Slytherin Finals for the last few years now...is it just because we'll be setting a record?"

"James is popular, Al" Scorpius said. "People want him to come away with a victory in his last game here."

Albus had been astonished to learn that the same held true for his own family. He was forced to spin Lucy around in the hallway the very next day, mouth agape at the large sticker on the back of her bag.

"Down with Potter (the Slytherin one)" Albus read off, shaking his head while she blushed.

"What!" she said indignantly. "It's James' last year...you have two left...and you already won the cup..."

"And everyone else? Lily?" he asked, realizing that Hugo was almost certainly rooting for James.

"She's on the fence" Lucy said, her lips curling slightly.

"You're a horrible liar!" Albus said, and she giggled and moseyed along.

Albus was also used to the normal taunting and intimidating stares of those in Gryffindor house, and indeed, he was somewhat familiar with the negative energy coming from the other two houses as well. Most Ravenclaws that he saw-mostly younger ones who thought it cool- also had the stickers on their Hufflepuffs were being unusually nasty however, and it took Albus a little bit longer than it should have to see why. Only when Lance walked by with his friends, all of them wearing a unique badge with a picture of a badger and lion tearing a snake to shreds together, did Albus finally get it. Dumbfounded, he had needed Morrison to give acknowledgment to them.

"I think you messed up the pictures on your little pocket protectors or whatever" he said coolly as the two groups passed by in the fifth floor. "There's some random badger in there..."

The Hufflepuffs all stared nastily, except for Lance, who continued walking in a dignified manner. Albus got chills when he saw this. He never would have guessed a year ago that he and Lance would be on such awful terms, but he supposed that he really should have seen it coming; Scorpius had been infatuated with Lance's girlfriend after all. Albus was actually surprised that his friend had recovered from it all so quickly, but upon further thought, he realized that

Quidditch had been what was keeping him busy. This added an extra motivation to his desire to win-he did not want Scorpius in an emotional slump just prior to the most important exams of his schooling thus far.

The only person who didn't seem to be making a big deal about the game was James. Apart from cleverly trying to implement off-pitch strategies, his brother had been almost entirely silent to him since he'd been called out on his Chaser's injury. When Albus did glimpse his brother in the halls or at meal times he always wore a look of deep concentration and focus; it appeared as though he was spending every moment of every day mentally preparing in some way. It wasn't until the day before the match that he actually received word from him. A hushed conversation in the library with Mirra revealed that his brother wanted to meet him a half of an hour before midnight at the lake, something both shocking and slightly suspicious.

"The night before a match?" Albus asked incredulously. "Seems dodgy. What's he up to?"

"Albus, you're acting like I'm in on it!"

"Well you are a Gryffindor..."

"Are you seri-"

"I'm kidding" Albus grumbled. "Kind of..."

"He just said to meet him there" she told him, ignoring his last comment. "That's all I really know."

Albus checked with Morrison and Scorpius, who both seemed to think it was a ploy as well.

"You need your sleep, mate" Scorpius said. "And so does James, he won't be up around midnight. He probably wants you caught out of bounds before the game."

Morrison nodded in agreement. "Or maybe-hear me out-Rose and Mirra are friends again, and Rose is putting Mirra up to this!"

Albus turned his head away from Morrison. "Back to real suggestions" he said. "You really think I shouldn't go?" he asked Scorpius.

"Well" Morrison chimed in again, and Albus rolled his eyes. "You could always just check the Map to see if he's there or not..."

Albus smiled at the intelligence of this answer, and sure enough, he did just that. At a quarter after eleven Albus whipped out the Marauder's Map, where sure enough, a dot labeled *James Potter* was making its way towards the grounds. Now having all the proof that he needed, he bade goodnight to his friends, slipped on his Cloak, and headed for the lake as well.

It was easy to navigate with the help of the Cloak and Map-inarguably the two most impressive mischief making devices that he knew of-and he was able to enter the grounds with little effort. The air was cool and crisp, not a single gust of wind, and Albus smiled to himself at the thought of clear conditions in the morning. Making his way to the lake, he saw his brother standing facing the water at the edge, silhouetted by the moonlight and as straight as a statue. He was in his regular school robes.

Albus removed his Cloak and tucked the Map away, tapping his brother on the shoulder once he was near enough. James spun around and smiled at him.

"Glad you could make it" he said.

"James, what are we doing here? You don't have the Cloak, if you got caught-"

"Nothing would happen, I run this place" James cut him off arrogantly, and Albus snorted.

"Keep telling yourself that..."

"What's the matter, never been near the lake this late before?"

Albus smiled, recalling exactly *when* he'd been by the lake this late. It had been here last year when he and Mirra had shared their first kiss. He said nothing however. There was silence for a few moments before anything happened.

James turned back to the lake, and when he spoke there was an air of nostalgia in his voice that Albus was not used to.

"I can still remember riding across this lake" he said. "In a cramped up little boat. I sat next to a girl named Lola, she ended up in Hufflepuff. I don't talk to her anymore, not since like third year, we just drifted. But I remember boasting about dad the entire trip..."

Albus said nothing, now slightly irked at having been called out this late for nothing, when he could be sleeping. James continued seamlessly however.

"First Friday of the year I signed up for flying lessons. I already knew how, of course, but I still did it. They don't really let first years on the team, so I didn't bother, and then I ended up in detention during tryouts the next year. Third year though-made the team. You saw it all. I remember picking Chaser at first because I wanted to be separate from dad. Seeker just feels more natural to me though, you know? That's why I switched. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Yup" Albus said, staring off into space. James turned to him however, capturing his attention.

"Al, tomorrow, we play our last game. Last game until we end up in the big leagues together, anyway" he added with a wink. "And I just want to let you know, that I'm sorry in advance" he said.

"Getting a little cocky, aren't we?" Albus said shortly, but James shook his head seriously.

"I'm going to be aggressive tomorrow. Relentless. And if I hurt you tomorrow or embarrass you...then I'm really sorry. But I'm going to catch that Snitch, and I'm going to win that cup. I'm not guessing, I'm *telling* you. And I'm sorry for whatever it takes for me to get there."

Albus knew that his brother was being serious, but he could only grin. "Whatever you have to tell yourself, James" he said.

James smiled lightly. "You can go now" he said.

Albus turned to leave, perhaps say goodnight before he did, but James called after him.

"You beat me fair and square two years ago!" he said. "You took that torch from me! I want it back!"

Albus tapped his chest with his hands as walked backwards, eyeing his brother intently and smirking. "Then come get it" he said, and at the next moment he'd concealed himself under his Cloak, eager to get back in bed and sleep, but now more excited than ever.

Albus awoke the next morning right on time, nervous but at the same time confident. This was unequivocally the biggest match of his life, bigger than his first championship even, which was one for the sake of giving Atticus a cup before he left. This one was about him. He and his brother, the two captains. It wasn't about who was a better flier anymore. It was about who had built a better team.

Albus and Scorpius went down to breakfast together, applause greeting them as they sat down at the table and basked in it. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs attempted to drown it all out with a chorus of booing, but Albus saw the Gryffindors eating breakfast stoically; James had evidently told them to refrain from hackling. Knowing his brother, James would probably consider it an unfair game if a Slytherin player ended up shaken by antagonism.

The rest of his team came down minutes later, a smatter of applause greeting them, and seconds later the Hall erupted into cheers as the entire Gryffindor team walked down in single file, looking as intense and determined as their captain.

"Blimey they all need to go to the bathroom" Morrison said, and Melonie giggled next to him. A flutter of owls above signaled the mail, and Albus looked up expectantly only to be greeted with nothing. He had not received another letter since the last one-the one that had been almost identical to the fourth one-and he was actually rather pleased to not be burdened by one today. Scorpius choking on his orange juice two minutes later did capture his attention however.

"What? What is it? You okay?" he said lowly as the rest of the table discussed the upcoming game. The older students were trying to force the young team members to eat something.

Scorpius gave something of a mix between a nod and a shake of the head as he slid over the *Morning Prophet*. Albus's eyes widened in surprise when he saw the heading.

Ministry Admits to Numerous Silver Wizard Attacks

"What's going on?" Morrison asked, but Albus raised his hand to silence him as he read.

Breaking news hit the Wizarding World last night when high ranking members of the Ministry of Magic (many whom wish to be unnamed) admitted to several Silver Wizard attacks taking place over the last few months, kept hidden by the Ministry.

"These attacks were lower level, and all on members of the Dark Alliance who were being tracked by the Ministry anyway" says one source. "Most authorities-including the vast majority of the Wizengamot-believed that it was not need-to-know information for the public, especially considering the amount of panic over previous, larger attacks."

Calling it an attack may be considered incorrect to some, but the amount of attention received is hardly an understatement. After the Dark Alliance attack last December was interrupted by the masked wizard at a muggle wedding, the outbreak of public criticism and acceptance towards the situation became more convoluted than ever, with some believing the Silver Wizard to be a source of hope, while others viewed the vigilante as an intrusion trying to mar the Ministry's coordination. Following the information revealed last night however, the Ministry expects more public outcry.

"There have been five small instances of the Silver Wizard in the last month" says Auror Ron Weasley. "Let the whining begin" he added.

Some members of the Ministry of Magic however claim to not hold themselves accountable at all for the clandestine nature of these attacks, including Co-Head Auror Janine Fischer.

"I personally believe that each and every Silver Wizard sighting should be made known to the public, and the decision to hide these occurrences was certainly not my own. Many people believe the new Renegade movement is simply a sign of a stronger community, but in actuality it shows recklessness and signs of anarchy. Though nothing severe has happened yet, all Renegades are known to oppose Ministry forces when taking the law into their own hands, and the Silver Wizard is no different. If left with no choice, many here in the Ministry believe that innocent members of the public or Ministry could end up hurt. It is imperative, then, that the public be aware of these instances so as to understand the entire situation and all that it entails."

Albus stopped reading here for a moment, scanning over Fischer's words carefully. On one end he actually agreed with her; he did believe that the Ministry should have revealed this to the people. But what she said next had intrigued him a great deal.

Many here in the Ministry believe that innocent members of the public or Ministry could end up hurt.

This made it sound as though Fischer expected the Silver Wizard to attack the Ministry. Albus had seen the masked wizard in person, and nothing that he had seen had given any indication that the Silver Wizard posed a threat against those who they were not already aiming to attack. Did Fischer expect this to change at some point?

"Well this explains why Puckerd's still after my dad" Albus said, though he was drowned out by intense cheering; the Gryffindor team had just left for the changing rooms. Scorpius snatched the newspaper out of his hand.

"We should be heading out too-"

"I was reading that!" Albus said, but his friend gave him a stern look.

"You'll get this back after we win!" he said. "Focus Al, focus!"

Albus nodded, angry at the Ministry for having revealed this information just hours before the Quidditch Final. Morrison and several other Slytherins wished him good luck, and he left for the changing rooms. As he entered them and got himself prepared, however, he allowed his mind to wander slightly.

There had been so little news on the Silver Wizard recently that Albus had almost altogether stopped theorizing on their identity, but hearing this news had kicked his brain into gear. A sudden flurry of attacks in the last months or so...that would be right around the time that he'd received his last two scribbled letters.

"Nothing mate? No words of encouragement?"

Albus looked up and saw that it was Scorpius addressing him. His team was completely dressed; he could hear the roar of the crowd from in the locker rooms. Albus stood up immediately as he fixed his padding and cleared his throat.

"This is it" he said, as calmly as he could. "This is the biggest match you've played yet, and possibly will be the biggest for years to come. This is the grand finale. This is the Final."

His team stood shoulder to shoulder as he paced back and forth in front of them, trying to find meaningful words to grant them.

"Now a lot of you are young" he said. "You've got your whole careers ahead of you, and I myself have got two years left. Hey, I've even already got a cup! But what does that mean? Does that mean that we let this one slide? Does it lose its mystique? Its allure?"

They all shook their heads side to side, Scorpius smirking.

"You don't let an opportunity like this squeeze through your fingertips. Not ever. We play hard every game, but here we play hardest. This is what we've worked for, this is what we're here to get! We can either be satisfied with making it this far, or we can strive for more! That's the difference between those who succeed, and those who excel!"

They cheered, and Albus turned briskly and led them out onto the pitch from here, wiping sweat from his forehead as he did so.

"Let's do this!" he said, and there was yelling agreement behind him; he could feel Scorpius clasp his shoulder tightly with one hand.

They walked to the center of the field to such a tumult that it was almost impossible to distinguish the friendly noises from those meant to insult. Albus could hear booing and cheering as he stood in the sunlight, but it was all mangled together from the excitement. He looked up at the Gryffindor stands however, and he saw Mirra wave at him with a beaming smile on his face.

The Gryffindors entered next, and the noise made as they entered was a more obvious kind of positive; Albus had to strain his ears to hear his own house booing. He didn't care about this however, he was now entirely focused on the match-everything about it. Slytherin and Gryffindor were dead locked in points, meaning that for either team to win they had to be up by at least ten points. This meant that every goal and every save was of the utmost importance, but Albus knew that it was especially challenging to he and his brother. Every time that the lead changed they would have to swap offense and defence; it would be a two-way game all the way through.

The noise made it almost impossible for Albus to hear either the commentator or Mr. Wood , and it was by reading lipsthat Albus knew he wasto shake handswith his brother. They gripped one another's wrists firmly, nodding to each other with straight faces the entire time. Last night had been the time for smiles.

The whistle blew, and they were off. Albus kicked off from the ground hard, enjoying the nice breeze but also acknowledging that his brother had the same perfect flying conditions. The noise of the crowd was absolutely deafening, and thus, as Albus rose higher and higher into the air, he had to pay attention to what was actually happening as opposed to listening.

The first thing that he saw was Gryffindor's Chasers take possession of the quaffle. They weaved in and out of one another so quickly that it was hard to tell who was coordinating the plays, and their passing games was excellent; Albus could not even tell who in particular was holding the

quaffle. Scorpius somehow knew it however, as he saved the first shot of the game by hanging upside down in spectacular fashion.

Albus then started looking for James, intent on tailing his brother to be able to block him off at a moments notice. This proved to be extremely difficult however, as James was speeding around randomly like a bullet, confusing Albus at every turn; he'd come prepared.

Albus maintained his position high in the air, surveying the field for the Snitch, not to capture it, but to have a tab on it. In a single second, however, the pace of the game changed. A chorus of booing arrived, and Albus realized that his team was up ten to nil. An excellent shot by Tiffani Garret managed to squeak its way by the Gryffindor Keeper, and Albus was now completely on offence. There was no point to tailing James now; he could not capture the Snitch anyway.

He sped downwards, a gut feeling telling him that the Snitch was close to the grass. He managed to dodge a bludger while simultaneously scrapping a fragment of information from the commentator.

"And that Fred Weasley is on fire today, he's got three successful hits already, and he's after Potter's head next!"

Albus didn't care how much gold his little cousin earned, what was more important was the gold on the field. He skimmed the grass slowly in an attempt to capture every detail of the field, and his heart leapt when he turned his attention towards the bottom of the right Gryffindor goal post.

He sped off at once, the Snitch clear in his sights-

James skidded to a halt in front of him, creating the familiar blocking image that Albus had loathed in their last game together. Albus did not let this deter him however, he simply soared upwards and over his brother, fully willing to sacrifice distance in order to get ahead of his brother-

But his brother rose with him, his look fierce.

"I told you Al, you're not winning this one!"

"We'll see-"

He was cut off by a roar of joy however-Finnigan had evened things up at ten apiece. James continued to block him however.

"We're tied up James!" Albus roared stupidly. "I can't catch the Snitch either!"

But James continued to box him in, not letting him move more than twenty feet in any direction. To his surprise, however, James was now smiling.

"I'm sorry," he started, "what did you say about us being tied?"

Albus turned in horror as all three Gryffindor Chasers sped passed everyone in green, entering a three on one that Scorpius could not successfully block. Thomas scored, and they were now down by ten.

James sped off at once, and Albus realized at once what had happened. James had not just been blocking him, he'd been keeping him in place while following the Snitch that Albus had seen first. Once Gryffindor had taken the lead, he knew right where to go.

Albus shot after his brother, refusing to lose in such an embarrassing way. James had an exceptional lead on him however, and Albus could again hear the booming commentary for a second or two.

"Potter's after the Snitch, with Potter on his tail!"

James was nearing the hovering Snitch now, and Albus was not be able to overtake him-

Thinking fast, he reached out his hands and grabbed the tail end of James' broomstick, stopping him from moving forward. A whistle blew while three quarters of crowd hissed at him.

"Foul!" Mr. Wood called, and Albus didn't even need to hear the exact rule that he'd broken, he knew it was a penalty. Gryffindor would get a free shot, sure, but as far as Albus was concerned, that was a far cry better than just outright losing.

It was Finnigan who took the shot, which Scorpius successfully saved. Albus grinned inwardly; not only had his penalty prevented a loss, but the time-out call had evidently made James lose sight of the Snitch as well. All in all, he thought, it was a smart penalty to take, regardless of how disingenuous it seemed to the audience.

Play resumed with Slytherin still down twenty to ten, Albus now trying to take better care of the way that he followed his brother around. James was still moving in an unorthodox fashion however, swerving at random moments to throw Albus off from where it was he was searching. Albus could not take his eyes off his brother (who didn't seem to care in the slightest that Albus had acted so egregiously) and he thus had to try and grasp what the commentator was saying over the sounds of the crowd.

From what he gathered over the next few minutes, Scorpius had managed to string together several incredible saves, but his own Chasers had only managed one measly shot on goal, and it had been blocked easily. Albus would need them to score at least two more if they had any chance of winning, and that was only if Scorpius continued to prove exceptional with his keeping. This hit a further snag within the next three minutes however. Eckley had knocked a bludger right into Garth Moone, and the quaffle had dropped into possession of the Gryffindor Chaser named Tabbers, who had thrown a quick pass to Finnigan, who finally snuck it passed Scorpius in the left hoop. Thirty to ten.

"Damn!" Albus shouted aloud, but at the next moment he was forced to fly after his brother, who had gone into a dive after a glimmer of gold. Albus managed to block him, but James ended up using his weight to move around him. Again, Albus was forced to fly close enough to collide with him, which he nearly did.

"And both Seekers are really going at it! There's some close contact here..."

The next ten minutes proceeded like this, with Albus subjecting his body to torment as he was forced to stop his bigger brother in his tracks numerous times; it almost felt as though he'd been knocked around by a bludger or two. He managed to hold off defeat long enough for Garth to redeem himself and score a goal however, meaning that they were back to being down by only ten.

As the game progressed, however, it became very obvious to Albus that he and his brother were not going to be the only two getting physical. As he'd expected, Gryffindor was using their superior size to knock around his team, which could only really be prevented if they avoided contact-something tough to do when you also need to put points on the board. They somehow got it down though. Five minutes later and Tiffani Garret had tied it up at thirty a piece.

"We're neck and neck now!" Albus heard the commentator chime in. "This is one spectacular showing all the way around for both teams!" he added, which genuinely surprised Albus. He was used to a much more biased form of narration.

Albus decided to take a page from his brother's book at this point. Just as James had kept him in one place while searching for the Snitch, Albus attempted to surreptitiously do the same thing, moving back and forth in front of his brother while letting his eyes wander ever so slightly.

"Come off it Al!" his brother said, sounding aggravated for the first time. Albus continued to pester him however, which only ended with a sharp elbow to the mouth. A whistle blew.

"Penalty on Gryffindor!" Mr. Wood announced, and he was met with ferocious booing.

"Cobbing-excessive use of elbows- penalty shot awarded to Slytherin!"

Tiffani Garret took it. She moved in slowly, swerving slightly in an attempt to marginally confuse before veering all the way to the right-

It didn't work. There was applause from three quarters of the crowd, and the game stayed tied.

For five more minutes the game proceeded with little happening apart from he and his brother's own personal wrestling match, and Albus was starting to feel ridiculously tired. Nudging along his brother was extremely hard work. It was all worth it however; he saw the Snitch.

"And Slytherin is on a three man run here!" yelled the commentator, and Albus, putting two and two together, realized that a goal from his team followed by him immediately catching the Snitch

would result in a victory within the next ten seconds. He bolted after the Snitch, which was hovering higher and higher-

James started tailing him, but Albus was faster. He was in reach-

Barnabus Curdur missed the shot, making Albus' entire attempt futile. But the Gryffindor Keeper was not thinking along these lines. He heaved the quaffle half way down the field, to be caught by Tabbers, who passed it to Finnigan, then back to Tabbers, then over to the corner where Thomas was waiting, the Slytherins not able to move back in transition-

He scored. Albus heard Scorpius' curse echo throughout the entire stadium somehow, but all that Albus could think of was the score. They were down forty to thirty. And what's more, James now knew where the Snitch was...

I've got to stay ahead of him Albus thought to himself repeatedly, knowing that if he stopped to turn around and block his brother then James would simply zoom passed him. He simply stayed on course towards the Snitch instead, trying to make himself a moving obstacle that James could not shift himself around-

He was extremely close to the Snitch now, and he needed to keep himself between the golden ball and his brother. James was bumping into the back of his broom now however, and Albus had the strange feeling that a penalty was about to take place. It didn't though.

"Good game, Al" he heard his brother holler from behind him.

"What!" Albus yelled, confused. Did his brother think that Albus could catch the Snitch and win?

And then he felt it and saw it at the same time. There was a blast of wind behind him, and Albus saw James' broomstick slide under his own. At the same time he could see a shadow above him; in an amazing display of athleticism, his brother had leapt over him-

He landed back on his broom expertly, now in front of an awestruck Albus.

"What a move!" the commentator yelled. "I've *never* seen that done before!"

"No-" Albus started, but it was too late. James was ahead of him. He took an easy swipe at the Snitch and held his fist up high.

"GRYFFINDOR WINS! WHAT A MOVE! WHAT A GAME!"

This was all that could be heard from the commentator; the noise of the crowd was now fiercer than anything that Albus had ever heard. Any booing was completely drowned out by the intense sounds of elation and excitement. Albus sunk to the ground with his head held low, his team crowding around him and patting him on the back consolingly.

He looked to the Gryffindor stands, which had already cleared. Only Mirra was left behind; she gave him an apologetic smile and shrugged.

"Don't sweat it Al-"

"Next year mate-"

The Slytherins had already cleared out, but the other three houses had joined the field in anticipation of the cup ceremony. Albus's team made to march him off of the field as well, but he stopped them.

"Wait-just-yeah-hold on a second, guys" he told them all, and he dropped his broomstick to the floor and marched into the crowd of scarlet, blue, and yellow.

He saw his brother in the center, his arm around his girlfriend and the other one around his Keeper, with a smiling Lily in front of him. He was grinning wider than Albus had ever seen him grin, and his smile only got bigger when he saw the massive Quidditch Cup make its way towards him. Before accepting it however he noticed his brother in the crowd. He winked at him.

Albus had swallowed his pride for as long as he could. He flashed his brother a weak smile and raised his arm up high. With an almighty heave, he tossed the torch into the air.

His brother mimed catching it and laughed, giving him another wink before clutching the cup.

Chapter 19: 2791 Woodlard Way

Albus wasn't sure if the air of excitement after the Final would ever die down. Every Gryffindor that he saw walking in the hallways wore a look of smug satisfaction on their face, as though they themselves had led their house team to victory, and it was not uncommon to hear the other houses talk loudly about the finer points of the match-most of which only pertained to the winners. Slytherin's better than average performance was barely ever mentioned.

Worst for Albus however was not that the other team had won, but that he had lost. He had let his team, his friends, and his entire house down. Those who supported him praised his attempts proudly, but Albus hated that he was given the accolade of having "almost won". What was worse was that he had no time to be agitated with his loss however; O.W.L's were rapidly approaching.

"Good game, Potter-"

"Don't beat yourself up over it Al-"

People were clapping his back in the library as they passed, but Mirra hissed them away.

"He's trying to study! And he lost anyway!"

"Thanks, sweetheart" Albus said sardonically, and she gave him a weak smile.

"I'm not trying to rub anything in, it's just that I don't want them bothering you! You said that you'd put studying on hold because of Quidditch, and it's over now."

"Yeah yeah, I know" Albus said. "So what are we looking at?"

She slid a leather text book over to him. "We're studying our magical creatures today. Look over those details on Fire crabs..."

"Oh come on, Hagrid wouldn't fail us, he's known my fami-"

"That's the kind of attitude that's going to get you a "P" or a "D"! Now study! And then we'll head to the Room for a bit..."

Albus smiled weakly at this, pulling the textbook around and scanning the page ruefully.

The jewel encrusted shell on the Fire Crab is made from an incredibly hard substance, so much so that some cauldrons are even made from it. In terms of functionality, however, the shell is often used to attract mates during mating season, with the jewels shining brightly to lure-

"Ugh, I think I'm done for now" Albus said, yawning and looking up from the book.

"You accumulated an awful lot of information in ten seconds..."

Albus smiled. "I'm going to go join Scorpius, he's working on Herbology. I'm getting stuff done either way!" he added quickly.

She rolled her eyes but kissed him good-bye, and Albus returned to the Common Room moments later. He had no intention of studying however, mostly because Scorpius would certainly not be doing so anyway. As Albus had known all along, his friend's ability to suppress his sadness over his situation with Rose was dependent on Quidditch, and with the match unsuccessful, Scorpius had reverted back into his lethargic state. Oddly, it was Morrison doing more studying between the two, mostly, Albus was sure, because of Melonie's insistence.

He went straight into his dormitory after he arrived back at the Common Room, walking right passed the lump of blankets that was Scorpius as he did so. He quietly crawled into his own bed and removed a stack of papers from his trunk.

"What do you all mean..." he mumbled to himself.

Though he would let no one know it, he had recently become interested in his mysterious letters again. The first two didn't bother him so much now-he had long since passed them off as ramblings-but all those following perturbed him. Who was sending him things about the Veil? Was it meant for him or for Puckerd? And why had the last two been scribbled out?

He fanned the letters across his bed, trying for the third day in a row to detect a pattern, but it was to no avail. Scorpius coughed however, and he stashed them back in his trunk at once.

O.W.L's were officially to start in one week, not that Albus needed to keep count; his teachers were doing that for him. Every class period began and ended with a lecture on the tests, and these lectures usually comprised of mentioning both the difficulty and importance of the exams. The heads of houses, however, were entrusted with describing the actual test taking itself.

"To ensure that the results of these extremely important exams are as precise as possible, members of the Ministry of Magic will be performing the practical exams along with each of you in turn" Puckerd said smoothly to them all during Potions on Monday. "I can only hope that none of you embarrass yourselves in front of people with such prestige" he added, Albus' fists shaking and his feet tapping on the ground. He still loathed every second spent around his professor.

Donovan Hornsbrook raised his hand. "Professor Longbottom mentioned written exams as well!" he said, and Puckerd nodded.

"Indeed, there are two tests to be taken for each subject, a written exam and a practical exam. The written exams will always take place first, in the mornings, and practicals in the afternoons. The only exceptions in required classes are History of Magic and Astronomy, which comprise of only a written and only a practical, respectably. Also, Astronomy will take place a night.

"It is also important to note that all kinds of cheating are prohibited, and that includes every single method, regardless of how seemingly innocuous it is. Auto-Correct Quills, Answer-Revealing Erasers, the whole lot. The common rule of thumb is that if you can even consider it as dishonest, it is enough to fail the test and severely cut in to your entire future."

There was a collective grimace of everyone in the class, but Albus noticed that few people actually took it to heart. Within twenty minutes after class he was being offered things by older students that were "one hundred percent guaranteed" to help him ace his exams.

"Eye of mantichore here, kiddo. Three galleons and for a short amount of time your deductive reasoning-"

"Powdered dragon claw? Proven to give your brain a boost-"

"Felix Felicis! One tiny vial will give you all of the luck that you need-"

"That's not Felix Felicis!" Albus replied to the shady seventh year Ravenclaw, who gave him an indignant look.

"How would you know!"

"Because it's frickin' purple-"

So many people were anxious about the upcoming tests that Albus had seen lines formulating outside of the Hospital Wing for a Calming Draft. Only Morrison seemed to be able to resist the temptation of being nervous over his future.

"If I couldn't learn it in five years, there's no way I can learn it in a few days" Morrison reasoned to them all. "I did my studying. Way I see it, the best thing to do is relax and let what you already know float around in your head..."

"I'm dating an idiot" Melonie said immediately afterward, hitting herself in the head lightly with a notebook.

Another common sight in the days leading up to their exams was for students to receive words of either encouragement or pressure from their families. As Albus looked up for mail every day, he was able to see the increase develop over time, and it wasn't long before people close to him started receiving these messages. Scorpius' parents had fired him up for his exams by sending him a truly confusing message about how necessary it was that he not fail, though simultaneously they had wished him the best and told him that they'd love him no matter what. Mirra's loving grandparents had only kind words to give her, insisting that she relax and understand that they were just tests, which she had always been good at taking. As Albus had a rather large family, however, he had ended up receiving more than letter.

The first letter that he received was from his Uncle Percy, who Albus could still recall to this day sending him a letter about exams in his first year. His overall message had not changed in the slightest.

There are two roads that you can take, Albus, the road of your Uncle Ron, or my road. The difference between the two includes a considerable amount of respect, an unmatched feeling of personal achievement, and a rise in self-confidence. Yes, I am aware that my brother is rather high in the Ministry and is well known for many things, but I can assure you that he regrets not taking his studies more seriously in school a great deal, especially at the thought of what he could have been with more effort!

Uncle Ron's letter seemed to contradict this one however, and it was made known in the writing that he knew of his brother's words.

Don't let my idiot brother get to you Al, I don't regret a damn thing! I got where I am today because of perseverance, instinct, and the uncanny ability to make friends with extremely famous people! Yes, exams are important, but not nearly as important as a social life. Always remember that.

- Love, your (rich and successful, seven O.W.L, and Hogwarts dropout) Uncle Ron

And Aunt Hermione had went even further, making sure that Albus listened to neither of them.

Please ignore your drunken uncle Albus, and your Uncle Percy as well. What we're all trying to say that we have faith in you, that we know that you're an intelligent young man, and that we simply don't want you to get preoccupied or overly anxious about your exams. And more importantly, to always remember that we are here for you!

Aunt Hermione's words had been best, and as Albus later learned, they'd been passed on to everyone else in his family taking tests as well. The most personal letter that he'd received however, by far, had come from his mother. Albus could tell that it had been kept short intentionally, to make the message clear and precise to him.

Albus,

Your father and I wanted you know that we are immeasurably proud of you, and that your exams are nothing more to us than a way to learn just how intelligent and special you are, and that we both love you very much!

-Your mother and father

"Heartwarming words, Al?" Morrison had asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Something like that" Albus said, stifling a small and tucking the letter away. "Any advice or anything from your folks?"

Morrison gave him a steely grin. "I'm not entirely sure my mum even knows what year I'm in."

The weekend before exams were to begin Albus found himself more cramped in his Common Room than ever before. Mirra was no longer meeting him in the library-the five to ten minute walks there, she reasoned, added up and severely cut into her overall studying time-and Albus was thus forced to keep company only with his Slytherin friends in the time leading up to the first exam, which was to be Herbology. Something of interest did happen at the breakfast table on Sunday morning, however.

"That's them there" Scorpius said sternly, jerking his head towards the high table.

Three people-two witches and a wizard, to be exact-were shaking hands with the various professors of the school, in addition to the Headmistress. Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly and made the announcement shortly after they'd arrived.

"I would like to introduce," her voice boomed to them all, silencing them at once, "our examiners. Ms. Laherty" McGonagall said first, waving her hand towards the youngest of the three, a somewhat haughty looking witch with dirty blonde hair and rather flat facial features. She eyed the students warily, then waved her hand in a simple gesture of greeting.

"Mrs. Comely" McGonagall said next, indicating a rather elderly witch who reminded Albus of Professor Verage in appearance. Mrs. Comely beamed at them all before striking up a conversation with Neville.

"And Mr. Horwitz" McGonagall finished, indicating the man, who was balding and rather large, with glasses as thick as goggles attached to his face. He looked to be around the same age as the Headmistress.

The Hall-unsure of what to do-clapped briefly before returning to their meals, whatever conversation they'd been having officially dropped because of the arrival of the examiners. Albus eyed them all while Morrison voiced his opinion.

"They don't look so bad" he said with a shrug. "That Laherty lady seems a tad dodgy though. And look, she's talking to Puckerd..."

Albus looked up and saw that this was quite true, though he was distracted by the conversation between Mr. Horwitz and Headmistress McGonagall, which, due to Horwitz's loud squeal of a voice, was audible even over the talk of the hall.

"Minerva, Minerva!" he was saying. "How very good to see you again! You're looking youthful!"

"Oh Fester..." she said, rolling her eyes, but blushing.

"No, I'm serious! Why, you don't look a day older than my youngest son! He's turning thirty seven next month, if you're interested in any suitors" he added cheekily, and Professor McGonagall covered her mouth uncharacteristically as she let out a girlish giggle, taking Albus aback completely. Puckerd ended his conversation with the Laherty woman at once and strode over to the louder one.

"Mr. Horwitz!" he said, grabbing the man's hand and shaking it vehemently. "A true pleasure to see you..."

"Aye, well we all would have been here sooner if we weren't caught up in the media storm on our way. People seem to want our advice on this 'Silver Wizard' business..."

"I can assure you sir, the Ministry of Magic is doing everything that it can to end the Silver Wizard threat-" Puckerd started obsequiously, but Mr. Horwitz batted him away with a lazy wave.

"I know boy, I know! I'm in the Ministry as well..." he said, sounding almost annoyed. Puckerd bowed himself away looking disgruntled while Horwitz turned back to McGonagall.

"You know Minerva, in all of my years alive, and out of every accomplishment or accolade I've ever had, my proudest moment is right here at Hogwarts! Oh I'll never forget the day! Albus Dumbledore pulled me aside after class one day and said to me, 'Fester, you've improved greatly. I'm very proud of you'. I almost cried upon my return to the Hufflepuff Common Room..."

Albus tuned the rest of the conversation out after this, and breakfast continued as a mostly silent affair. The rest of the day was spent with students cramming information into their brains on their last full day of studying, and all too soon it was time to go to sleep. Not that everyone did. It wasn't until well after three in the morning that Albus saw Scorpius extinguish the light of his wand and stop mumbling about Fanged Geraniums.

The next morning's breakfast proved to be even more somber than the previous one. With the first day of O.W.L's officially underway, Albus could only watch as the majority of his classmates traded in plates for notebooks in an attempt to get last second studying in. Even Albus had removed an old notebook on Herbology.

"Al, what do you have for the usual lifespan of those Screaming Korean Shrubs?" Scorpius was asking hurriedly, flipping through his notes. "I have two different things written down here..."

"Uhh" Albus attempted to reply, flipping through his own notebook and not seeing the plant listed anywhere.

Of all the fifth and seventh years, only Morrison was indulging in the typically delicious Hogwarts breakfast. He had stacked up a tray of waffles in front of himself, eating them each in two bites gleefully.

"Morrison, will you *please* study? Just a little bit?" his girlfriend pleaded with him, shoving one of her own notebooks underneath his nose.

Morrison swallowed before addressing her. "Mel, if I don't study, I'll do somewhat okay. But if I don't eat, I'll pass out and *die*, and then I'll fail for sure! Is that what you want! Me to fail!"

Melonie merely stared at him with her mouth wide open after this, but it didn't matter anyway. Five minutes later the fifth and seventh years were asked to leave the Hall, and at half passed nine they were asked to enter once more.

The long tables of the Great Hall had vanished, replaced instead with hundreds of small desks. They were randomly organized into rows, and Albus could see James and the seventh years at an entirely different side of the room, probably there for a different subject. At the next moment Neville was passing out identical packets of paper to all of the fifth years, and once everyone had a test paper and a quill, Neville addressed them.

"You can go" he said casually, and the scribbling began at once.

Albus glanced at the first page nervously.

1. Assyrian Alert Seeds are capable of keeping someone in a state of consciousness almost always. List two exceptions to their power.

He grinned and dipped his quill in ink, wondering if writing about Merlin's Mist would get him credit or not.

All in all the written portion of the exam went fairly well, with Albus having answered every question, even if he only expected half credit on a few of them. The practical exam was a bit more difficult. He had the eccentric Mr. Horwitz first, and he had been given the task of taking care of four exotic plants simultaneously for an entire hour, which including feeding them. The most ferocious plant by far in the bunch was the Venomous Tentacula, and Albus spent so much time catering to it that one of his other objectives-the Snarglepuff-looked extremely withered and neglected by the time that the exam was done.

Albus had no chance to relax after this first exam however, as they now had to study for Transfiguration the following day.

"How do you think you did in Herbology?" Scorpius asked as they settled themselves on the floor of the Common Room.

"Mediocre" Albus admitted. "You?"

"Between and 'O' and an 'E'" Scorpius said with a shrug. Morrison too seemed confident.

"I'd hazard a guess at an 'E' for myself as well" he said.

The next morning Albus ended up sitting next to Eckley as they took their Transfiguration O.W.L, and he could not help but notice that he was writing a considerable more amount than this neighbor. Indeed, he realized that he understood the theories of the difficult spells very well; it was applying them practically that he knew he'd have to worry about.

He had the Laherty woman for his practical exam, and for the duration of the hour he stayed with her in a cramped chamber, transfiguring random objects as he was asked to. He managed to alter the shape of several inanimate objects well, but when it came to the living creatures he struggled. His mouse-turned-clock, for instance, still scuttled away when the minute hand moved.

"Okay Potter, just to wrap things up" Ms. Laherty said, surveying him while she made notes on a clipboard. "If you could conjure a quill for me."

Albus nodded and concentrated with all of his might. Conjuring and vanishing had been his biggest problems in Transfiguration this year-

"Well done" she said, sounding bored as he caught the quill created from thin air. "Now if you could vanish it for me..."

Albus concentrated once more, and with a wave of his wand the quill had disappeared back into nothingness.

"Very good, you can go" she said the second that he'd accomplished his task, and he left feeling satisfied with himself-he thought that he'd perhaps scraped an 'E'. No sooner had he left did a soft hand pull him aside. It was Professor Bellinger; she'd evidently been watching through the window.

"Nice work Potter" she said swiftly. "I'll see you in my N.E.W.T class..."

Albus again had no time to revel in his success however, it was next time to study for Defence Against the Dark Arts, one of the broadest subjects to cover. He did, however, manage to catch a glimpse of his girlfriend in the hallway as he scurried back to the Common Room.

"How are things-"

"I'm failing everything!" she said quickly, hurrying by him, though she blew him a kiss as she turned the corner.

Albus knew that there was probably little to the validity of Mirra's fears, but at the same time, the stress of these exams had taken their toll on himself mentally as well. Though he was sure he hadn't failed anything yet, he was also quite sure that he had plenty of time left to make a major error.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was the longest written exam so far. The first three pages had all been rooted in dark creatures, most of which Albus thought that he'd been able to deal with well. The next portion had been all about dark hexes and curses, which Albus also sadly had enough experience with to describe. It was the actual defensive magic that he ended up struggling with slightly, though he did feel as though he was able to describe the effects of certain spells well- he'd seen plenty of good duels, anyway.

The practical exam proved to be something of a mixed bag as well. Albus was able to do simple defensive magic like stunning and disarming okay, but the more advanced jinxes he was unable to perform. He again had the Laherty woman, and she seemed somewhat unimpressed by his overall mediocre abilities.

"Any additional spells worthy of note?" she asked, and Albus flushed. He faintly remembered firing incredible golden beams of light from his wand at Darvy two years ago, but he somehow thought that his anecdotal evidence on the matter would not suffice. Thus, he left without another word.

The next day they had Charms, which Albus thought had the most amount of last second studying done for it, most likely because of the bulk of complicated spells to remember. The written exam came quicker than the others had, but he was again pleased with his ability to answer his questions. He knew most of the required wand movements and incantations anyway. The practical exam that followed after lunch ended up being one of Albus' best however. He was surprisingly able to do everything required of him, from making an apple tap dance across the table to changing the colors on the floral pattern on a vase. He then levitated a few objects, summoned a couple others, and ending by perfectly banishing an old wooden chair away from him.

"Very good Mr. Potter!" crooned the elderly Mrs. Comely. As he turned to leave she added a further comment to him. "Oh, and do tell your father I said hello! I so rarely get to see him at the Ministry nowadays..."

Albus nodded his head and smiled, and minutes later he'd rejoined his friends in the Common Room.

"That went pretty good" he told them.

"I definitely forgot the incantation for levitation spells on the written portion" Scorpius said, looking flustered as he whipped out his Potions textbook.

"Oh come on mate," Morrison said, "it's so simple..."

"Well I'm used to doing things nonverbally!"

"I definitely screwed up on Cheering Charms" Melonie chimed in ruefully, and Bartleby Bing called over to her voicing that he'd done the same thing. Morrison chuckled and threw his arm around her however.

"Cheering Charms are dumb anyway. What's the point of magically inducing your own happiness? Kind of defeats the purpose, doesn't it..."

Albus was barely listening however. Tomorrow he had his Potions exam, the one that he was most excited for. He skimmed through the pages of his textbook idly. For the first time this week, he was feeling confident.

And with good reason. Friday morning's Potions written exam went as smoothly as he could have hoped for, even if he thought that some of the questions were a little ridiculous (how in the world was a fifteen year old supposed to be able to accurately describe the effects of Polyjuice Potion?). He was able to provide a completely clear list of ingredients for each potion listed however, and he even went slightly overboard in some areas by adding an explanation of what each component did. His practical exam proved to be even easier.

Along with a group of a few other students, he was put in a room and tasked with creating four different potions, each of them more difficult to make than the last. The pressure appeared to be too much for some people-Winona Soreeno, who was working next to him, ending up melting a cauldron- but he practically hummed his way throughout the entire thing. Mr. Horwitz noticed.

"Dear me, Mr. Potter" he said, just as Albus was just finishing up his final potion. He crouched down low to examine Albus' perfect Essence of Tranquility. "How did you know to add that dash of ashwinder venom?"

"I thought that it would help to balance out the Knarl quills" he said. "Otherwise it would have ended up too liquidly, which kind of lessens the impact of the Erumpent skin..."

"Well I say!" he breathed. "You've taught me something here today Mr. Potter! And that's saying something..."

Albus cleaned up his station moments later, Mr. Horwitz walking him to the door with his hand on his shoulder. Puckerd was waiting for them right outside of the small chamber, looking irate.

"Wendell, right?" Horwitz said to him as they passed. "You've done a bang up job with this one here! I've scarcely seen a more promising student!"

Albus took this moment to strike. He looked up at Horwitz's balding head placidly. "Actually, Mr. Horwitz, Professor Puckerd just recently told me I didn't quite have what it takes to pursue a career in potions. He seemed to think that I'd be better off behind a counter..."

Horwitz' smile slid off his face, while Puckerd's cheeks turned to a delicate shade of pink.

"Is that so?" Horwitz said slowly, walking Albus passed the Potions Professor. "Well I'll have to look a bit further into that..."

Albus looked back at his furious teacher smiling slightly-an added consolation to the 'O' that he'd undoubtedly just received.

Albus was quick to boast about his examination the second that he'd returned to the Common Room, but as Morrison was still waiting to be tested, it was only Scorpius there to congratulate him.

"Nice job" he said, half sarcastically. "Now quiz me on History of Magic" he added, tossing a book to Albus that was so thick he nearly toppled over upon catching it.

"I'm not studying now, I just did a test!" he said. "History of Magic's not until Monday!"

"Well let's see how that works for you then" Scorpius huffed, taking the book back and throwing it down on the stone cut table next to him. Albus frowned slightly. Scorpius had already been in a bad mood due to Rose and the Quidditch Final, and Albus' unwillingness to study with him must have only exacerbated it. He heaved a sigh.

"Alright, give me the book back..."

They studied until Morrison came back, and as Morrison too seemed unwilling to get an early start on studying, they all put an end to it abruptly. Saturday ended up being a day packed full of learning however, as Scorpius flat out refused to leave his dormitory for the duration of the day. Rather than spend Sunday as he had the previous day, however, Albus joined Mirra in the library.

"How've your exams been going so far?" he asked, as soon as he'd sat down.

"I think that I failed Charms" she said, and Albus noticed that her usually pale skin looked gray; her eyes were slightly bloodshot as well.

"Oh come one..."

"No I'm serious! I think I did good at everything else so far though..."

"What happened to 'I failed everything!', then?" he asked her cheekily, and she blushed.

"I was stressed! And I still am! Now help with my History of Magic! Who was the goblin that led the goblin rebellion of 1655?"

"The short wrinkled one" he said, smiling.

She blew strands of hair out of her face. "Why aren't you taking this seriously! I even see James studying."

"Because I'm tired, and I studied all day yesterday. That doesn't mean I'm not taking this seriously" he said, somewhat indignantly.

"Well you're not doing anything!"

He smiled at her. "We could always go to the Room..." he told her in a soft, sing song voice.

She gave him an angry stare and slammed her book shut. After pausing for a moment, however, she allowed a smile to flicker on her face. "Just to get away from these books for a bit" she said. "But I want to be back here in an hour!"

They ended up staying in the Room of Requirement for most of the day, and by the time that Albus had made it back to his Common Room it was nearly empty; most people had moved their studying upstairs so that they could wake up with their faces stuck to pages. He himself crawled into bed happily, but the next day things did not go so well.

"Ten minutes left!" called Professor Bellinger, who was monitoring this particular written exam.

Albus gave a sheepish grin, staring down at his pack of paper hopelessly. He had skimmed through the test booklet and managed to guess on a few of the multiple choice questions, but he'd only been able to write about one of the open answer ones. The first question on the first sheet seemed to taunt him as he stared at it.

The Goblin Rebellion of 1655 (alternatively known as the Second Goblin Rebellion) had several key individuals.

A) *Who was the goblin leader who died just a week after the rebellion ended?*

and

B) *What was the primary cause of the rebellion?*

Albus had the unfortunate pleasure of sitting next to Scorpius the day of the exam, and as his scribbling didn't stop for a single moment, he felt even worse than he normally would on failing a test.

"How'd you do?" his friend asked him as the papers were collected.

"I think I scrapped a passing grade" he outright lied.

Tuesday's exam went only slightly better. As the Astronomy exam only consisted of a practical and took place at night, Albus had the additional morning to look over his sloppily drawn star charts of the last four years. It helped somewhat, but ultimately proved to be a bit too much information for him to retain.

"What an awful subject anyway" Morrison commented loudly as they left the Astronomy tower, Mrs. Comely eyeing him widely as they went. "How are we supposed to know everything that there is to know about space!"

Albus and Scorpius had the day off Wednesday, while Morrison took his practical in Divination. Rather than skiving off a study session with his friend, Albus did indeed look into his notes on his two most short-lived classes: Muggle Studies and Care for Magical Creatures.

"You reckon you'll take either of these two things next year?" Scorpius asked, his eyes a blur as he read over the few notes that he'd taken in Care for Magical Creatures over the last two years.

Albus pondered it as he flipped the page of his old Muggle Studies textbook, finding himself in a chapter entitled *A History of Muggle Cleaning Supplies*.

"Not Muggle Studies, that's for sure" he said dryly, just as Morrison was returning.

"Well, I failed" he said simply upon his entrance.

"Oh come on," Scorpius started, "don't be so hard-"

"No, Trelawney told me so as I was leaving" Morrison said seriously. "She watched the whole thing from the window."

Care for Magical Creatures was the next day, and for the first time of the week, Albus was confident in a passing grade. It seemed odd when he really thought about it, but Hagrid's hands-on teaching style had taught him a great deal. He was able to describe Thestrals and Hippogriffs extremely well on the written portion of the exam, and the practical wasn't too bad either; he didn't have to deal with any Bowtruckles anyway. He did get a nasty scratch from a Kneazle, but he was also able to bathe his Fire crab without getting any burns. He left the grounds with a smile on his face, a beaming Hagrid waving to him from the cabin window as he went.

There was only one day of exams left, and Albus was beginning to feel the freedom at the tips of his fingers. Once he was passed his Muggle Studies exam he wouldn't have to worry about such extreme testing again for two whole years, and the air of excitement in the castle was almost tangible as well. People were grinning more and more often in the corridors, and even the chatter at breakfast had returned.

"One more to go" Scorpius said, exhausted, but Morrison was grinning ear to ear. Care for Magical Creatures had been his last exam.

"Well enjoy you guys!" he said, laying his head on Melonie's shoulder, who had an Arithmancy book open on her lap. Albus remembered that Mirra too would be taking that exam today, while he was taking his Muggle Studies one.

Melonie threw her boyfriend a detestable look. "Well have fun on your day off" she said menacingly, and he smiled.

"Mel, that's so sweet-"

Albus ignored the rest of the table for the most part, he was too focused on the Muggle Studies notebook in front of him. It wasn't until he heard Dante Haug speak aloud that he looked up.

"Blimey, someone's getting their advice a little late, aren't they?"

Albus peered towards the ceiling, where sure enough, a tawny owl was circling over head. He felt his body go cold, but he couldn't quite explain why-he didn't expect anything new, after all.

"On the last day of exams too, eh Al?" Morrison said lazily. "Maybe someone gave you an end of year treat and decided not to cross it all out this time?"

The envelope fell right square in the middle of the table, and the owl flew away at once. Albus paid it no mind however.

"Just leave it there, I'll chuck in the fire later" he said to his friends.

"Smart man" Scorpius said absentmindedly, but much to Albus' surprise, Melonie had snatched it up.

"What is it!" she barked. "No one ever told me."

"Long story" Albus said dryly, though he himself wasn't interested in it anymore. He didn't want the image of a few scribbled out numbers or letters to plague his mind during his exam. Melonie, apparently not pleased with this answer, tore into the letter at once.

"Mel, it's rude to read other peoples stuff!" Morrison said, looking almost offended, though Albus didn't mind in the slightest.

"What!" she exclaimed. "It looks like it's addressed to Puckerd anyway, and you guys are always opening it right up-"

Albus returned to his book as Melonie unfolded the letter, waiting to hear her confused statement about the unreadable message.

"What's Woodlard Way?" she asked to no one in particular, and Albus looked up from his book. Morrison and Scorpius also turned to her.

"Wait, what?" Albus asked.

Melonie handed the letter over to Morrison, who eyed it for a second before giving it to Albus. He stared at the brief contents of the letter with intrigue. There were no scribbling marks at all.

2791 Woodlard Way

"Woodlard Way?" Albus read off in a whisper, confused. His stomach started to sink. An address?

Scorpius pryed the letter from his fingertips and glanced at it. "Huh" he said. "What do you know, I was right...okay, back to Muggle Studies..."

Albus took the letter back, though he did not return to his notes. Breakfast was starting to clear now so that the tables could be arranged for exams, but as Albus waited outside of the Great Hall, he found himself mulling over his thoughts in his head.

An Address. Whoever wrote this knows about the Veil. Fairhart had the Veil, and we never found it. The Silver Wizard is still active...

"You look intense mate" Morrison said suddenly, snapping him out of his transfixed gaze towards the wall. "You must be really eager to finish up today..."

"Huh? Oh, yeah..."

No one said anything for ten whole minutes as they waited outside the Hall, and it ended up being Scorpius who finally voiced his opinion.

"What's going on in that head of yours, Al?"

"Huh? Nothing."

"A likely story-"

"Wait, what's going on?" Melonie asked out of the blue, and it was her boyfriend who answered her.

"Judging by the familiar look of mixed curiosity and recklessness, Al's trying to get himself killed again."

"Killed-"

"I'm just going over muggle stuff in my head!" Albus defended himself. "Airplanes and helicopters and the like..."

Scorpius smirked at him, and Albus knew that his facade was amounting to nothing. He angrily lashed out at his friend.

"Oh come on, you're not the slightest bit intrigued!"

"I'm intrigued as to how you plan on passing this exam with a random address floating around in your head-"

"Aha! So then you admit it's an address!" Albus said, almost maniacally, and Scorpius laughed.

"Of course I do! I'm the one who proposed that in the first place! But I still don't think it's worth investigating..."

Albus folded his arms over and stayed silent, and by the time that they had re-entered the hall for their exams, Albus was pleased that he had been randomly assigned to sit apart from his friends. He waited patiently as the test papers were handed out, and then dove right in to the first question as soon as he was allowed.

1. Muggles have a variety of different entertainment mediums, one of which is their large collection of sports. The muggle sport involving players maneuvering on ice while simultaneously attempting to shoot a rubber disk into a net is called:

- A. The address may be the location of the veil*
- B. Fairhart had the veil last*
- C. The Silver Wizard may be writing the letters*
- D. All of the above*

Albus blinked his eyes a few times, reading over the question again and again until he saw the answers that were intended. He circled the letter with "Hockey" in front of it and moved on to the next question, beads of sweat now falling down on his paper.

For the first hour or so of the exam Albus was forced to read over things again and again. Scorpius had been right; the address was all that was on his mind. He knew that it seemed outrageous for him to return to such an old theory, but it was Fairhart who had been the first person to ever send him an anonymous letter. And if the veil was never found, and neither was Fairhart's body, then didn't it seem likely that the two were both in the same place? And *someone* had to be sending these letters...

Only when the announcement of twenty minutes being left in the test came did Albus really buckle down and pay attention. He looked over his multiple choice questions and tried to scrap half credit on the ones that involved his own lengthy answers, and then went over every one of them one last time to ensure at least a passing grade. He was just deciding that he'd probably managed a fairly average score when the exam was called to an end.

"Okay!" tiny Professor Flitwick announced to them all as he collected the papers with a quick Summoning Charm. "You're free to go and get some sleep! Good work everyone!"

There was applause from the entire Hall, which Albus added to only in an attempt to clear his head. As the students all filed out of the Hall he was immediately rejoined by Scorpius.

"How do you think you did on that last essay question? I knew about coins, paper, spices, and all that, but I wasn't sure about the actual *origin* of muggle money-

"Huh? Oh yeah, me too-

"Dammit! You failed!"

"I did not!" Albus hissed indignantly as they made their way back to the Common Room. Amidst the bustle of the hall they saw two unwelcome people however. Lance and Rose, both having finished their exams as well, were walking by them towards the stairs to enter Gryffindor tower. Albus felt Scorpius tense up beside him.

Albus, unsure if he and his cousin were even back on speaking terms yet, decided that it couldn't hurt to make the first move.

"Hey Rose!" he said to her. "How-how'd you do on your test?"

Both she and her boyfriend stopped right in front of him, Rose looking surprised.

"Um-good, I guess" she said, and she immediately looked to Lance with a perplexed face; perhaps she just wasn't used to being approached civilly. Albus knew that he'd made a mistake at once however. Scorpius, following his lead, attempted to create an actual conversation of it.

"You had Arithmancy right?" he said breathlessly. "We had Muggle Studies. How was Arithmancy?" he added, all without pauses.

Unlike she'd done with Albus, Rose gave him no speaking reply; only a cold look. Lance leaned over and whispered something in her ear. She giggled, and just like that, they'd walked right by the two of them.

Scorpius turned a faint shade of pink in embarrassment, and Albus' insides squirmed. He momentarily forgot about the excitement of his theories to sympathize with his friend.

"Scorp-

"I don't want to talk about it" Scorpius said, and he continued walking at a brisk pace, Albus following right behind him.

They arrived to tumult in the Common Room-the Seventh years had started up a massive party already. Morrison was stretched out on the floor looking extremely relaxed, despite having finished his testing yesterday. He appeared to be waiting for Melonie to return. Albus followed Scorpius straight up to their dormitory, where his friend promptly crawled into bed and pulled the hangings around him, refusing to talk. Albus sat down on his own bed, now disgruntled as well.

Poor Scorpius. He should be excited to have his exams over with, but their impromptu encounter with Rose had destroyed the semblance of optimism that he'd been clinging to. As bad as he felt for his friend, however, his newest letter was still crumbled up inside of his pocket. He still needed someone to talk to, and right now at that. He could comfort Scorpius later; his friend wasn't in the mood for sentiment anyway.

He dug through his trunk, and at the next second he'd mumbled the magic words to his favorite Map. Mirra was walking along the fifth floor corridor along with a gaggle of other Gryffindor students, and she was moving slow at that. The traffic of navigating the halls with everyone on their way up to Gryffindor tower must have been horrible. This did, however, give him the chance to catch her.

"Be back later mate" he said aloud, and Scorpius grunted into his pillow to acknowledge that he'd heard. Albus tore through the full swing party of the Slytherin Common Room and made his way through the labyrinth, passing through the ice cold shower that was the Bloody Baron as he turned a corner. He took the steps up each floor three at a time, finally catching sight of his girlfriend just as she was turning around in the sixth floor corridor.

"Mirra!" he called out to her, and she turned at once, smiling. She pushed her way through the crowd and approached him, hugging him tightly as she did so.

"It's over!" she squealed. "It's really over! I can't believe it. How did you do on your Mug-"

"Pretty average" he cut her off. "But anyway-"

"Average? But you were studying so har-"

"Yeah I know but not really" he said quickly. "But anyway, will you *listen*-"

He waited for the hallway to completely clear to avoid being overheard, and then succinctly explained the day's letter and all of the new information that he'd been able to deduce. Her face fell as he finished.

"Oh Al..."

"What?" he said, frowning himself.

"Are you still hung up on this?"

"I'm not hung up on anything" he said coarsely. "Look, *really* think on it, everything makes sense! These letters have been coming for the last month or so, and we know from that article that the Silver Wizard has been active for around the last month-"

"So then you think that the Silver Wizard is writing to you?" she said.

"Yes, and-"

"But I thought you said that they were addressed to Puckerd?" she said sharply.

"Well-" Albus started. "I mean, it switches really, but right now it's more likely that they were meant for me-"

"And you think you know who the Silver Wizard is as well?"

Albus tensed up slightly at this. "I have an idea" he said quickly.

Mirra groaned and stamped her foot. "Why can't you just be normal and celebrate the end of your O.W.L's?"

"I didn't ask for all this stuff!" he said through gritted teeth, which was perfectly true.

Mirra sighed and said nothing. After a moment, however, Albus asked the one question that he'd truly been itching to ask.

"So do you want to go with me?"

Her jaw dropped. "You better mean to the Room of Requirement..."

"No!" Albus said irritably, removing the letter from his pocket and smoothing it out for her. "*Here!* To Woodlard Way! It's where the Veil is, I'm sure of it. And the Silver Wizard too, probably-"

"Albus are you crazy!" she blurted out. "At least *tell* an adult! Tell your father!"

Albus gave her a weak smile. The thought had occurred to him vaguely during Muggle Studies, but the immediate repercussions of such had entered his mind as well. This mail did appear to be addressed to Puckerd. How was he going to explain opening Puckerd's mail?

"I have told adults" Albus said. "Scorpius is one year away from being of age-"

"Oh Albus, you're being ridiculous!" she said, flapping her hands now and looking around wildly to make sure that no one was listening. She lowered her voice afterwards. "You promised Al."

"Promised?" he asked stupidly.

"You promised that you wouldn't go and do something stupid and get yourself hurt-"

"Were those the exact wor-"

"It's something along those lines" she said. "And Al, you're not even thinking things through. You don't even know where this place is. How would you get there?"

"Well I'll get Morrison and Scorpius to go with me, and they'll have some good ideas I'm sure. I mean, I already have a few-"

"Like what?" Mirra said dryly.

"Uhhh..." Albus started, thinking on the spot. "Thestrals!" he said quickly. "We'll ride Thestrals! Hagrid reckons they have an excellent sense of direction-"

"That's safe" Mirra said sarcastically. "A couple of teenagers riding around the sky on creatures that most of them can't even see. Honestly Al..."

"Okay that was a dumb idea!" Albus said, holding his hands up. "But I mean, there's plenty of ways to-floo!" he finished his sentence quickly.

"What?"

"Floo! I'll floo there!"

"Albus, none of these fireplaces can do full body travel-"

"McGonagall's can!" Albus said excitedly. "Fischer used it months ago, when she stopped by to investigate! And I know the password to get in to her office too! I doubt she changes it often! And there's Insta-Floo there too, to protect against any enchantments!"

He said this all in one breath, both pleased and astounded with how fortuitous things were working for him. Now thinking back, it was probably a very good thing that Fischer had shown up months ago...

Mirra started biting at her nails, apparently thinking of something else to add to her arsenal. "You haven't considered all of the possibilities!" she ended up blurting out. "Have you ever considered that it could be a trap!" she hissed. "*Again!*" she added blandly.

"Yes!" Albus lied stubbornly, though he thought of a rebuttal on the spot. "But it can't be a trap! If it was a trap, then why would it have been crossed out the first two times? The person would have wanted me there as soon as possible!"

Mirra grimaced at this evidence. She frantically searched for another excuse, and this one was the one that gave Albus the most trouble.

"You can't go! Because I don't want you to!"

"Oh come one..."

"I'm serious!" she barked, and she looked close to tears now. For the first time in the conversation, Albus felt guilty. "You may not care about whether or not you get hurt, but I do! You're not just my boyfriend Al, you're my best friend too!"

Albus stood there in silence, unsure of what to do. Should he back down?

He leaned in close and hugged her. "I'll-I'll be fine, I promise-"

She pulled away. "If you go I'll tell Puckerd!" she screeched, and Albus backed away as well.

"What?"

"Well-okay, maybe not Puckerd-but somebody! Professor Longbottom! Or even the Headmistress!"

There was a long silence while Albus stared at her, taking care to notice her furious expression. He knew, somehow, that she wasn't blushing.

Albus swallowed. "Fine" he said coldly. "Then I guess I'm not going" he added after a moment.

Mirra breathed an intense sigh of relief. "Promise?" she asked, and Albus nodded his head.

"Promise" he repeated, his tone unchanged.

It appeared as though every muscle in his girlfriend's body had relaxed. Her features softened, but right when she made to speak Albus addressed her first.

"I have to go check on Scorpius" he said quickly. "He had a run in with Rose earlier..."

"Oh" she said, disappointed. "Well-wait-are you really done with all of this?"

"Yeah" Albus said simply. "I'll catch up with you later...we'll talk about how your exam went."

She breathed yet another sigh of relief. "Okay!" she said, sounding excited. She moved towards him and gave him a kiss, and ten minutes later he was in the Common Room again.

"I'm going to that place" he said to Scorpius, who still had his face pressed down into a pillow. "Do you want to come with me?"

Scorpius lifted his red face up. "Don't be crazy mate..."

"I'm serious, either yes or no-"

"No" Scorpius said. "Because you're not going anywhere. Even you aren't that dumb. How would you even get there, you don't even know where it is!"

"I've already worked that all out-"

"Not now Al" Scorpius said, looking extremely depressed and putting his head back down.

Albus merely stared at his spread-eagled figure. After conceding defeat, he turned and made his way down to the still-going celebration. Morrison was sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs, with Melonie somehow, despite the noise, asleep on his lap.

"Morrison-" he started, but his friend held a finger up to his lips.

"She's sleeping" he whispered, pointing downwards and stroking his girlfriend's hair.

"Well look, I'm gonna-"

"After dinner mate" his friend said, even quieter. "Big after-exam feast should wake her..."

Albus again could only stare, though he eventually did make his way back up to his dormitory. He began digging through his trunk quietly while Scorpius lay on his bed nigh unconscious.

He was positive that his friendships had not broken with his two best friends, but at the same time, he considered it odd how much things had developed. Scorpius was too upset with his girl issues-and Morrison too elated with his female situation- for either of them to really put much thought into anything else at the moment.

He came across his Cloak as he was digging, but he left it in his trunk-he was not going to need it, he was sure. He knew exactly what he was getting himself into. Not the specifics, perhaps, but he knew that these letters were benevolent by nature, and he had a sufficient amount of evidence to correlate them to the masked vigilante of the news, in addition to an old friend.

He found what he was looking for stashed away in the corner of his trunk. A silver ring. If he was correct, he'd be returning it tonight.

The party was put on hold while his classmates shuffled themselves down to the feast, a disgruntled Scorpius included, though Albus waited in the Common Room with the map in hand. Only when the halls were completely clear-and McGonagall's office empty-did he wipe the map and leave.

He worked his way up to the seventh floor without anything but the Grey Lady noticing him, and he felt the excitement bubble in the pit of his stomach as he approached the stone gargoyles. They eyed him with interest as he scratched at his chin.

"Erm...Wulfric?" he said. There was a moments pause, and the gargoyles moved aside.

Albus tried not to look too suspicious as he stood on the revolving staircase, appearing a moment later in front of the grand looking door. He was shivering now from excitement, though he was not scared. He had an uncannily good feeling about what he would encounter, and he knew that if any of his suspicions proved correct-whether it be on the Silver Wizard or the Veil-he would be helping his father in some way. He pushed the door open and saw the Head office empty.

Albus nearly giggled aloud at how simple things had been. He strode over to the fireplace, where sure enough, a pot of dusty yellow Insta-Floo sat. He took a pinch of it and threw it in the fire, his grin wide.

The flames turned to the color of mustard at once. Albus pulled out the letter and read off the words.

"2791 Woodla-"

"Despicable!" barked a menacing voice, and Albus spun around so fast that he almost tripped over his own robes. He whipped out his wand instinctively, though he saw no one. Then he saw the portrait hanging above McGonagall's desk.

"A disgrace to my name" sneered Severus Snape. "Again, the Potter family shows its inability to follow the simplest of rules, considering their own personal endeavors of greater importance than the regulations-"

"That's enough Severus" said the portrait next to him, and Albus' eyes snapped towards his other namesake, the man with the silver beard and crooked nose: Albus Dumbledore.

"Enough of what? The truth?" Snape said, his curtain of dark hair failing to conceal the disgust in his eyes. "Breaking in to the Headmistress' office, clearly against the rules in itself, and then attempting to use her fireplace to leave school property! Where do you think you're going Potter! Off to try and save the world single-handedly, I'm sure-"

"You were nicer last time I talked to you" Albus said, unable to contain himself; he was suddenly very uncomfortable.

"When we last spoke you were a child, capable of being molded into a respectable wizard. Now you are just a replica of your father, the man who practically invented malfeasance-"

"Severus" Dumbledore said softly, "have you not yet considered that perhaps young Albus Potter here has a very good reason for clandestinely breaking Hogwarts rules?"

"No, I haven't-"

"It is not our place to judge this young man Severus."

Albus stood on the spot, watching the two portraits speak to one another, still eager to go but unwilling to leave in the middle. He was also pleased to see that Dumbledore-a man who everyone seemed to hold in high regard-was on his side.

Snape sneered once more but said nothing. After a moment he mumbled something that sounded as though it contained the word "eyes", and then his expression softened, if only slightly. The portrait of Dumbledore, however, turned back to Albus and addressed him with a stern look on his face.

"Your choices belong only to you, " he said. "But know this. The consequences of your choices have the potential to affect many."

Albus nodded his head in confusion, though the finality in the former headmaster's tone comforted him slightly. He was free to go. He turned back to the fire and cleared his throat.

"2791 Woodlard Way!" he said, and he walked into the fire. He found himself hurtling through space instantaneously.

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle"- Plato

Chapter 20: The Sender Of The Letters

Albus revolved on the spot for longer than he'd ever remembered. He was spinning so fast that it was hard to keep his eyes closed, though he knew from the soot sneaking its way up his nostrils that it was unsafe for him to do anything other than wait patiently for his trip to end. After almost a full minute of spinning, his feet hit solid ground.

Albus fell over at once, his eyes still closed as his knees collided with something that felt like thick carpet. He immediately stood up and wiped at his eyes with his ash covered hands, and the second that he could blink them into focus he spun around to stare at the fireplace that he'd just exited.

It was an extremely simple looking thing, one almost archaic in how withered it looked. There was no fire roaring however, and indeed, the wood inside looked as brittle as twigs. For some odd reason he recognized it not as a wizarding fireplace, but as one of the muggle kind. Without the added powers of Insta-Floo, he realized, he may not have even been able to use it.

He turned his head away from the fireplace to survey the rest of his surroundings, and he felt his eyebrows raise in surprise at what he saw. However vague his expectations had been, they had had nothing at all to do with this.

It was a cozy sitting room, and it looked as though it hadn't been used in years. He was indeed on a carpet, a shaggy brown one in fact, but it was so coated in dust that it felt like he was standing on an extra layer or two. There were tables all over the room, all adorned with unlit candles and framed pictures that, oddly enough, were all face down. In the corner of the room he saw a massive grandfather clock that looked as though it hadn't told the time in years, and most surprisingly of all, he saw a comfortable couch a few feet away from an old television set. This was definitely a muggle house.

Albus walked forward slowly, thick clouds of dust forming with every step that he took. The carpet made a squishing noise at the slightest movement as well. The room itself was dark, but there was a window near the television providing light from outside. Albus walked over to the window carefully, then peered outside to get a better impression of where he actually was. The first thing that he saw was a garden that looked as though it hadn't been tended to in decades, and beyond that a massive oak tree that hung over a dirty road. He knew that he was in a single house of some sorts, nothing too fancy but not exactly shabby either, and that he wasn't far from civilization-possibly a muggle town or village. Who had lived here? Or, more specifically, who was *currently* here?

His curiosity was beginning to sink into confusion and, to some degree, fear. Suddenly the excitement of stumbling upon the answers to all of his questions had replaced itself with the solid

fact that he'd been very stupid to come here alone. He looked back at the dilapidated fireplace as well, and realized that he could not use it to return anywhere. Why hadn't he brought extra Insta-Floo with him?

No longer caring about why the letter had requested this particular muggle home, Albus strode over to the nearest table full of photographs, intent on gathering a few clues as to his current whereabouts. He picked up the first face down picture frame that he saw and examined it carefully, his eyes widening as he did so.

It was Fairhart. Even with the thick dust covering it, his former professor was immediately recognizable. The tall figure, the wild black hair, everything. His face, however, was immaculate. Whenever this photograph had been taken, it had been at some time before half of his face had become horribly scarred; Albus had only ever seen one other picture of Fairhart like this before in his life, and it was one that Fairhart had kept with him while at Hogwarts.

Most peculiar about the image of his friend however was the large smile on his face. He looked positively electric; his smile went from ear to ear, his eyes looked young and possessed an uncanny sparkle to them, and he even stood in a more relaxed manner. Next to him was possibly the source of his happiness. With a slender hand on his shoulder stood a beautiful woman, her hair equally black, only straighter. She had a smile on her face that matched the man next to her, and Albus could tell, even despite the fact that the picture was not moving, that they were extremely comfortable around one another. Something interesting caught his eye though. The woman's hand had a small gleam of silver on it. And now that he looked closer-

"*Sam*" he muttered to himself, and he dug through his pockets instinctively, removing the silver ring and eyeing it intently. It was definitely the same, there were no arguments to the contrary. Sam had not been a powerful wizard at all, as he'd once thought. Sam had been a woman...a muggle woman too, by the looks of it...

Albus placed the frame back down, suddenly feeling as though he were a voyeur. Even without looking at the rest of the pictures, he now knew exactly who had once occupied this house. It had been Fairhart and this woman, Sam. The two had obviously been lovers. But now that Albus really thought about it, hadn't that same woman also been in the photograph that he'd seen two years ago? He hadn't noticed a ring of any sort, though he wasn't exactly looking for one at the time either. But she had been pregnant...

Albus looked around the room, now extremely uncomfortable. Whatever mystery he had come here to solve, he had not wanted this kind of information on Fairhart's personal life. So what if Fairhart and this person had once lived here? Why had he been sent a letter regarding this particular location? He had expected to find something far more relevant to current events; the Executioner's Veil, to be exact.

Deciding that he could still search the rest of 2791 Woodlard Way, he poked his head into the next room; the dining room. This room too was cramped, and the circular table meant for dinners was grimy and filthy. He could see the kitchen as well, and it looked to be in no better condition, though the walls had been painted a lime green color that was chipping off.

Only when he returned to the sitting room did he ask himself another confusing question. Why were all of these photographs face down? Who was so unwilling to look at them?

He looked around the room wildly, looking for another destination and finding one at once. There was a staircase just a few feet away from the fireplace, it too with the same brown carpeting throughout the rest of the house. He had figured there'd be a second floor-there needed to be at least a bedroom and bathroom anyway-and he also knew that this would be an entirely different section of the house for him to explore. Though this home had an ominous feel to it, he still wasn't exactly worried. If he was going to be attacked, he realized, it would have happened by now. What he wanted to do above everything else was find out *why* he was supposed to be here.

He crept up the stairs at a slow pace, and even with the carpeting, each step created an awful creaking noise. By the time that he reached the top and had a view of the narrow hallway in front of him, he had the distinct suspicion that the house was close to collapsing. He saw several closed doors, and he decided to search each of the rooms systematically. The first door was on his immediate right. He pushed it open silently, and was strangely met with the sounds of music.

But it was not typical music. It was a slow, carefree jingle that one would fall asleep to, and Albus knew why on sight. He was in a room designed for a baby. Everything from the walls to the carpet was a light blue color, and this room more than any other that he'd been in so far looked as though there had been a considerable amount of effort put behind it. There were blocks with letters on them in one corner, stuffed animals cramped in a different corner, and even small picture books organized perfectly on a shelf near the lone open window of the room. Most notable however was the empty crib directly in the center, adorned in all blue, the light music that Albus could hear all coming from the baby toy hanging above it, as if to lull the toddler to sleep. The wind from the window must have been what was propelling it.

Albus suddenly felt queasy. This room appeared to be the most personal of all that he'd entered so far, and yet, he could not take his eyes off of the crib. While everything else in the room looked perfect, the crib was slightly lopsided and almost shabby in appearance; it looked as though it had been carved by hand. And what's more, the blankets and pillows inside looked strangely stiff. Albus slid his finger across the rail of the crib and saw that there were actual chunks of dust and dirt on it. It was not that this crib hadn't been used in a long time. This crib had never been used at all.

Albus backed his way out of the room slowly, everything now with a surreal feel to it. What was he doing here? He did not belong here, whatever his initial expectations may have been. Had the

letters perhaps been meant for Puckerd after all? But even that didn't connect. Who would want Puckerd to come to Fairhart's old home?

He closed the door silently behind him, the light caressing music now almost entirely faded from his ears. He had half of a mind to exit the residence and look for the nearest muggle village-possibly find a way to contact wizards or get help in any way possible-but he was distracted by an odd fluttering noise. A few doors down on the opposite side there was a chilling sound of movement from the crack underneath the door. Was someone in there?

Albus went over to it and removed his wand. He pushed the door open slowly-

He gasped. There, clear as day, was an ancient archway with a thin black curtain hanging from it. The Executioner's Veil.

Albus staggered towards it in complete disbelief, recognizing it instantaneously as the same object that he'd seen with Fairhart two years ago, in the heart of the Department of Mysteries. The Veil was big enough so that it took up most of the space in the room, but the actual decor did not go unnoticed. The only other item in the room of a comparable size was a bed, lined with crisp white sheets that had not escaped the dusty decay of the rest of the house. There were also two identical white dressers. Albus knew at once where he was. This was the master bedroom; this was where Fairhart and that woman Sam had slept.

Albus turned away from the bed, feeling even more uncomfortable than he had near the crib, his attention now completely held by the Veil. It was indeed fluttering, though the window in the room was not open. Now that he could examine it up close, Albus moved around to the other side of it and saw that there was nothing there but empty space. Had this been an ordinary archway, someone could definitely fall through and wind up on the other side. As he knew from his father, however, this was not the case. He was careful not to touch it as he looked at it-

He heard a horrible buzzing sound, and soon an intense pain was shooting through his skin.

"No, not now!" he mumbled to himself, collapsing on all fours and dropping his wand. His senses were going crazy, and the pain had turned into an awful numbing that was possibly even worse; he felt as though he'd lost his body. "Not now!" he mumbled again, but even his voice was starting to sound different to him. He was beginning to see flashes of gold through his eyelids, and as he blinked over and over again it only became more stable. After a few more seconds, the numbness stopped. The buzzing ended, and everything that he could see he saw with a tint of gold. He was still on the floor, but that odd and delicious feeling of intense power had returned to him. It was more clear now than it had been earlier in the year, during his first Quidditch game against James. It was more similar to how he'd felt at various moments during his fourth year; as though he could do *anything* that he wanted.

But the intense feeling of power was now accompanied by an inexplicable fear, something that he'd never experienced alongside this radical and unusual transformation. Some part of him-for some reason-was worried.

Give it back.

Albus blinked his golden eyes a few times. Who had said that?

Give it back!

The coarse whisper seemed so close, and yet he could not discern its exact whereabouts. He looked at the Veil, which for some strange reason was not tinted gold as everything else had been. It looked the exact same, only somehow more majestic. It was fluttering unusually fast now. Albus' golden eyes widened as the bottom of the curtain rose itself slightly...a horrifying, scabby hand was now protruding from it-

Everything stopped at once. The hand disappeared, the golden tint went away, and everything was back to normal. Albus kept his stomach pressed to the floor, gasping for air; he had not noticed it before, but he was now sweating profusely. The Veil was fluttering in its normal way; it appeared as though it had only reacted to his own transformation.

It took him a moment to realize what had made things stop, but after a few seconds he knew what had distracted him.

Scratch scratch scratch!

Albus stood up at once, scooping his wand up and spinning around wildly on the spot. It sounded as though a mouse were scuttling around somewhere.

Scratch scratch scratch!

No, it wasn't a mouse at all, mice did not move in rhythmic patterns. It sounded as though someone was scribbling something. *Or writing a letter!*

Albus aimed his wand in front of him, for the first time sure that someone else was in the house. His fear was mingled with anticipation now; he had the feeling that whoever it was that he heard would be the greatest asset to solving the mystery that he'd been encountering all year.

The scratching was constant, but barely audible with the door almost entirely closed. He inched himself towards the door and pushed it open, attempting to be silent as he did so. The hinges of the door gave an extended squeak as if to mock him.

The scratching was now louder, and Albus was sure that it was coming from one of the other rooms in the narrow hallway. He could hear his own heart pound as he pressed his ear up to each

one. Finally, two doors down from where the baby room had been, the scratching noise was at its loudest. Albus tightened the grip on his wand and slowly pushed the door open-

He had entered a dimly lit study, the only piece of furniture occupying it a dilapidated desk with burn marks from candle wax. The entire floor-which was hardwood, unlike the rest of the house-was covered in scraps of paper and envelopes, at least a hundred of each. And there was also someone in there. A woman, her back turned to him as she scribbled away furiously at a piece of parchment on the desk. She had wild blonde hair matted with dirt, and her skin appeared to be completely pale, as if it hadn't experienced sunlight in months. And yet, Albus inexplicably recognized the back of her head.

"*Professor Blackwood!*" he gasped, and the woman turned at once.

It was indeed Ida Blackwood, or whatever was left of her. Her lips appeared thin and parched, her tangled hair falling in front of her as though in an attempt to conceal how unattractive she'd become. Her eyes were bloodshot, and yet at the same time irregularly active. They were glaring in almost opposite directions; she looked crazed, manic even, and the blue of her irises had faded as well. The scribbling stopped while she ogled him for a moment.

"San!" she breathed, and her face lit up with a mix of excitement and disbelief. In a single swift motion she fell from her seat at the desk, landing face down on the floor. She began crawling towards him.

"W-what?" Albus said, lowering his wand at her pitiful state. What had happened to her? He knew that she had been on the run from WAR, but what was she doing here? And why did she look insane?

As she crawled towards him he glanced down at some of the discarded pieces of parchment on the floor. Some of them, he noticed even from afar, had words written in perfectly legible handwriting. The others were child like scrawls.

"Professor have *you* been sending me these lett-"

But she cut him off by flinging herself around his legs, now weeping bizarrely and muttering things indistinctly.

"San!" she repeated, and she looked up at him, mucus and tears mixed on her now grotesque face. Albus felt her arms squeeze around his waist tightly, and *this* was officially the most uncomfortable part of the day so far. It was hard to imagine that he'd just finished an exam hours ago.

"Pro-prof-"

"San I wrote to you!" she wept, tears sliding down her eyes. "So many times! I didn't-you weren't-I thought you were dead!" she finished, aghast, and Albus could only watch as she curled up into a pathetic ball on the floor, pulling out strands of hair.

"I thought I'd killed you..." she sputtered to herself, her tears now dropping onto the slips of paper on the floor."San..."

"Professor, I'm not Fairhart" Albus told her, but she didn't even acknowledge him. She merely picked herself back up on her knees and flung herself around his waist once more, sobbing yet again.

"San..." she repeated in between wails."Some-some-sometimes you're here...and-and-"

"And sometimes I'm not" Albus finished for her tensely, remembering the contents of the first letter.

He was completely flabbergasted now. Is this what Blackwood had been doing the entire time that she'd been on the run? Writing him letters? But they had been addressed to-

The Head of Slytherin House

Albus felt a pang in his gut as things slowly began making sense. Puckerd was the Head of Slytherin House this year. But two years ago, before Blackwood, it had been Fairhart. She had been writing all of those letters to Fairhart. That's why she had mentioned the Veil as well...

"Professor, I'm not Sancticus Fairhart!" Albus yelled down at her as she continued to cling to his robes, but nothing got through to her.

"San I'm s-s-s-so s-s-s-sorry" she stuttered out. "F-for *kill*ing you" she finished dramatically, and Albus felt his skin go cold. What had she just said?

"F-for killing me? For killing Fairhart?" Albus asked.

She looked up at him, and Albus could see a mad glint in her eyes that even surpassed the one he'd seen in Darvy's before.

"P-please don't make me do it *again*" she begged desperately, and Albus could only stand there as thoughts flooded his head.

Blackwood was nothing short of insane. She seemed to have lost all awareness of her physical health, somehow believed that Fairhart was both dead and alive, and also believed that he, Albus, *was* Fairhart! She'd even been sending him letters throughout the duration of the year assuming such. And what was more, judging by the varying grammar and sense of her letters, she entered stretches of time in which she could barely write cohesively! Albus had been trying to decipher a puzzle along...but there had been no actual puzzle to speak of...

Albus could not even hazard a guess as to how this had happened. His old Potions professor had seemed upset following the news of Fairhart's death two Decembers ago, but she had looked and acted nothing like this. Had her seclusion done this to her? And why was she at Fairhart's old house anyway, sending him letters to come to the location?

Out of the corner of his eyes he thought that he saw the answers. Or at least, what contained them. He had been quite wrong to initially assume that the floor only had scraps of paper on it. Right next to the desk that Blackwood had evidently written numerous letters on, he saw a large circular bowl, ancient in appearance and filled to the brim with a silvery substance that Albus knew was neither solid, liquid, or gaseous. It was a Pensieve, and further than that, there was already a memory swirling around inside of it.

Albus pried Blackwood's fingers from around his body, and when she no longer had his support, she fell to the ground in a disheveled heap of worn out robes. He slowly stepped over bits of paper and made his way around the desk, peering into the pensieve as he did so.

"Professor" he said aloud, to no reply. "Professor I'm going to look around here, okay?"

She merely continued to sniffle, muttering something under her breath that Albus didn't quite catch. He turned his attention fully to the Pensieve now, curious as to why it was active. Blackwood had not been surveying a memory. Why then, was there a memory in there? He tried to recall what Fairhart had told him years ago about people who used Pensieves. Hadn't he mentioned that some people purposefully removed their records of memory from their heads, so as not to dwell on them? Or something along those lines anyway...

Blackwood must have removed this memory, in an attempt to forget it and remember it again at her leisure. As she looked in no condition to explain anything, however, there was only one way for Albus to find out what was going on.

He crouched down to the floor, paper sticking to his robes as he did so. He hoisted the pensieve up carefully and placed it on the desk, then slowly inched his head towards the bowl, so much so that the silvery substance began to draw him in, mesmerizing him, until-

He felt everything spin; it was almost as if he was travelling by floo powder again. He had experienced the magic of a Pensieve before, however, and he knew that once his feet hit solid ground, he would be in one of Blackwood's memories.

The first thing that he heard when he arrived was voices.

"Is everyone ready?" someone whispered hoarsely, and there were slight murmurs of compliance.

He was in a front yard of sorts, on a concrete pathway that led to a single, normal looking home. Similar to the one in which his present body was in, it had with no other houses near it, only this

one looked much further from society. It was in a heavily wooden area, almost forest like in fact, and it had a distinct look of a home that was not privy to having company inside of it. The bricks were all the same dull gray, and the fence leading to the yard, Albus saw, was high with spikes attached to it. This person liked their privacy.

More ominous than the house and surrounding yard, however, was the actual scene itself. It was dark outside, with the clouds above looking thunderous; a powerful rain was imminent. But beyond that there were people. Anywhere from ten to fifteen cloaked individuals, all dressed in identical black with their hoods up, a silver sword like emblem embedded to each one. Wands and Redemption.

"What's our attack strategy?" someone from the back of the group asked, and Albus saw that they were all standing huddled together outside of the front door to the house, looking somehow both frightening and afraid.

"We pretend like Warren has a message for him" the one in front-the same one with the hoarse voice-said to them all. "And then we attack. No mercy. Warren wants him dead."

"This will never work!" squeaked the smallest member, a boy of eighteen perhaps, whose teeth were chattering. He appeared to be a new recruit of sorts, and this particular task, it seemed, he wanted nothing to do with. "I've heard things of the man! I heard that he once put Zydrunas in St. Mungo's! For a month!" he added, but everyone else in the crowd shushed him, creating a sound that in itself was louder than the young man's voice.

"There are thirteen of us, and we have the element of surprise as well!" the leader of the group said once more, and Albus realized that every face that he could see, he had never seen before in his life. Whoever these people were, none of them were at WAR's headquarters weeks ago...

The group leader, who pulled back his hood to reveal a mane of gray hair and a head shaped like a square, banged on the door twice. Everyone else in the group jumped at his abrupt actions. There was no response at the door however.

"He's not here!" rattled another voice, this one a woman's. "Let's just go! Tell Warren that he fled-"

"Shut up Ida!" the one in front barked, rounding on her, and Albus now saw that it was indeed Ida Blackwood he was talking to. She was in the back of the group, and she was looking the most nervous of all, even more so than the new recruit. Her entire body was shaking, and her eyes were darting around unusually fast. Still, she looked different than she did in the present day. She still had her good looks, anyway.

"Don't tell me to shut up! Sancticus is smart; he'll have known that Warren detected betrayal! He's probably half way around the world by now!"

Albus froze on the spot, now understanding what it was exactly that he was viewing. This particular memory took place during his winter break of fourth year. It had been in that time period that Fairhart had been killed on Warren Waddlesworth's orders. Albus' insides shriveled up knowing that he was about to witness a murder. His theory on the Silver Wizard had been incorrect after all...

"Well if you're so sure that he's not here, just leave then!" someone else in the crowd hissed at Blackwood, and she bared her teeth towards him menacingly.

"I have to stay, on Warren's orders" she said. "He wanted a long standing member here to make sure that you idiots don't screw it up! Not that it matters, he's not here anyway..."

Even as she said it however, Albus could tell that she herself did not believe it. It was almost as if she was simply trying to convince everyone to leave, so as to postpone what needed to be done. The WAR member in front groaned.

"Well if he's not here," he spat, "then he won't mind if we blow down his door-"

There was blast of light and a terrible crashing noise, though Albus noticed that the man in front had not even withdrawn his wand. Instead he'd been blown backwards, knocking several others to the ground as he did so, howling in pain the entire time. The door, however, had certainly been blown down.

"He knows we're here!" someone spat, and spells of all different colors-mostly green though-shot into the open doorway. It was impossible to see if anything was connecting however. There was an odd mist inside the house that concealed whatever was going on...

Two of the cloaked men gave a wail of agony and sunk down to the floor.

"He's behind us!"

And so he was. Fairhart was standing behind the group, just in front of the spiked fence in fact, having evidently apparated behind them all after destroying his own door. He was looking furious. His eyes were focused and intense, and the mangled side of his face was even more twisted due to the muscles being pulled. He was dressed in ordinary wizarding robes, his wand drawn out and aimed square at the group.

"Inside the house!" one of them yelled, and they all immediately shuffled inside, except for the two that Fairhart had incapacitated. He walked towards his own home almost placidly, aiming his wand at the two bodies on the floor as he did. There were two bolts of green light, and the men stopped moving at once.

Albus phased through the house himself, just as Fairhart was entering. The interior of this house looked slightly more decorated and well kept than Fairhart's old muggle home; the carpet was a rich red with silver designs on it, there were various bookshelves beside a comfortable looking

armchair, and the fireplace was active. These were the only traits that he managed to pick up on however; the rapid spells coming from both ends of the sitting room were distracting.

The WAR members all took cover behind the furniture and the shelves, popping out to fire spells aimlessly at random moments. Fairhart stood firm on the spot however, whirling his wand around in deep concentration, shields and protective barriers formulating themselves and repelling everything thrown at him. He only dodged when a killing curse was thrown at him, and even then he did it gracefully and with great tact.

The WAR members began dropping like flies from behind their hiding spots as their own spells rebounded upon them. The only person wearing the sword insignia who was not an active part of the battle however was Blackwood. Though Albus knew that she was more than a capable witch, she was taking cover behind the armchair, hands over her ears. Her wand was not even withdrawn.

It mattered not however, all of the noise and ruckus made it impossible for her to defend herself, and a random stunning spell ricocheted off of the ceiling, going straight downwards and colliding with her. There was a few seconds where Albus stared at her motionless body on the ground, the scene around him still active with Fairhart slashing his wand through the air menacingly, but soon things began to grow dim...and then dimmer...the noise stopped...it became completely dark...

Albus understood at once what was happening. Though the Pensieve was magical enough to recount memories from different positions, Blackwood was officially unconscious at this point in the battle, and thus had no memory of what occurred afterwards. Albus was sure that the scene would return however, and he expected that his friend and former professor would not be alive when it did so...

The darkness passed almost instantaneously, though Albus knew that this was only because it had seemed this way in the memory. Albus regained his seeing and hearing at the same time as Blackwood, with a mix of colors and sounds returning, first as blurs and muffled tones, and then as more distinguishable noises and sights. Once the scene returned, Albus could witness the carnage.

There were bodies on the floor everywhere, scattered as though they'd been tossed aside arbitrarily. There was gaping holes in the walls, the carpet was matted with debris, one of shelves with books had completely exploded, and the fireplace had even caved in. Fairhart was still standing however.

He looked virtually untouched, bar the accumulated filth on his robes. He seemed extremely tired however, which Albus could only assume was a product of vigorous dueling. Albus grimaced as Fairhart walked around to survey the unmoving bodies individually, firing a killing curse at each of them in turn to ensure no more surprise attacks. On one end, it was difficult to watch who he

knew to be a genuinely good man murder with such little thought. But on the other, he couldn't necessarily blame him, not after the ambush that had just occurred. Had it not been Fairhart who had first told him that sometimes killing was necessary? And still, he could not help but think of that nervous teenager among the group of renegades...

Blackwood, despite having regained consciousness, stayed collapsed on the ground, eyes jammed shut as if to feign death. Fairhart approached her smoothly, sighing heavily as he did so.

"I know you're not unconscious, Ida" he said, and she jumped upwards at once, pale as a ghost.

"San, I-I-I-I I did not plan this! I did not want-"

"I know" he replied, stepping over a dead body to become even closer to her. Albus noticed Blackwood's eyes light up with fear. "To what exactly do I owe the pleasure of Warren's message?" he asked bitterly.

Blackwood swallowed. "He thinks that you've been communicating with the Potter boy! And he thinks that you're unwilling to eliminate him as well, if necessary!"

"He's correct on both accounts" Fairhart said dryly, waving his wand through the air absentmindedly, cleaning his robes at once. Blackwood's jaw dropped.

"*No wonder you knew we were coming!*" she hissed at him. "You'd practically begged for your death-"

"I knew you were coming because Warren was stupid enough to expect more than ten people to make no noise as they waited outside of my door inquiring to one another about the best way to plan a surprise attack that had failed the second that they'd decided to discuss it aloud" Fairhart said all in one breath, his tone icy. "But I suppose he's caught me here" he added. "I have no defence."

"What do you mean?" Blackwood asked, and Albus too was curious at this.

"I mean that Warren knows me. He knows who I will harm, and who I won't. He won the second that he sent you here."

Blackwood's lips began to tremble. "S-San-"

"You cannot go back empty handed, Ida" Fairhart said. "You have a job to do. And I see your wand in your hand."

Albus could not believe what he was hearing. Is this how Fairhart had truly died? Unwilling to fight an old friend?

"After all of that!" Blackwood spat, jerking her head towards the bodies on the floor. "You'll just let me kill you!"

"Yes" Fairhart said. "I refuse to let myself fall to a gaggle of mediocre mercenaries. But I have no qualms with dying at your hand. You are a skilled witch, Ida."

Blackwood was now breathing extremely fast, and she was staring directly at Fairhart's face, as if to detect lies.

"How do I know you're not just saying that to see me make the first move!" she barked after a moment. "To give you a reason to defend-"

Fairhart tossed his wand to the other side of the room. In one swift movement, he'd moved himself directly into Blackwood's face, so close that their noses were practically touching. He picked up the limp wrist that she was holding her wand with and pointed it directly at his forehead; Albus could see his silver ring gleaming on his own hand as he did so.

"Do it" he said sharply, and she gave a screech of detest.

"No!" she said, and she tried moving her hand away, but he pulled it back, intent on having her wand aimed at him no matter what. Albus was beginning to feel sick now...

"Do it!" he repeated. "If my only two choices are killing you or being killed, you know which one I'll pick!"

"Those aren't your only choices!" she said, her lips now quivering even greater than they'd been. "You could kill the boy like you were told!"

"Please stop calling him 'the boy'" Fairhart said, and Albus, despite knowing what would soon come, could not help but feel honored. "Albus is a former student of mine, as well as a friend. And what's more, he is innocent. I will not take his life because Warren believes it necessary."

A single tear leaked from Blackwood's right eye, but her grip tightened. "San, please don't make me..."

He said nothing. He merely stared at the wand pointed in his face, half of his own covered by his wild black hair, the other half so mangled it was hard to tell what it was he was focusing on exactly.

"I could lie" she suggested weakly, more tears now streaming silently down her face. "I could say I killed you-"

"Warren undoubtedly has Veritaserum at his disposal, and even you cannot brew a defence for it every day. Also, in the extremely unlikely event that Warren ever gets a proper legilimens to replace me, your deception will become known."

"I could go with you! We could both flee-"

"Me and you both know that you can't keep up" Fairhart replied at once. "And besides, you need to return to Hogwarts soon, classes will resume and I would not have those students robbed of an education-"

"It's like you want me to kill you!" she barked at once. "Dammit San, why do have to be so prepared for this!"

Fairhart lowered his head slightly, his expression stoic. "There is a difference between being prepared for, and having accepted death. I am aware of my options, and I have examined the results of both. Out of the two things that can be done in this situation, I want you to kill me."

"But what about what I want!" she said furiously, and Albus thought that she was making an extremely good point.

"I don't care what you want" Fairhart said simply, and for a fraction of a second, a smile had flickered on his face. "I'm sorry" he added afterwards.

Blackwood's knees looked wobbly, and Albus, still frozen in the same position that he'd been in since the darkness had faded, thought that he had never seen a bigger dilemma in his life. He was not stupid; he knew the kind of feelings that Blackwood had for Fairhart. What was she supposed to do in this situation? Was there any correct answer?

Blackwood exhaled deeply. "This-this is what you want?" she said, her tone making it clear that she was praying for a negative reply.

"Yes" Fairhart replied. "But first, I must ask two favors of you."

"What are they?" Blackwood replied breathlessly, welcome to any conversation that postponed what she was about to do.

"First," Fairhart began, "you will keep Albus Potter safe."

"*What?*"

"With me gone, Warren will elect you to the position of Potter's murderer, mostly because your place as his Potions professor will make it so easy. You must use your role however to protect him instead. No matter what occurs, do not let any harm befall Albus Potter! Even if it means turning your back on WAR" he added darkly, and Albus' jaw dropped in sync with Blackwood's.

"Sancticus you can't possibly expect me to-"

"If you love me" he said, "you will do this for me."

It was a pitiful card to play-no better than what Mirra had tried to do-but it somehow worked far more effectively. Blackwood had cringed at these words, but she seemed more accepting of her task.

"Why do you care so much about the boy's safety anyway!"

"Numerous reasons" Fairhart replied. "First, your own safety is involved. If anything happens to Albus-or his siblings for that matter, though it's not as likely-Wands and Redemption will be suspects. And what that means, Ida, is that Harry Potter will mercilessly slaughter every member of WAR numerous times over in a fit of rage that only a parent can truly understand. You would be killed, and it would be painful. I refuse to let that happen.

"Second, Warren has reason to place Albus on such a pedestal. Though it is a working theory, I believe that he is an integral part of stopping this war. I will go no further however; some information is too risky considering things like Vertiaserum. I expect it to develop over time though."

Albus strained his ears at this part, bewildered as to what he was hearing. Had Fairhart just called him an integral part of stopping the war? There was no time to think on it however, Fairhart was finishing his list.

"And lastly" he said to Blackwood, who was looking both irate and confused, "I am, as I've said, friends with him. And a friend of a friend, Ida, is always worth protecting."

Blackwood was fuming. Her wand, however, had lowered itself slightly as she paid attention to what Fairhart was requesting of her.

"And the other thing, Ida" he said, "Is equally important. On the second floor of this house I have a very important object. It is large, but it is transferrable by magical means. I need you to move it to a safe location, and to keep guard over it as well."

"And what object is that?" she asked grimly.

"It is called the Executioner's Veil" he said, and things clicked in Albus' head at once. That explained quite a bit.

"And what *exactly* is this Eradicator's Veil! She said.

"The Executioner's Veil," he corrected her, "is a magical archway long since linked to the very roots of necromancy. It was, up until recently, kept in the Department of Mysteries for study. Harry Potter predicts a time when Ares-or possibly even his brother-will seek the Veil, and it has been entrusted to me. I am now entrusting it to you."

Blackwood looked close to fainting now. "You want me to keep something from the Department of Mysteries hidden, and you're worried about *Warren* having me killed! What if the Ministry gets wind that I have it? Or Ares!"

"That is why it is so important that you keep it hidden. When you return to Hogwarts you are not to mention anything to anyone, not about what happened here, what I've asked of you, nothing.

There are leaks everywhere. As for the new location of the Veil, I know of one place safe enough, though it will require your own enchantments."

"Not Gringotts?"

"A Ministry breach could have my vault opened by technicality. No, I need the Veil kept at my home. My old home."

Blackwood made a hissing noise and re-tightened the grip around her wand, now looking, for the first time, murderous.

"You'd have me staring at the pictures of the two of you while I keep your promises-"

"I ask only that you guard it with your own enchantments, and the occasional personal check up. It's a muggle residence, and thus, it is not on Ministry records. It will be almost impossible to trace. Your presence is merely an added precaution. Please Ida, I need these things tended to" he added earnestly.

Blackwood's breathing turned shallow. Albus could tell that she was going through everything in her head; all of her tasks and all that was about to happen. After a moment, she nodded.

"Thank you" Fairhart said, sounding extremely sincere. Albus felt his own heart pounding however. All of Fairhart's affairs were in order. This was it.

Blackwood was crying again, for Fairhart had just moved her wrist again so that her wand was pointed back at his face. She began sobbing silently, and Albus did not know who this was going to be more difficult for; Fairhart, experiencing the mystery of death, or herself, forced to murder someone who she loved-

Things were beginning to turn dark again however. An odd haze had risen throughout the entire memory, and suddenly the sounds were distorted. Everything had a surreal feel to it...it was almost as if this next portion of this memory had been tampered with. Was that even possible?

His feet hit solid ground again. Whatever had happened, the memory had ended, and Albus had left one destroyed house to return to another that appeared beyond repair. It mattered not however; Albus could take a very good guess as to what tragedy had occurred next. But still, not everything had been explained. Why was Blackwood acting so strange? Had being forced to kill Fairhart addled her brains? And why was she erroneously addressing Albus as Fairhart, when she knew him to be dead better than anyone else? And wasn't Fairhart supposed to have lost his ring during the battle? Somewhere in the rubble? He had still been wearing it when he and Blackwood had been conversing...

And where was Blackwood? She had been weeping on the floor when he'd first entered the Pensieve...

"Professor!" Albus called, looking around the room wildly and seeing nothing but scattered sheets of paper. He held his wand up high and bolted from the room, seeing a door ajar. He entered it and realized that he'd just gone back into the master bedroom, the one containing the Veil. Sure enough, Blackwood was in there. She was staring at the Veil, a vacant expression on her face.

"Pr-professor" Albus called. "Can-can you hear voices too?"

Blackwood didn't answer however. She simply continued to stare at the Veil. Albus, though quite unnerved, decided to stay by her. She was, at least, a familiar face. Insane or not, perhaps she could help him get in contact with someone?

CRASH!

The sharp clatter echoed from the downstairs area, and Blackwood immediately snapped out of her stupor, diving behind the giant bed as she did so. Albus too leapt over it instinctively.

There were more noises from below. It was not just the two of them in the house anymore.

"Does anyone else come here?" Albus whispered to Blackwood, who was curled up in the same position that she was in earlier. For the first time, she acknowledged him; she shook her head.

"It's WAR!" Blackwood hissed to him, and Albus, taken aback at being spoken to, stared at her in confusion.

"W-what?"

"It's WAR!" she repeated, her eyeballs moving around disgustingly. "They know San-they know everything! Warren wants you dead!" she added crazily, her eyes sliding out of focus. Only now, sitting next to her so close, did Albus realize that she smelled awful.

"Pr-professor, I don't think so-" he stammered out, though he supposed that it was a possibility. His thoughts were leaning more towards the Dark Alliance however, and this unsettled him a great deal. In her current state, Blackwood didn't seem like she'd be a very big contributor during a duel to the death.

"Shhh" she said to him, placing a finger up against her lips. "I'll keep you safe, San" she said, staring at him with her eyes wide open, and she rose to her feet.

"Professor no!" Albus blurted out, pulling at her grimy sleeve to make her sit back down. "You don't-you-you're not right in the head..." he finished weakly, but Blackwood appeared unable to register what it was he was saying. She had returned to her previous state of ogling him with an insane expression on her face. Her mouth was sagging open now too. And then-

"Professor!" he gasped, but he could not stop her. She had already moved forward, pressing her lips against his, and Albus, somehow surprised, repulsed, and baffled all at once, was rendered immobile as she kissed him. Only with their lips touching did Albus understand the full negatives of her unkempt state; the malodorous breath and the dry, grimy lips among them. After a few seconds she pulled away, staring at him with the same expression.

"P-p-p" he was unable to finish his thought. He wiped at his lips, then had to forcibly remind himself that the two of them could be in great danger, and now was not the time to dwell on such a surprise. Blackwood, however, was focused squarely on him.

"That's the first time you didn't pull away" she said breathlessly, and her face twisted itself into a grin so wide that her entire face became transformed.

"Uhhh..."

She stood up, and Albus didn't even reach for her sleeve this time.

"Stay here" she muttered, removing her wand from her robes. "I'll protect you!"

And with that, she leapt over the bed, the Veil fluttering powerfully as she moved swiftly passed it and out the door.

"You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life" - Winston Churchill

Chapter 21: Chaos

"Pro-professor wait!" Albus managed to stammer despite his daze, but Blackwood had already left the room. Albus, realizing that acting on impulse had backfired tremendously today once already, sat still near the Veil, weighing his options. On one end, he was safe. On the other, he wouldn't be for long if it was indeed the Dark Alliance down there. And considering Blackwood's state of mind, they would probably mow through her. He didn't want his former professor to get hurt...

He dove over the bed as well, gripping his wand and breathing heavily as he did so. He left the room and turned down the corridor leading to the stairs, just in time to hear a shrill voice that was hardly more welcome than the Dark Alliance.

"Drop your wand! I am the Head Auror!"

Fischer Albus thought to himself, suddenly cold. He crept down the stairs, seeing Blackwood standing on the bottom most step, her wand raised. Albus shifted his head and saw Fischer standing alone, her robes completely back, her hair as ruffled as always. When she saw Albus walking down the stairs her lips curled into a smile.

"I spend weeks following your Traceto see you out of bounds, and I'm finally rewarded!" she shrieked. "Out of bounds, during exams, in suspicious company-excellent-just excellent-"

Blackwood turned to Albus, her eyes swiveling crazily, her voice barely more than a whisper when she spoke.

"Who...is she...?" she said angrily, and Albus detected something similar to betrayal in her voice.

"Pro-professor-"

"Who is she San!" she barked, sounding close to tears. Fischer ignored their exchange.

"Over here, Potter, I'm taking you back to school-"

But Blackwood had rounded on her, flourishing her wand as she did so. There was a streak of red light, which Fischer dodged only just in time.

"How dare you!" she bellowed, removing her wand, and Albus instinctively leaped over the banister of the stairs to separate the two women.

"Ms. Fischer, wait!" he pleaded. "She's not right in the head!"

"Out of the way Potter, you're in enough trouble as it is-"

Before anything else could happen, however, an extremely unwelcome noise was heard; angry voices. At the next moment, the front door to the house had been blown off of its hinges, and Albus knew that it was not the Ministry this time...

"There, the Potter boy!"

It was a group of shadowy figures, all of them adorned in frightening red masks. Albus lost count after seven.

"Behind me!" both Fischer and Blackwood yelled to him, and they both, interestingly enough, moved in front of him, wands turned on the Dark Alliance members now instead. Some of them laughed however, and Albus understood why at once. They were quite outmatched.

Albus crouched low behind his two guardians, all the while feeling humiliated. He should not be hiding...

"Tell Warren you can't have him!" Blackwood screeched at the group. "San's done nothing wrong!"

Even with their masks on, it was easy to tell that the Dark Alliance members were bemused. Fischer too cast a sideways glance at her.

"Drop your wands!" Fischer said confidently, and Albus was forcibly reminded of Uncle Ron at Lisa Vincent's wedding. "Cooperating now will permit certain rights otherwise-"

"*Stupefy!*" one of them shouted, and Fischer whipped her wand upwards. The spell deflected itself back, hitting one of the other masked figures square in their red face. They fell to the ground in a heap of robes, and the other figures gave a cry of anger and all brandished their wands.

"Into the kitchen!" Fischer hissed at them, just as a variety of hexes and curses flew at them, and Albus dove towards the dining room, Blackwood trailing along behind him.

"No!" Albus yelled, looking back at Fischer; whatever his feelings towards her, he did not want her dead. He needn't have worried however. She deflected them all expertly, and Albus supposed that he should have expected this; she was the Co-Head Auror after all. Blackwood forced him along into the grimy kitchen, where they both took refuge behind the bar top.

Just as they were crouching down Blackwood turned to him, grabbing his chin and pulling his face around.

"Who is that woman!" she barked.

"Professor, now is really not the time, and I'm sorry, but you don't know what's going on-"

"Warren knows our location" she cut him off quickly. "The Hammer will be here any minute-"

"Professor!" he exclaimed, and just now did he realize that he had no reason to call her this. Still, he didn't feel right calling her anything else. "Professor, that's not WAR, it's the Dark-"

Fischer slid towards them, raising her wand high above the bar top and firing a canary yellow spell aimlessly. Albus heard a whelp and knew that it connected.

"Potter, listen to me-" she started.

"Who are you!" Blackwood cut her off immediately.

Fischer turned to Albus in confusion, speaking loudly to cover up the sounds of spells whizzing over their heads. "What is her *problem*?" she asked.

"It's a long story" Albus replied hurriedly. "She thinks I'm someone else-"

"Blow the damn kitchen up!" someone yelled, and Albus felt his heart miss a beat.

"*Expluso!*" someone shouted.

Blackwood stood up and aimed her own wand.

"*Confringo!*" she said unexpectedly, and from what Albus could hear, the two destructive spells had met in mid-air. The next thing that Albus knew debris was raining down on him, with people coughing and sputtering due to the smoke. Albus poked his head up and saw utter destruction in the dining room. The moldy table, for instance, was a pile of splinters.

"Potter, listen to me" Fischer said to him. "The enchantments around this house make it impossible to penetrate the actual exterior walls. I am going to rush in and attempt to garner their attention. You will head upstairs, and that is where you will stay!"

"Don't you have reinforcements?" he asked, eyes half closed because they were stinging from the dust in the air. Fischer shook her head furiously however, her spectacles almost sliding off of her nose as she did so.

"Following you was a personal ambition. But now that we have some free time-"

She waved her wand, and a silvery substance came out; a patronus. Albus knew this technique to have been used by Fairhart before, and could only assume that it was common Ministry practice now. The patronus molded itself into the shape of a small bird with a curved beak-a parakeet.

"Send word to the Ministry of Magic!" she told it. "Last records of Insta-Floo used is current location, we are under attack! Potter is with me!" she added urgently.

Just as the bird soared through the kitchen wall they heard the shuffle of footsteps. Albus watched as both Blackwood and Fischer stood up with their arms raised, simultaneously firing a

stunning spell that merged in mid-air, knocking the unfortunate foe off of his feet and backwards onto the pile of wood in the dining room.

"Now, Potter!" Fischer exclaimed, and the three of them charged out of the kitchen and back into the sitting room, where there were still several more enemies, all of them firing lethal looking spells.

"No!" Albus shouted, his eyes catching a deadly looking purple curse that was aimed directly at Fischer from behind. He whipped his own wand upwards and without time to articulate, said in his head *Protego!*

The spell worked perfectly, rebounding and hitting the same opponent, causing them to crumble and wail in agony. Albus was so surprised at his nonverbal proficiency that he didn't even notice the cloaked individual behind him, who had unleashed a fiery orange spell-

He felt Blackwood force his head down and fire her own spell, which knocked the cloaked figure off of his feet easily. They had little time to revel in their success however. Albus did not know how long it would take Ministry reinforcements to arrive, but the Dark Alliance ones were already here. More and more masked figures were shuffling themselves through the destroyed doorway.

"Potter, what are you doing!" Fischer roared, dodging a spell while simultaneously flinging her wand in a fluid motion. The television set, which had somehow remained in place this entire time, flew into the air and shot itself towards one of the masked figures extremely fast, catching him off guard and knocking him in the head with a horrible shattering noise. "Get out of here!"

Albus nodded and leapt over a body on the ground, running up the staircase two steps at a time as he did so.

"After him!" someone yelled, and at the next moment he saw a masked figure chasing after him.

Albus pointed his wand at the stairs, and thought of a spell once more-this time, the Trip-Jinx. The masked figure, unaware of this, fell forward and banged his head on the edge of one of the steps, his mask flying off to reveal a now bloody face. The body toppled down the staircase effortlessly, but it was leapt over by another masked figure, this one with his wand already raised-

There was a flash of green light, and this man too had fallen on the staircase, only this time, there was no mistaking the full impact of the curse. He was dead. At the foot of the stairs stood Blackwood, looking as stoic as she had all day; her ability to kill without thinking much of it reminded Albus forcibly of Fairhart. Albus watched as she returned to the battle, then ran for the hall.

He didn't know quite why he did it, but he instinctively returned to the master bedroom-the one with the Veil in front of it. Only when he was standing right next to the magnificent and haunting arch did he realize what his intentions were.

"Go gold, go gold, go gold-" he muttered to himself repeatedly, for the first time that he could recall, now wanting this strange power to possess him. He wanted to do anything to help, anything to contribute. Nothing happened however. Why couldn't he have more control over it?

The bangs and explosions from below him brought him agony with each and every instance, but it was these noises that kept him alive and on his toes. So long as there was struggle, he reasoned, his two unlikely guardians were putting up a fight. Fischer appeared to be much more skilled than Albus had given her credit for, and Blackwood-despite appearing to be downright delusional-had retained her magical skills as well. But would it be enough?

He heard thundering footsteps, and he braced himself immediately. He aimed his wand right at the doorway, and sure enough, a masked figure slid in front of it. Rather than raising their wand however, the figure stared through the holes in their mask in awe, and it took Albus a moment to register what it was that had him so surprised-

"The Veil!" he squealed, sounding delighted. "The boss was right, up here, the Executioner's Veil!"

"*Silencio!*" Albus cried, cutting him off at once. "*Reducto!*" he added, and the Dark Alliance member was blown back several feet, falling through the door on the opposite side of the hall, which appeared to be a horrendously dirty bathroom.

For a fraction of a second there was silence downstairs, and then he heard the rush of footsteps belonging to far more than one individual, but rather an entire group of duelists. Albus knew at once what was going on. The Dark Alliance was interested in more than just his cadaver-Darvy wanted the Veil as well. And Fischer too would be after it, as it belonged to the Ministry. It seemed as though Blackwood, interestingly enough, as she was in charge of its safety, was the only one who did not register the importance of the dark object. Unwilling to let the Dark Alliance anywhere near it, however, Albus hurried out of the bedroom and towards the staircase once again, where sure enough, there were five or six masked figures running up it-

"*Glisseo!*" he exclaimed, and they all looked up in surprise as the steps below them transformed into a straight sheet of carpet, completely void of indentations. They all toppled over due to the new slide like passageway, collapsing atop one another and tumbling down into a heap of angry robes and masks at the bottom of the stairs. Albus pointed his wand at the ceiling above them.

"*Deprimo! Deprimo!*" he shouted, and the ceiling began to fracture inwards, caving in and causing chunks of brick and cement to fall atop his victims.

He could not help but smile to himself as he stared down at the group of incapacitated foes; pleased with himself immensely, though still shaken. There was no time to marvel at his success however-a battle was still going on in the center of the room, with Blackwood and Fischer somehow cooperating extremely well together as they dueled with the few Dark Alliance members left. Their opposition was starting to dwindle...

There was a tremendous explosion in the doorway, and soon the room was shrouded in smoke once more. Albus peered into the ruin with obscured vision, and what he saw almost made him faint.

"You lot," The Hammer started, jerking his head at the renegades to the left that had followed him in, "get the Veil. The rest of you, help me clean this mess up..."

The battle between the few remained Dark Alliance members and Blackwood and Fischer ended abruptly, those wearing red masks turning their attention to the renegades instead. Albus watched as the Hammer, adorned in typical WAR garb and looking more intimidating than ever, flourished his wand with a powerful slashing motion. Two of the Dark Alliance members were lifted from the air and thrown backwards immediately. He next reached into the pile of muddled bodies that Albus had just created, using his bare hands to lift a dazed Dark Alliance member up like a rag doll. He tossed the man much like how Hagrid would, and he landed on top of his two companions.

Albus had no time to survey the new addition to the frenzy; WAR members seemed to have somehow deduced that the Veil was here, and what's more, they immediately went for the stairs-probably because that's where most of the groaning bodies were. Albus turned on his heel to run back to his hiding place, but not before he had witnessed something truly shocking. With the Dark Alliance members now preoccupied with WAR, Blackwood had turned on Fischer, firing a lethal looking spell at her.

"Professor, no!" Albus yelled, and this alerted Fischer to the stream of white light. She dodged it narrowly and spun around, flailing her own wand so that multiple blue hexes erupted from it in a staccato like pattern. Blackwood knocked them away each one at a time, but Albus forced himself to look away and return to the Veil.

Connections were going off in his head despite his dire state. Blackwood, now sure that Albus-who she believed to be Fairhart-was safe, was now fighting for something that only her wounded mind could comprehend. As for the combination of combatants, Albus realized that Fischer had answered that for him earlier; it was his Trace that had drawn them all here. A series of leaks that had all brought them to this one muggle residence from years ago, some of them after Albus, some after the Veil, and some after both...

Albus dove behind the bed once again, hoping that neither Fischer nor Blackwood were causing lasting damage to one another, and that the Ministry reinforcements would be here soon. He was

too full of adrenaline to feel either completely frightened or hopeful; the only thoughts that could go through his head now was that once his father came with a team of Aurors, everything would be okay.

But the bangs from downstairs only served as proof that they were not there just yet, and the tumbling on the ruins of stairs were his reminder that he still had a Veil to protect until help arrived. He was not entirely sure why it bothered him if WAR had the object; it was preferable to the Dark Alliance having it anyway. All that he knew was that he felt strangely protective of the Veil, and that he wanted it safely back in the Ministry's hands, above all others...

Two WAR members appeared at the frame of the door. Albus instinctively brandished his wand and took aim. Concentrating as hard as he could on stunning, he fired a crimson spell towards them both, but it was deflected away easily.

"We're not here to hurt you Potter, that's over with!" the older looking one growled, and Albus saw spit flying from in between his teeth as he spoke. "Don't make us get nasty-"

The other renegade slashed his wand through the air and a jet of red light fired, but Albus, acting entirely on impulse, flung his wand upwards so that the mattress of the bed raised itself up like a shield, taking the blunt of the blast and landing smoking in the corner.

Albus, unsure of how best to battle two people from a cramped position behind a box spring, started firing disarming spells at random, hoping to catch at least one of them off guard, though it failed. He watched as the two of them raised their wands up menacingly-

Albus dove down low and felt the spells scorch the back of his neck, hitting the sides of the Veil, though it seemed to have no effect on the architecture. He saw the feet of his enemies from underneath the bed, and he knew that they would not be expecting such a juvenile attack-

He jerked his wand to the side, concentrating fiercely on the carpet yanking itself upwards. It worked; both of his foes staggered and fell over, and at the next moment, Albus had removed his head from underneath the box spring and leapt over it, banging his knee painfully as he did so and twisting himself into an offensive position.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" he shouted at the figures, who were trying to regain their balance, and they both crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Albus breathed a sigh of relief, wondering when more renegades would make their way up, and, more importantly, if the Ministry had even received Fischer's message. With a pang he wondered about the safety of his only two, unlikely companions on this battle. He stepped over the bodies of the two renegades and went to the stairs, where his previous victims were still laying under rubble just a few feet below. The noise had lessened slightly. He slowly peeked downstairs...

The sitting room looked as though it had been despoliated. There was ashes and rubble everywhere, with either shaking or immobile bodies scattered across the dirty floor. The sofa was smoking as though it had at one point been set on fire, and the tables with photographs had all been overturned, the frames holding memories shattered and ruined. Albus also saw, with a pang in his gut, that the fireplace had been completely destroyed as well. For some strange reason, only the massive grandfather clock in the corner of the room seemed untouched.

Only two battles were still going on, with the Hammer and his team of renegades practically bullying the three or four Dark Alliance members who were still standing. The masked figures were merely dodging and squealing now as they had hex after hex thrown at them, completely outnumbered. The other duel was between Blackwood and Fischer.

His former professor was firing spells in a ferocious and malevolent manner, her teeth bared and her eyes bulging as each streak of light emitted from her wand. Fischer was mostly defending, deflecting them all with relative ease, though she appeared tired as well. Albus wanted to yell out, to stop them from fighting, but he didn't want to attract attention to himself. Something happened to cause this diversion anyway, however.

There was an explosion from somewhere else in the house, and Albus' heart leapt. If he had to pinpoint it, he would have thought it had come from the kitchen. Hadn't Fischer said that the enchantments around the house made it impossible to penetrate? It must have been someone extremely powerful then... like his *father*.

Albus hopped down the stairs, jumping over the group of moaning Dark Alliance members on the floor, and watched as all heads turned to the dining room, the one place separating the battle from the arrival in the grimy kitchen. He heard footsteps-

His jaw dropped. It was not his father at all. Standing instead in the frame of the door was a tall, gleaming figure, adorned in all silver, mask on securely and wand dangling by their side loosely. The Silver Wizard had arrived. There was yelling from everyone in the room, and only Albus watched the vigilante closely, looking for signs of whatever was going on inside of their headturned downwards and to the floor, and though Albus could see no eyes, he was sure that they were focused on the broken picture frames scattered across the destroyed floor. Albus watched as the Silver Wizard began to shake, positive that they were, for some reason, infuriated.

The Silver Wizard raised their wand up high, and a bolt of green light soared through the air quickly, aimed directly, strangely, at the Hammer. Albus watched without breathing as Warren's right hand man grabbed one of his companions and forced him in front as a shield, causing him to take the force of the curse and crumble to the ground in a dead heap. Immediately, Albus watched as the members of both WAR and the Dark Alliance combined and turned to face their common threat, wands raised-

The Silver Wizard slashed their wand through the air a single time, and streams of red light flew throughout the house, bouncing off of the walls and striking two or three people in the middle of their incantations. Fischer, Albus noticed, had dodged the spell fired at her and had stopped paying attention to Blackwood, who strangely had been nowhere in the vicinity of a spell. The Co-Head Auror stared at the Silver Wizard hungrily for a moment, and Albus knew that, despite the heat of the battle, she was now mulling things over in her head meticulously, contemplating the best way to capture the prize that she'd sought all year.

Albus forced himself up against a wall as the Silver Wizard began walking forward in a slow manner, avoiding the curses and hexes thrown at them by merely twisting their body away from them. He slashed his wand through the air and what looked like a blast of wind issued, colliding with two Dark Alliance members and sending them backwards in something that resembled a cyclone; their heads banged together, knocking their masks off as they gave yells of terror.

Albus heard small, almost indistinct grunts, and he looked around rapidly in an attempt to find their origin. This was answered when he looked down. A few of the Dark Alliance members that he'd knocked out with the ceiling before were stirring, removing the large pieces of concrete from their frail bodies...

The Silver Wizard continued their decimation of the few remaining combatants, not pausing for a single moment as they slashed their wand through the air repeatedly. The Hammer, having repositioned himself so that he was behind the masked wizard, fired an icy blue spell clandestinely, but the Silver Wizard flipped their wand over the back of their head, creating a shield without even aiming. The bubble like substance repelled the cerulean spell away, and it connected with the Hammer's face, sending him to the ground in pain.

Only a few other threats remained in the way now, and they were all cowered behind pieces of obliterated furniture. Albus noticed that the Silver Wizard had a propensity for aiming their wand at the ground and firing killing curses as they walked, the jets of green light hitting already unmoving adversaries as if to ensure their deaths. He recognized the tactic from a scene that he'd witness just an hour or so ago. Could it be...?

The Silver Wizard slashed their wand through the air two more times, identical killing curses flying through the air and killing those attempting to crouch. Albus stood where he was numbly, not impressed at what he was seeing, but sickened by it. The last time he'd seen the Silver Wizard battle, they had been vicious. But they had not killed. Now, however, they looked too angry to care...

Albus was blasted off of his feet suddenly, and as he clutched his ribs he saw who had done it. Two of the Dark Alliance members that he'd rendered obsolete earlier had dug themselves out of the rubble, and were now heading for the stairs; Albus knew that they were trying to salvage something from their disaster of a trip.

He glanced into the center of the room and saw the Silver Wizard blast a hopeless WAR member to the ground. Realizing that he had no one to worry about in terms of being followed up, he chased after the two red masked figures, who were hobbling up the broken steps on injured legs.

He clutched his ribs as he moved, sure that there had been no lasting damage done, but still quite in pain. He fought through it however, wheezing as he chased after the two wizards who had been so weak that they hadn't even been able to muster a Killing Curse to throw at him when he was unsuspecting. He could take these two out, he was sure of it-

They staggered their way through the door to the room with the Veil in it, and Albus followed them in, wand raised, positive that if he could just stop these two he would guarantee the object's safety. One of the Dark Alliance members jabbed their wand at one of the white pillows on the floor.

"*Portus!*" he growled, and Albus saw that the man-who had beady eyes and dirty, long hair-was bleeding profusely from his nose. The pillow began to glow blue.

"*Stupe-*" Albus started, forgetting about nonverbal magic entirely, but the other Dark Alliance member was faster.

"*Crucio!*" he bellowed.

Albus felt pain course through his limbs like never before. It was as though every inch of his body was sizzling under fire; it was far worse than what he experienced during the moments before his inexplicable transformations. His skin was being pierced deeper and deeper every second, excruciating pain the only thought that he could truly register completely, and though he could only hear his own blood-curdling screams- which were entirely uncontrollable-he could still see what was happening from his writhing position. The first Dark Alliance member had one hand on the Veil and one on the pillow, ready to transport it out. The other had his wand aimed at Albus, smiling widely and showing off his crooked teeth as the torture commenced-

Though he could hear nothing but his own yells, he could feel footsteps approaching. As his body twisted and contorted to match the awful pain he was feeling, he saw the hem of silver robes at ground level, and then managed to twist his head up and glance at the most dangerous person in the house.

Get the one with the Veil! The Veil! Ignore me! he thought as loud as he could, as though it mattered. He watched as the Silver Wizard raised their wand-

There was a streak of green light, and the pain stopped; Albus felt the strange feeling of both relief and displeasure course through his body. The man who had been torturing him was on the floor, dead. But the other Dark Alliance member-along with the Veil-was gone. By stopping Albus' pain, the Silver Wizard had missed their opportunity to stop the Veil being taken away.

"No-" Albus sputtered out, feeling, for the first time since he'd foolishly flooded himself to this wretched battlefield, completely defeated.

Albus was still shaking with pain as the Silver Wizard grabbed him and heaved him upwards, but before anything else could happen, his freshly freed ears heard a whelp of pain. The Silver Wizard dashed downstairs, and Albus, now with much more than just his ribcage in complete agony, was forced to drag along behind him, using the mangled banister for what little support it could provide as he made his way down what could no longer actually be called a staircase.

The Silver Wizard had eliminated all who had served as opposition, but Albus noticed that the Hammer, and only the Hammer, it seemed, had fled during the ending of the massacre-his spot on the floor was vacant anyway. Only two duelists were still at it; Blackwood and Fischer.

"*Confringo!*" Blackwood bellowed, her robes torn and her wand hand bloody.

Fischer ducked just in time. "Come off it you crazy hag!" she shrieked, and Albus realized that Fischer still did not realize why Blackwood was attacking her; perhaps she thought her to simply be another WAR or Dark Alliance member. She dodged the next hex thrown at her as well, her glasses lopsided on her face and her own robes smoking as though they'd been scorched at some point.

The Silver Wizard was looking in between them, apparently contemplating the best way to stop them. Neither of them, Albus realized, were the usual victims of vigilantism-one was no longer a renegade, and the other was a Ministry member.

Albus ran towards them both however, intent on stopping the battle anyway that he could, though this proved to be a mistake. He was caught in the crossfire, and an orange jinx fired by Fischer hit him in his shoulder, causing him to stumble back and clutch it with his other arm, an intense stinging pain now added to his other problems. Blackwood gave a roar of rage and raised her wand up high.

"No!" Albus gasped towards her, sinking to the floor, but it was too late.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Blackwood shrieked, and the jet of green light soared through the air; Fischer narrowly avoided it by leaping out of the way.

"*How dare you!*" the Auror spat, and she came out of her roll with her own wand brandished, a fiery purple, lethal looking hex streaking from her own wand. Blackwood, who had been watching Albus to make sure he was okay, was hit square in the chest, right above the collar bone.

"No!" Albus barked again, reaching out with his other hand now, as Blackwood staggered backwards, grabbing her neck and sputtering. The Silver Wizard had dove towards her now, but

they were not quick enough. His former professor backed up and collided into the strangely still untouched grandfather clock, which fell over-

Blackwood gave a frail shriek as the towering pillar of wood and metal crashed down upon her, slamming her into the ground and causing her to choke up blood. Albus felt his insides writhe as the dark red liquid spilled out of her throat, no doubt a combination of both the curse and the weight of the clock.

Fischer looked on almost placidly, somewhat unnerved but making no attempt to interfere or help; she seemed to be relieved that her own danger was over.

Then, without warning, Albus heard the Silver Wizard speak.

"Ida no!" yelled a man's familiar voice, and Albus' insides froze. *I knew it.*

The Silver Wizard slid over to Blackwood on his knees, removing his mask as he did so. Tears were streaming from Fairhart's face as he raised his wand and waved it through the air, sending the massive clock spiraling off of her body and into the corner of the room, now just another piece of broken decor.

"Ida! Ida! Look at me!" he roared, wrapping his arms around her body. Blood was still spilling out of her mouth. Fairhart was now waving his wand back and forth over her face and neck, muttering incantations that he knew were designed to heal. But Fairhart had told him a long time ago that he was less than proficient with healing spells...

Blackwood was still choking, her face chalk white. Albus heaved himself into a standing position, both surprised and terrified. The look on his face was nothing compared to Blackwood's however. She was looking nothing more than utterly perplexed, staring into Fairhart's face with wide eyes. And then, her ghost of a face turned to Albus, who she had been calling Fairhart this entire time.

"I-I-I don't-I-I don't under-"

More blood was spilling out of her mouth.

"Ida stay with me!" Fairhart growled, and he immediately went back to muttering his incantations, the tears now leaking from his face and onto her body. He was not the only one crying however. Blackwood too was shedding tears-they were mixed with the blood and mucus of her face. She looked both confused and pathetic as she uttered her next sentence in a frail breath.

"S-San" she choked out, looking back at him. "I'm so-I'm sor-I killed-"

"No, no, no no no no no!" Fairhart blurted, and Albus looked back at Fischer, who was looking quite unconcerned. Her wand was hanging loosely at her side, and Albus knew that she was still searching for the best opportunity to capture the Silver Wizard.

"Ida, stay with me-stay-Ida! Ida!" Fairhart was still spitting out, clutching her as though she were a treasure vanishing within his finger tips.

"I'm so sorry-I'm so-I'm so sorry-" Blackwood was wailing to him, and she reached up and attempted grab his face, all the while more murky red liquid spraying down her chin, her tears sliding down as well. "I'm sorry I-killed-you-" she finished, and she gave one final, rattling breath. Albus wasn't sure which one solidified it for him-this one shallow gasp for air or Fairhart's subsequent yell of pain-but he knew what had happened. Her suffering had finally ended. She was dead.

Fairhart collapsed on top of her, moaning louder and greater than Albus had ever heard anyone before, his hands running through her grimy, once beautiful golden hair, grasping it in anguish.

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" - Matthew 10:16

Chapter 22: The Truth

Albus could only watch in horror as one former professor continued to wail over the corpse of another. Fairhart was still clinging to Blackwood's body as though he could bring her back to life by squeezing her tightly, but the ferocity and sadness in his yells indicated that he did not truly believe such a thing. Ida Blackwood merely laid there, face and neck stained with blood, eyes wide open in a vague and bemused expression. She had died confused.

"P-professor" Albus stammered out, standing up straight now and talking to Fairhart, who, like Blackwood, could not quite bring himself to address as anything else. "Professor I-I'm sorry-"

Fairhart either did not hear him or ignored him, and Albus was somewhat thankful for this silence. It gave him time to think. Now that the shock of seeing the Silver Wizard unmasked was over, Albus could only guess as to how what he was seeing was possible. He had always had the shrewd suspicion that there was more to Fairhart's death, but this particular proof-seeing him in the flesh-baffled Albus completely. How was his former professor still alive? Hadn't the deceased woman next to him delivered the final blow? And if not, why had she been in such a terrible state before her death?

Someone cleared their throat, and Albus remembered that they were not alone in the room. When Fischer spoke it was in a clear, authoritative manner that the situation did not call for.

"Silver Wizard!" she called aloud. "You have been caught red handed! Drop your wand and stand up, hands behind your head!"

Albus could not believe what he was hearing. Neither could Fairhart, it seemed. His former professor was still cradling Blackwood's limp body, apparently unaware that he was under arrest. His moans of despair had ended, but his body was still shaking in fury.

"Silver Wizard, can you hear me!" Fischer snapped again, wand held out firmly.

"Shut up!" Albus yelled to her, turning on the spot and realizing that for some reason, probably from when he was squirming from torture earlier, his head was bleeding slightly. "Shut *up*!" he repeated.

For the vast majority of this entire ordeal Albus had been pleased that Fischer was with him, but now, with her goals returned to what they'd always been, he could see that she was just going to escalate the situation.

"Don't you dare speak to *me* like that Potter!" she spat out, eyeing him with contempt. "You're already facing expulsion, not to mention the fact that I heard a great deal about stolen Ministry property! You hold your ton-"

Fairhart muttered something, and though it was indistinct, Albus had strained his ears away from Fischer's ramble in an attempt to catch it. Fischer too turned her attention to him.

"Silver Wizard, I repeat, you are under arrest! You have been charged with numerous counts of murder in the first degree, vigilantism, resisting arrest, performing magic in clear view of muggles, and a very long list of other charges to be read to you during a Ministry of Magic hearing! You will be taken to Azkaban, where you will await your trial and-"

Fairhart muttered something again, and this time, Albus heard a bit of it.

"*Killed her*" he had breathed.

"Silver Wizard, I will take you in by force if necessary!"

"Shut up!" Albus bellowed once again. "Can't you see he's grieving!" Albus added desperately, though he could not see how this would help the situation. Even as he said it he turned back to Blackwood's body, and he cringed inwardly at the thought of what was going on in Fairhart's head. They had been extremely close...

"Mr. Potter, this is the last time that I will tell you, shut your mouth!"

She didn't stop here however. With a wave of her wand, she'd conjured another silver parakeet, just like the one from earlier; another message.

"Send word to the Ministry of Magic! I am apprehending the Silver Wizard, and can confirm-"

"YOU KILLED HER!" Fairhart roared, cutting her off. She stopped in the middle of her sentence, the patronus soared away, now carrying an unfinished message.

Fairhart stood up now, turning to face Fischer, his hands stained with blood from how he'd been holding Blackwood's face, his wand gripped and at his side. His teeth were bared and he looked ravenous, his eyes darkened as though he were possessed. So contorted was his face that Albus had trouble distinguishing the scarred half from the regular side; it all looked the same.

"Silver Wizard, you have been warned!" Fischer said, and Albus, despite the severity of the situation, could not help but marvel at her courage as she flicked her wand through the air, a stunning spell of considerable size soaring over Albus' head and towards Fairhart.

"No! Stop!" Albus said, looking over at Fairhart. He knocked it aside however with a slight, sharp wave of his wand.

"*Incarcerous!*" Fischer yelled. "*Incarcerous Metallum!*"

Fairhart struck his wand through the air, deflecting this spell as well. He walked towards Fischer almost as if he had no peripheral vision, his eyes focused intently only on her. Fischer raised her wand once more-

Fairhart slashed his wand through the air, and what looked like a bolt of lightning issued from it. Fischer stopped whatever spell she'd been going for and made a complicated circular movement with her wand instead; the result was a transparent circle that Albus knew was a powerful shield. Fairhart's spell broke through it with ease however, and it hit Fischer's body with such force that she was lifted ten feet off of the ground, giving a howl of pain as she writhed in mid-air, only to be blown backwards into the wall; she slid down it and sat slumped, her hair frizzy as though she had actually been electrocuted, her body jolting sporadically.

"Professor no-" Albus started, and he actually went towards Fairhart in an attempt to block him as he continued his forceful walk. He made to press up against him, to stop him in his tracks, but Fairhart, surprisingly, pushed him away forcefully.

"No! Just let it go!" Albus yelled.

Fairhart only stopped moving when he was five feet away from Fischer. She looked up at him with sunken, fearful eyes, now no longer quite as obstinate in her attempts to arrest him. Whatever his spell had done to her, it had broken her spirit as well as a few bones. She shook her head back and forth, unable to speak as he raised his wand again.

"Professor Fairhart stop! It's done!" Albus yelled, and he raised his own wand. Even as he did so, however, he knew that he would not be firing any spells. This was not the same Fairhart that had once given him advice with Mirra, or had shared a butterbeer with him in his office. This Fairhart would hurt him if he interfered.

Fairhart stared down at Fischer with revulsion in his eyes. "*Crucio!*" he yelled, and Fischer immediately began squirming, her almost lifeless body moving as much as it could under the force of Fairhart's curse. The noise coming from her mouth was not quite a scream; it was an agonizing, extended breath.

"Stop! Stop it!" Albus yelled, and he hobbled towards Fairhart, who was showing no signs of slowing down.

"*Crucio! Crucio! Crucio, Crucio, Crucio, Crucio, Crucio, Crucio!*" he repeated, Fischer's body contorting now in unimaginable ways. Her arms and legs were flailing around as though attached to strings, her soft cries of pain turning into moans as they progressed, until finally, she was silent, simply shaking back and forth, blood on her arms and face from the ways that she'd smacked against the floor and wall-

"Stop!" Albus said, and he grabbed Fairhart's arm and pulled it back, uncaring now as to what might happen to him; he refused to watch this. Fairhart was not looking at him, his hand was still shaking, and there was something about his face...something about the twisting of his lips or the bulging of his eyes, that made Albus despise him for a moment. He had never before known Fairhart to be a cruel man, but watching him act so sadistically made him realize that his former

professor had officially reached the breaking point. Whatever he had been back during his time in WAR, he had reverted to now.

Fairhart pushed him away again and aimed his wand back at Fischer.

"*Avada-*"

"No-"

"-*Kedavra!*"

Albus closed his eyes, knowing full well what would happen; what he'd been unable to prevent. When he blinked his eyes open he had to turn away from the sight that he had seen. Fischer had been laying there in a bloody mess, just as dead looking as the woman across the room from her; the two standouts in a room full of bodies.

Fairhart backed away in an almost peaceful manner, whatever sense of revenge that he'd wanted apparently obtained. Albus could only sit on the floor, face over his hands as he shook his head. He was in complete disbelief at the atrocities that had occurred here today. So many people dead...two of them that he knew...Fairhart alive...Darvy now had the Veil...

Albus looked up and watched as Fairhart walked towards Blackwood's body, and Albus found himself incapable of feeling pity for him. For Blackwood, perhaps, but not for Fairhart, not anymore...

He crouched down on his knees and wrapped his arms around Blackwood once more, and Albus knew that he would have no problem apparating her body out for his own private burial; it was his incantations around the house, after all.

"So then what is it, then!" Albus yelled to him uncontrollably. "What's your feeling, eh!" he added bitterly, and he could feel, for the first time, tears falling down his own cheeks now. Fairhart turned to him and gave him an inquisitive look. For the first time in more than a year, he addressed him.

"What?" he croaked.

Albus swallowed. "You told us that everyone fights with an emotion! With some sort of drive! What's yours then, huh? You don't even know anymore, do you!" he choked out, and Fairhart looked genuinely taken aback. He could not however, Albus noticed, give a response. Perhaps he really didn't know.

"Answer me!" Albus growled, and Fairhart stood up straight; Albus was not intimidated however. Too many awful things had occurred today for him to be afraid of Fairhart, who, for all of his magical abilities, he now officially considered the weakest person that he knew.

"ANSWER ME!" he repeated.

Fairhart brandished his wand, and Albus, despite his previous thoughts, recoiled slightly. Fairhart did not raise it to attack however. He pointed it at the top of his head, and then withdrew a long, silvery memory from it. It hung from the tip of his wand for a mere second, before his professor finally let it go to float like an incredibly slow feather in the wind. He then tucked his wand away, seized Blackwood, and disappeared, taking her body with him in a swirl of his cloak.

Albus thought fast. He brandished his own wand and concentrated as hard as he could on conjuring, knowing that it was never more important. A silver glass vial appeared out of thin air, and he caught it clumsily. He then drug himself over to the silver substance, scooping it into the vial quickly. What were the contents of this memory?

He sat there in a stupor, surveying the glass vial and allowing himself to once more recount the experiences of his day. He had been taking his Muggle Studies exam...and then he'd been fighting with Mirra...

The excitement of reading an address off of a sheet of paper had proven to be ephemeral, everything following now permanently burned into his head as horrendous memories. He should have listened to Mirra and stayed behind. With a pang, he realized that it was dark outside. They must all be looking for him right now, confused and worried. And Albus wasn't even sure if Fischer's message had gotten through to the Ministry or not...

He turned his head towards the corner of the room, his eyes sifting over the lifeless bodies of those who had worn robes with symbols or red masks. The only victim that he could focus on was Fischer, who was lying in a pool of her own blood in the remnants of what was once a neatly furnished and cozy home. Fairhart's old home.

The revelation that his former professor was indeed still alive-that Albus had been correct in his suspicions all along, even dating back to his hopes last year-proved to be one of the most disheartening truths of the day. Fairhart had been the Silver Wizard...but Albus knew that what had just happened would put a permanent end to that. He'd left his mask-his justice-indicating facade-behind, anyway. With a sudden jolt Albus realized that he'd expected Fairhart to be here all along. He'd even prepared for it.

Hand trembling, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny silver ring; Sam's ring. He'd completely forgotten to hand it over. Would Fairhart have even wanted it? He was no longer the same person who had worn it two years ago, after all.

Albus squeezed the glass vial tightly, still wondering what could be in it that Fairhart wanted him to see. Albus had demanded answers before he'd disappeared with Blackwood. Were these the answers that he sought?

He stood up straight, his body aching slightly, though not enough to deter him. There was a Pensieve upstairs. He could get to it...

He stepped over body after body, eventually clinging to the impossibly still standing banister and using it to pull himself over the broken steps; he reached the second floor panting. He moseyed along the hallway, almost in a dreaming state, wiping at the spots of blood on the side of his head as he did so. He tumbled through the door filled with scraps of paper, which he now realized served as the only indication that Blackwood had ever even been here.

He found the Pensieve on the desk, right where he had left it. He watched as the silvery vapor that was Blackwood's memory swam around as though it were alive. Albus, unsure of what to do exactly, scooped it up with his wand and watched it fizzle out before his eyes. He then stared stupidly into space. Had he just gotten rid of her memory?

He supposed it didn't matter now anyway, however. He tipped the contents of Fairhart's memory over into the bowl, where it did exactly what Blackwood's had been doing. Albus swallowed tensely and moved his head close to the bowl, having not even the slightest clue as to what he was about to see. He felt a tug as his face got closer and closer...

He was spiraling down into nothingness just like he had earlier, and as the scene around him grew in color, he realized that he was hearing voices before actually seeing anything.

"Thank you" came Fairhart's voice, and then there was sobbing. As the blurred images became more and more clear, Albus became more familiar with his surroundings, and indeed, the setting as a whole. He was back in the place where Fairhart had been ambushed; Blackwood's wand was once again pointed at his face. This was what had happened after Blackwood's memory had ended.

Blackwood was grimacing, her eyes closed as the tip of her wand hovered in front of Fairhart's stoic visage. This was the moment when his murder was to happen-

"I can't do it!" Blackwood cried, lowering her wand and falling to her knees, tears pouring down her face. "I can't do it San."

Albus' jaw dropped. Was it that simple? Had Blackwood simply chosen not to do it? But then how had she managed to keep her secret despite things like the influence of Veritaserum? And then why had she thought Fairhart dead?

Fairhart lightly touched her shoulders and raised her up. "Ida-"

"I can't do it! Just-just kill me and-"

"We've already discussed this-"

"Then make me think I did it!" Blackwood shouted into his face, her lips shaking.

There was a small silence while Fairhart stared at her, apparently bemused. Albus too didn't understand.

"What?" Fairhart finally asked.

"Make me think it! You're the expert on memory charms-"

"Ida that is completely out of the question" Fairhart said adamantly. "You are raving, and you are not considering the possibilities-"

"Will you *listen to me!*" she spat, her eyes looking as though they were on fire, and for the first time in both memories combined, she appeared in control of the conversation. "You can put a false memory in my head. Make me *think* that I killed you, rather than me actually doing it."

"Ida, it's the same thing" Fairhart said, shaking his head. "Either way you end up miserable, only in one way-"

Blackwood smacked him so hard that Albus felt his own cheek sting. He had seen her do such a thing once before, in another one of Fairhart's memories, and he supposed that her tendency to do it must have contributed to Fairhart's blank face. When Blackwood spoke her voice carried a tenacious chill to it.

"Dont you *dare* say that Sancticus! Don't you *dare* say that it's the same! You may not care about your life, Sancticus Fairhart, but I do! Whether it makes a difference for me in the future or not is irrelevant! What matters most is how I feel *now*, and now...I cannot raise my wand and kill you! I just can't!"

"Have you stopped to consider everything else?" Fairhart said. "What happens if I alter your memory to make you think that you kill me, and then you see me right here? What happens then?"

"There are ways!" Blackwood lashed out. "You told me before! There-there are ways! You can put a false memory in someone, then have it grow over time! That's possible, right?"

"*Possible* Ida, I do not know-"

"Yes you do!" Ida lashed out. "Tell me! Is it possible!"

Fairhart stared at her, completely void of expression, and Albus felt his heartbeat quicken as he too anticipated an answer.

"Yes" Fairhart said. "But I can not do that. The repercussions-"

"Who cares!" Blackwood screeched. "I don't! Do it!"

"Ida, I will not!" Fairhart barked. "You don't understand the complexities of such magic! The mind is not a slate to be cleared at will, replaced with more information at a whim. Everything is stored. If I do this, over time your reality will become blurred. What really happened and what you know to have happened could merge, constant hallucinations, a warped sense of chronology-

"I don't care!" Blackwood yelled into his face.

"Well I do!" Fairhart roared, the loudest exclamation between the two thus far. "And like I told you before, I don't care what *you* want, *I* want what's best for you-

Blackwood let out a stream of profanities that Albus had only ever heard before from Uncle Ron; strange, considering that he thought that his uncle had invented them. When Blackwood finally began speaking in a coherent manner, her voice radiated malice.

"Then I don't care what you want!" she snapped at him, looking as though she was close to combusting on the spot. "Then I don't care about that Potter boy, or the stupid Electrocuter's Veil, or any of it-

"Then you-" Fairhart started, but Blackwood cut him off with a derisive, maniacal laugh that showed hints of how she had been acting prior to her death.

"Then what! Then what, San? Then I'm a liar? Like how you lied! To me! Every *single* day! Every lie about how you didn't think of them anymore! I guess we're both liars then. We do this my way, and I promise to look after your stupid keepsakes while you're in hiding. We do it your way, and I slit the Potter boy's throat myself in his *sleep*" she finished, her tone dripping with pugnacity. "That's how little I care about your *wishes*, should you force me into this..."

Albus cringed, though this statement made him realize that he now knew how this memory was going to end. His throat was still very much intact, after all.

Fairhart was staring at her, beads of sweat formulating around his brow. "You would really go so far-

"Yes" Blackwood said coldly, and suddenly, Albus knew, the tables had turned. It was not Blackwood who was forced to choose between the lesser of two evil plots, but Fairhart. To ensure the safety of Albus and the Veil, he'd have to go along with Blackwood's idea-regardless of what he knew the repercussions to be.

Slowly, he nodded. Blackwood's face lit up.

"So then what happens now?" she asked breathlessly, everything suddenly more fast paced, and Albus moved in close, eager to hear every word.

Fairhart snapped his fingers; his discarded wand raised itself up and flew to him as though it were a loyal pet.

"I plant a false memory in your mind indicating that you killed me. The memory lies dormant for a prolonged period of time, though it still remains in your head. When administered truth serum- or when given any other test of validity- the false memory that you have will allow you to lie, as the memory itself will indeed exist. I suggest that you let the memory have time to develop however. Do not immediately go back to WAR; sleep a bit, that is when it will grow most."

"I have to return to Hogwarts soon" Blackwood said, and Albus was forced to remind himself that all of this had occurred during those few weeks when he had been at home at last year. "Warren will notice if I don't return to my post and give him updates."

"You needn't wait long" Fairhart replied, and he cringed as he said it. Albus registered why easily; he was being forced to give her specifics on a plan that he did not want to see come to fruition anyway. "Just until the memory is clear enough in your head so that you can recount it if tested. From there, you will know the truth for a short awhile; you will know that my death has been faked".

"And then...?" Blackwood whispered.

Fairhart took a deep breath. "Memories cannot extinguish themselves, and even if I tried removing it, it would stay embedded in your thoughts due to the powerful emotions connected to it. Over time, the false memory will combat what really happened. You may go through long stretches of time when you truly do believe yourself to be my murderer. Reverting back to the truth will only confuse you more, and this will occur so frequently that it may become hard to distinguish between which is the false memory and which isn't. Some days you may know that I'm alive; others, you may think yourself my killer."

"I understand" Blackwood said boldly, and Albus could not believe that she was so willing after hearing this. Would she do *anything* to keep him alive?

Fairhart looked like he was close to vomiting. His next words were didactic in nature, but he still only managed to choke them out.

"The- the intense shifts in cognizant ability will undoubtedly lead to other neurological deficiencies. Over time, you may enter stretches where you begin to lose basic motor skills, or- or even correct speech" he finished, his eyes closing as though he could not bear the thought.

Blackwood nodded, and she too now seemed concerned. She pressed on however.

"And what should I do then?"

"These things will probably not occur for quite some time, hopefully after the school year is over. I sense that Warren may ask you to harm Albus Potter before even that happens however; it

is imperative that you maintain your protection over him for as long as Warren seeks to hurt him. Once you have ensured this, however, I advise you to go into hiding. You can even take refuge in my old home, watching after the Veil."

"Will-will we have contact?" Blackwood asked, sounding almost like a teenager in how hopeful her tone was.

"In the stretches of time of when you know me to be alive...there is the chance that you could send me letters, or find some sort of correspondence. But it-it would be best if you could refrain from doing so. Actually having extended contact with me, or even seeing me, could greatly damage your memory even more. It would only serve to further blur your concept of time and reality."

"So then-I-I can't?" Blackwood said, her face falling, and Albus knew that this entire idea had just gotten worse for her.

"I'm saying that if you do," Fairhart told her, "be careful of what you write, and don't necessarily expect a response back. I do not plan on things being like this forever. I had hoped that my death would put a hold on a few things, but your idea is much more intricate, and will require much more precision in how it is carried out. We must, for instance, keep my survival a secret from everyone. Any leaks back to WAR could result in your death...and I fear that I will not be able to control myself if such a thing happens."

"Where will you be?" Blackwood asked suddenly. "While I'm-while I'm doing all of-of this" she stuttered out.

"In hiding" Fairhart said. "But only briefly; only until my death has sunk in. I still plan on contributing to this war, and that means stopping whatever it is Ares and Darvy have planned, in addition to keeping Warren from gaining more power; though he does not know it, his radical ideas may inadvertently make things worse, should he obtain more reverence and take a more active role in the actual battles.

"I advise you to pay little attention to my hiatus however. I plan on doing everything that I can to help end these threats, once my deceased status has been corroborated by my lack of appearance."

"But then what if I hear of your return?" Blackwood asked. "What will happen to me-"

"You won't" Fairhart said. "I plan on re-entering the fray only when a major shift in this war has occurred, to focus my efforts on what is ultimately the true threat. Remember, both me and Potter are not entirely sure that Ares' plans have been fully revealed...and we worry about his psychotic brother as well. Once this has happened and I return however, I will make sure that you are not aware of it. Not only will you be secluded, but I will find a way to disguise myself."

"Disguise?" Blackwood asked, and this word hit Albus like a ton of bricks. Fairhart may have intimidated his foes by concealing his identity, but its true purpose had been to prevent Blackwood from learning that he was still alive. He remembered the contents of Blackwood's second letter to "Fairhart" very clearly now; the one that had been written shortly after the Silver Wizard's first few appearances. *Is it you.*

"Yes, disguise" Fairhart said, and he elaborated no further on the matter. "Hopefully, Ida, this plan endures to the end, and we can rectify things at some point in the future. Today, however, will be the last time that you truly know of my life for quite some time..."

Blackwood was beginning to fidget. Was she having second thoughts? Fairhart picked up on it at once.

"You can still back out now!" he said quickly, and there was hope in his voice. "I-I have no problem letting you do the deed, letting you take my life, not so long as you keep your promises-"

"I will keep my promises!" she said. "But I prefer my plan" she added scathingly. Her face fell after she said it however. "I just-I have the will. I just don't know if I have the strength" she finished, hanging her head so that her blonde hair hung down and over her face.

"You will be strong enough, Ida" he told her, though his own face fell as he said it; he had been hoping she'd turn back. "You will be strong enough because you need to be, and you have in your heart what is far more powerful than any false or even real memory! In what you feel, Ida, we are tied together. What you feel for me is insurmountable" he said, and she looked up at him, eyes wide open. "Remember that..."

Blackwood nodded her head, though she still looked concerned. Her breathing had quickened, and her tears had been replaced by sweat. Fairhart continued in an attempt to advise.

"Think of Albus, Ida" he said, and she-and Albus too, actually-gave him an astonished look. "You protect him now, not because of him, but because of me. Use that to remind yourself of our connection; of how truly powerful it is. When you think of Albus...think of me."

Albus could have fried an egg on his face. This...explained a lot. That one last sentence, he realized, was the answer to the entire mystery that had been his fifth year. Blackwood, with a deteriorated psyche, had taken that particular connection too far...

"Are you ready?" Fairhart asked her, and Blackwood stared at him with blotchy eyes, looking very much like she'd never been less prepared for something in her life. She gave a quick nod however, apparently under the impression that if she didn't agree soon, she never would. Fairhart raised his own wand at her now, a sharp comparison to how hers had been aimed at his face moments earlier. He narrowed his eyes, almost as if to obscure his vision from the deed that he was about to do.

"*Obliviate Fallacia!*" Fairhart yelled, and at the next moment there was a bang, followed by a flash of blinding white light-or perhaps they had occurred simultaneously, for they were so close together.

Albus, despite not actually being part of the memory, was forced to close his eyes and put his hands in front of his face as well, to shield himself from the intense glow of the spell. When he had regained his vision, he saw Fairhart standing with his wand still outstretched, and Blackwood holding her hands up to her face, grimacing. Through the cracks in her fingers he could see her eyes; they were sliding in and out of focus.

"Well?" Fairhart asked her in a hoarse whisper.

"Is that it?" Blackwood said, eyes returned to normal and letting out a sigh of relief. "I-I feel no different."

"Not yet you don't" Fairhart said darkly. "But you will..."

He began fastening his cloak, then looking around the remains of his destroyed home, apparently to see if there was anything worth taking with him. He suddenly seemed to be in a great hurry.

"I must leave now" he said sharply. "Even as you see me here, you are accumulating information, to be stored within your mind. This very moment may later hinder your ability to truly believe me dead. I must leave-"

"Wait!" Blackwood shouted, shaking her head back and forth rapidly as if to rid herself of whatever nausea accompanied the spell. "I-I love you!" she threw out at him.

Albus groaned. He partly wanted the memory to end right here-he did not even want to hear Fairhart's response, not after witnessing what he had just witnessed. His former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor stared back at Blackwood with a shocked expression on his face, but after a moment, he gave a response that made Albus shiver.

"I-I know" he told her, his face twisting itself into an almost apologetic expression. "I...really care about you too."

Blackwood turned her head away, though Albus could see yet another fresh set of tears on her face, a product no doubt of Fairhart's less than ideal answer. The scarred man standing a few feet away from her looked down, almost disappointed in himself, but he did not remit his answer. Had he truly loved her-or at least, had he had the same kind of love for her that she did for him-he would have told her so.

"I'm sorry" he mumbled, though Blackwood paid him no mind. He turned on the spot, preparing to apparate-

"Wait!" Blackwood called again.

"What?" Fairhart answered, spinning back around.

"I-I-I need something to take back" Blackwood said, wiping at her eyes and then playing with her fingers. "I need something take back to Warren. T-to prove that I did it. That I killed you."

Fairhart heaved a sigh, but before he had even started thinking of something, Blackwood had an answer.

"Your ring!" she announced, ostensibly off the top of her head. "You can give me that ring to take back."

Fairhart tensed up, and Albus knew that this was just a ploy of Blackwood's. A ploy to get Fairhart to give up *something* of his former life. He was not so quick to let go however.

"Can't-can't you take my wand instead?" he asked.

"With your wand Warren will be able to see what spells you've performed last, including the memory charm-and-and *really* San? You'd rather give up your *wand*?" she added angrily.

Albus could not help but agree with the lunacy here. A wand, after all, was like an arm to a wizard. Fairhart closed his eyes and exhaled, apparently still unsure.

"It's just a ring San" Blackwood said soothingly. "And besides, it's not even yours anyway...you gave it to her..."

Fairhart slid the silver ring off of his finger slowly, his mouth curling into a frown as he did so. He handed the ring over to her, and she snatched it up quickly.

"Just show it to them!" Fairhart said immediately, once the metal had left his hand. "Keep-keep hold of it. Until I can reclaim it..."

"Don't worry San" Blackwood said reassuringly. "I will."

There was something odd about her change of tone however. Perhaps Fairhart was too upset to catch on to it, but Albus detected a false sweetness in her voice.

Fairhart nodded to her, and then, without further comment, vanished in a whirl of his cloak; he seemed too distraught to think any more of the situation. Albus felt a tug as well, and he knew that Fairhart's memory was now ending, and thus, he wouldn't be able to view anymore.

The magic of the Pensieve allowed him to survey the situation for just a few seconds longer however, and he watched in horror as Blackwood's mouth twisted into a sneer of contempt. The second after Fairhart had disappeared completely, she cocked her arm back, and then tossed the ring as far as she did not need to show Warren anything at all, her false memory would suffice. She had merely wanted to make Fairhart surrender an item from his past, a reminder of his love for another woman, a love that she could in no way match...

The ring bounced off of a wall, landing in the clutter and ruin of the ravaged house, to be found, Albus realized, by his father days later. With another jolt, he realized that Fairhart had not even bothered searching for the ring before he'd left with Blackwood's corpse...

The scene evaporated entirely, and the next thing that Albus knew he was back in the dingy study, piles of unsent paper at his feet. He sat in a statue like position for several seconds, letting all that he knew mull over in his thoughts. Never before had he been flooded with so much information. Everything was explained; Fairhart being alive, the letters, Blackwood protecting him last year-all of it. But he suddenly felt sick. He'd sought answers for so long now, that he had forgotten how awful it sometimes felt to know the truth. All of these things had been dependant on him. Was Blackwood's blood, and Fischer's, for that matter, on his own hands? It had been quite some time since he'd been able to blame himself like he did now. But still, he had not asked for all of this. These were not his own choices, they had been made by others...

A crash came from downstairs, and Albus spun around on the spot, his elbow banging against the Pensieve as he did so. He felt pain shoot through his arm at once, but this was the least of his problems. The Pensieve slid off of the table, tipping over on the ground and spilling its silvery contents on the floor. Albus watched horrified as it all disappeared in seconds.

There were more noises from downstairs, and Albus was forced to raise himself up and get in position for another attack. He picked up a random scrap of paper from the floor and used it to dab at his marginally bleeding head, then tiptoed out of the room, wand drawn...

He reached the foot of the stairs, and then saw movement in the darkness. He next heard a voice so familiar that it made his heart skip several beats.

"Lumos Schatere!"

Light flooded the downstairs area at once, and Albus, overjoyed at what he saw and ignoring the pain in his body, leapt down the crumbled staircase all in one swift movement.

"Dad!" he yelled, and no sooner had his feet touched the floor did his father swoop down on him, clutching him tightly.

"Albus!" he breathed, sounding incredibly relieved. "Albus you're bleeding!" he shouted, completely ignoring the twenty or so dead bodies around him, as well as the fact that he was stepping on someone's lifeless fingers.

"It's fine-" Albus started, his father had already let go and stood up. He looked for a moment as though he was going to lecture, but Albus then saw that he was staring at something-or more accurately, someone.

"No" his father whispered, eyeing Fischer's bloody mess of a body with a face as white as a ghost. "*No!* Albus-what-what-what happened!" he stuttered out. "What did you do!" he added stupidly.

"It wasn't me!" Albus blurted out at once. "It was Fairhart!" he added, shaking his head as he did so.

"F-Fair-*Sancticus Fairhart!*" his father said, his voice both incredulous and exasperated. "Sancticus Fairhart? Back from the dead?" he added.

"He was never dead! He's the Silver Wizard!" Albus said, and he pointed at the discarded mask near the blood stained portion of the carpet where Blackwood had lain. His father looked as though he was about to faint.

"Albus you're going to have to explain this a *little better*-"

"The letters!" he started, and everything that he said next was said in a single breath. "They were from Blackwood because she was supposed to kill him but didn't and then he put a memory in her head to make her think that she'd done it even though she hadn't but she went crazy and thought I was Fairhart while Fairhart was in hiding and she was sending me letters and then he dressed up as the Silver Wizard to hide that he was still alive but only after asking her to look after me and the Veil and the Veil was here the entire time-"

"A succinct summary, *please* " his father said earnestly.

Albus took a deep breath. "Those letters were from Blackwood, and one of them had the address for here. I thought they were addressed to Pucked though, so I didn't want anyone knowing I was reading them...I got in here by using the headmistress' fireplace."

His father nodded and rolled his eyes. "To be honest I'd be more surprised if you *hadn't* done that. Now what happened here?"

"Blackwood was here, and the Veil too" Albus said, grimacing as he did so. "And-well-long story short, Fischer showed up, then the Dark Alliance, then WAR, then Fairhart as the Silver Wizard. Dark Alliance got the Veil, Fischer killed Blackwood accidentally sort-of, and well...Fairhart killed Fischer for revenge."

His father put his face in his hands. He mumbled something indistinctly.

"We must hurry" he said after he was done.

"Hurry and do what?"

"They're coming."

"Who!" Albus asked, frightened.

"The Ministry" his father replied.

"You are the Ministry!" Albus exclaimed.

His father sighed. "I am one man, Albus. This...this is not good. We have little time to set things accordingly before their arrival. Give me a moment to think" he added, and he began scratching at his chin, sweat pouring down his neck as he examined the carnage on the floor; particularly Fischer's body.

"Dad, what's going on?" Albus said, not understanding why his father looked so agitated. The Dark Alliance had gotten away with the Veil, yes, and Fischer was dead, but he was acting as though they were still in danger...

"I was the first to receive Fischer's message" he said. "I immediately attempted to floo to the most recently used destination in our records, but I found the entranceway blocked-"

"It was destroyed during the battle-"

"I see that" his father said. "But Fischer's message has undoubtedly reached more than me by now. The Ministry should be on their way. They will no doubt be apparating to the muggle town not far from here any minute...and then they will make their way here..."

"So what does it matter?" Albus asked.

"What matters, Albus, is that we get you out of here as fast as possible!"

"What-"

"Albus, you can not be seen out of school! We must get you out of here, I will handle the rest. I will tell them that Fischer was killed by one of the men lying on the ground; it is not uncommon in dueling for two opponents to eliminate one another simultaneously. Until we can prove that Fairhart-"

"Dad-wait-there's-there's more-" Albus stammered out, and his father's expression became unfathomable.

"More?"

"Fischer-Fischer sent another message. When you were on your way. She mentioned that she was fighting the Silver Wizard. They'll-they'll know who did this."

His father took a sharp intake of breath, and Albus could tell from the look on his face that he was doing some heavy thinking. By the time he actually spoke, however, he seemed at a loss.

"The Head Auror is *dead*" his father muttered, as if to pinpoint the main topic of the entire conversation.

"Co-Head Auror-" Albus began to correct his father, but this was batted away.

"Janine Fischer was extremely high up in the Ministry of Magic. The public will not allow the culprit for her death to go unpunished; her confirmation of the Silver Wizard's appearance here changes everything. Unless we can hand over an adequate suspect for her murderer, the Ministry will be forced to pinpoint whoever is here currently."

"They can't possibly think it's me though!" Albus barked, terrified. "What just because I'm here? They'll think that *I* can do *that*!" Albus bellowed rhetorically, pointing at the bloody pulp that was Fischer.

"The Ministry of Magic has no control over the media! It will be twisted to suit the public outcry!" his father seethed, and his face was suddenly a dark red, as though he too was just now realizing the complete severity of the situation.

"But I can tell them about Fairhart-"

"Sancticus Fairhart is *dead* Albus! According to all Ministry records-"

"He's still alive! He killed Fischer!" Albus blurted out, an extremely unwelcome fear rising in his chest; he had thought that he was done with this feeling for today. "You have to believe me-"

"I do Albus!" his father barked. "*I* do! But everyone else can not be so easily convinced, not when things like truth potions and legilimency can be so easily compromised, and not when people will consider this statement is coming from Harry Potter's son-"

"Then what am I supposed to do!" Albus breathed. "What am I...am I going to Azkaban!" he asked, somewhat sardonically, the sentence not even making sense as it escaped his lips.

"No" his father said shortly, and he waved his wand. At once, his robes turned to silver. "I am."

Albus gaped at him. "What are-"

"Fischer's first Patronus says *Potter*. It never says which one. Her messages detail both a Potter being here and the Silver Wizard being here as well; we can connect them both. We must get you out of here; I will take the blame for Fischer's death-"

"No!" Albus yelled, more vehemently than he could ever remember yelling something in his life. "No! That's ridiculous-"

"It's the only way that makes sense!" his father shouted. "Half of the Ministry was convinced by Fischer that I was the Silver Wizard anyway, and until we actually have Fairhart in custody no one can say otherwise to anything that happened here! As I don't expect to find him anytime soon, someone must fill in for his role as the Silver Wizard-for the role of Fischer's murder. There will be no questions asked to my confession-I will say that my renegade activities have

been a product of my desire to take a more offensive route under Fischer's largely tactical regime. I will say that I killed her to silence her upon discovering my hideout, which was stumbled upon by both the Dark Alliance and WAR in their attempts to seize me. By doing this, your name is cleared completely, and the Ministry has an answer for both Fischer's death and for the sporadic Silver Wizard attacks of the last several months! They will not need to investigate any further, or learn of your involvement in anything, including that you left school! "

"But-"

"Albus listen to me!" his father said quietly. "I have realized in only the last few minutes how very important it is that you have nothing to do with this entire situation. Fischer designated a Potter, and that means that a Potter must be here when they arrive. If it is you, you will be expelled from school at the least, and even I cannot influence that decision. And if what you say is true Albus, then the Dark Alliance now has the Veil and is officially in position to wreak havoc on the world! Hogwarts may be one of the few places left that is safe, I will not have you taken from there!"

"But-"

"The only option is me" his father said, before Albus could even attempt to cut him off. "I will take the blame for Fischer's death" he reiterated. His face was determined; set in stone.

"But that's not the truth-"

"The *truth*, Albus," his father began loudly, nostrils flaring, "is that you are my son, and that I love you! And whether I must pretend to murder, or actually do it, I will do what is necessary to keep you safe! *That* is the only truth that matters now!"

Albus mouthed at him wordlessly. This was all so surreal; the politics of it made it all so much more confusing than the danger he'd encountered earlier. "Will-will they really put you in Azkaban?"

"They have to" his father replied simply. "I'm a murderer. And for now, it must stay like that. I predict a point in the future where my name can be cleared, but right now the Ministry and the public both need a temporary answer. I have been a common enemy before, for the sake of society. I do not mind taking the task again."

Albus could only stare at him, his eyes unable to wander to the crumbled remnants of Fairhart's muggle home. As he stood there in the middle of the destruction he realized just how much had changed in the last few hours...

"What-what happens now?" he asked his father.

"Now, you get out of here. You say nothing and speak to no one until you are contacted by somebody from me directly. Uncle Ron, actually."

"Why Uncle Ron?" Albus asked, and his father sighed.

"Just trust me, your Uncle Ron will know what's going on and he is more than reliable. While you are at Hogwarts I will wait for the Ministry to come. I will confess and be taken away, to await trial."

"Won't they-won't they snap your wand?" Albus asked stupidly, and his father gave a snort that seemed out of place considering the situation.

"No, that will not happen. They'll know better. When the time is right, I will use what little influence I have left in the Ministry to make arrangements. But listen to me Albus," he added, crouching down and putting his hands on his shoulders, "for this to work I need to count on you. No one can know that you left the school today-"

"I already told people though!" he said, horrified.

"Family is okay; family can know-"

"But I told Mirra and Scorpius and Morr-"

"I said that family is okay" his father said. "For a short while you must speak to no one, not until I'm arrested and you receive correspondence from your uncle. Then, there will be a very limited circle of people who know the truth about what happened today. Those who you select, the Headmistress, Professor Longbottom, Hagrid, and our family...you will know who you can speak to."

"Dad-"

"Can you do this, Albus? Can I count on you?"

Albus looked into his fathers matching emerald eyes; it was like staring into a mirror.

"I-yes-"

"Good" his father replied. "All will become clear in time-I have an idea. But for now, this is what must be done."

He waved his wand, and a piece of wood that looked as though it had come from a broken chair flew to his hand. At the next moment, it glowed blue. Albus, realizing that he was being asked to leave right now at this very moment, changed his mind at once.

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "No-I-I'll stay! I'll try to explain what happened-"

"You know I can't let that happen Albus!" his father replied, and he thrust the piece of wood into Albus' hands. He tried tossing it away, but his hand was stuck to it for some reason.

"What did you do?" Albus demanded.

"*Accio*" his father shouted, distracted, and the mask on the floor that Fairhart had once worn flew over to him. He began to fasten it to his face.

"Sticky jinx" he replied.

"No!" Albus cried angrily, raising his own wand and pointing it at his other hand, which did indeed appear to be stuck to the portkey that his father had just created. "*Finite! Finite!*" he added, but nothing happened.

"Nice try, Al" his father said, voice muffled due to the mask now being entirely on his face. "Practice while I'm away, won't you?"

"No-"

Albus felt himself begin to spin, colors swirling before his eyes as the portkey began to glow blue again, the last image in his head an image of his father dressed in the garb that Fairhart had been seen in for so long. Even as he began twisting away he saw his father turn as if he'd heard something; the Ministry had indeed arrived, and he'd sent his son away just in time-

Albus closed his eyes as he spun rapidly, finally landing on a hardwood floor that he recognized at once to be part of the Headmistress' office. He was so used to dust and decay that he began coughing on the fresh air. His wand was in one hand, the portkey in the other, Fairhart's ring tucked away again neatly in his pocket.

Thoughts were racing through his head as he laid his entire body on the floor; memories of the events of the day sifting out of order. What was going to happen to his father? Where was Fairhart now? What was Darvy going to do with the Veil?

He knew that he could stand up from the floor, but it wasn't until quite some time after his arrival that he finally did.

Chapter 23: The Man Who Murdered

Albus cringed as his joints continued to ache, his head pounding from the amount of thoughts circulating inside of it. He slowly pressed his forearms into the clean, highly polished floor that he was no longer accustomed to, and then hoisted himself up. A quick glance around the Headmistress' office told him that it had not been occupied for sometime; everything was unusually still. The fireplace, however, was strangely lit.

He dusted himself off, wobbling slightly as he tried to regain his composure. He heard a snorting noise, and after looking around in a bewildered fashion, saw its source. The portrait of Severus Snape was shaking his head as if terribly disappointed. Next to him was the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, whose eyes were closed in a placid manner. He was clearly feigning sleep.

Albus heard a noise, and, still somewhat paranoid, raised his wand up high. His other hand, he realized, still had the portkey stuck to it. Albus watched as the grand door opened up-

"Albus you idiot!" shrieked Mirra, her face stained with tears and her dark hair wild. Albus breathed a sigh of relief and extended his arms, but rather than embrace him she stood with her mouth agape, a finger pointed at his face.

"You're bleeding!" she gasped.

"It's okay, really-"

"You're okay?" she asked icily.

"Yeah, I'm-"

She slapped him across the face, and Albus actually sunk to his knees due to the intense stinging feeling. He gave a yell of pain which went unnoticed by his girlfriend, who had sank to her own knees and balled her hands into fists, which she was now using to pound the back of his head. She gave a wail with every strike.

"Will you-that-Mirra please-"

"Idiot idiot IDIOT!" she was screeching, batting him over the skull with more ferocity as she said it each time. Albus then heard footsteps, some indistinct shouting, and then relief as Mirra stopped. He looked up long enough to see long, gangly arms pulling her away.

"Mirra stop!" Morrison was saying, twisting her away and out of pummeling distance. Albus' heart soared with gratitude. "Just stop okay! Let me, I'm stronger-"

He felt something heavy collide with him, and the next thing that he knew, Morrison had him pinned down, each of his heavy blows adding a bruise to his shoulders.

"Not so hard!" Mirra pleaded. "He's bleeding-"

"Not...yet...he's...not..." Morrison said angrily, while Albus, who had dropped his wand a minute ago, curled himself up into a ball to absorb the contact.

"*Relashio!*" someone yelled, and Morrison was blown backwards. Albus looked up at once and saw Scorpius standing in the doorway. Nothing was making sense; why were they all up here in McGonagall's office?

Albus took a moment to breathe as Morrison straightened himself up. Scorpius still had his wand pointed out, but his face was the most collected of the three. "Give him a chance to recover. We don't know what he's been through."

"Why are-what are you guys doing here?" Albus said, rising to his feet and feeling agony near his clavicle, where Morrison had done most of his damage. He then realized that the portkey was no longer stuck to his hand; the jinx must have been timed. It fell from his fingers with a thud.

"The Headmistress sent us up here-" Morrison started.

"You've been missing for so long, there was an entire search party looking for you-" Scorpius continued.

"Albus you *idiot!*" Mirra threw in, tears still on her face. "You unbelievable git!"

"Okay slow down" Albus told the three of them, holding his hands up in anticipation of another attack. "Start from the beginning."

The three of them began shouting all at once, so much so that he could make nothing of it.

"Okay just Scorpius!" he said, and the other two fell silent while Scorpius started to speak.

"We noticed that you didn't come to dinner" he said shortly. "But obviously we didn't-well, *no one* could have predicted that someone could be so foolish-we didn't make much of it. Then we ran into Mirra and she mentioned that you'd told her too about you wanting to follow that letter. And well...she told Professor Longbottom first, and when we couldn't find you, McGonagall had us all looking around.

"I remembered the address though, and I told it to them. She sent Professor Longbottom after you, using her fireplace, just like you had. But a couple minutes later he showed up covered in soot, saying that he couldn't get through. That it had been jammed..."

Albus nodded his head. He now had an estimate of when this had all taken place. Like his father, Neville must have attempted to floo to 2791 Woodlark Way after the fireplace had been destroyed during the battle.

"From there...well we just kind of waited. McGonagall sent word to your dad but we never heard back."

Albus swallowed. His father had not responded because he'd already heard word from Fischer. And now he was-

"We have to go and get McGonagall!" he said. "I need to tell her what happened-"

"She should be coming soon" Morrison said.

"She sent the three of us up here because we're the only ones who knew where you'd went, and she didn't want Puckerd to find anything out" Mirra told him, and Albus noted that her voice still sounded cold; etched with betrayal.

Albus rolled his eyes at what she'd said however. Puckerd was so insignificant now, it was hard for him to remember why he'd once considered one upping his Potions professor a priority. With a pang in his gut, he wondered how Puckerd would react to the news about Fischer. Wondered how everyone would react...no one knew what he'd seen yet...

"So what happened?" Morrison said, penetrating the silence. "Go on, you owe us that!"

Albus sighed. "I should wait for McGon-"

"Tell us now!" Mirra roared, stamping her foot, and Albus again raised his hands up. "Okay, okay-"

He began to tell the three of them everything that he could, abstaining from any superfluous details that would only confuse them. Though he divulged the actual ownership of the property itself, he did not comment on some of the things that he'd seen-like the crib, for instance. His voice faltered when he first mentioned Blackwood and the Veil however. He thought of where both were now...

"So Blackwood was bonkers, eh?" Morrison said. "I guess that explains why those letters were so awful. But why was she writing to *you*?"

"I'm getting to it!" Albus barked. "Anyway, I-I saw a memory-"

Again, he was careful here. Though he intended on keeping all of the events of the last few hours in chronological order, he also made sure to cut out certain things said by Fairhart and Blackwood to each other. Regardless of how things had ended up, it seemed too personal. Mirra cupped her hands to the mouth when Albus spoke of the Dark Alliance. Scorpius too raised his eyebrows, apparently deeply curious as to how Albus-notorious though he was for somehow surviving through seemingly insurmountable events-had managed to get through this particular encounter.

"And-and Blackwood and Fischer were both-they-they were both great..." he trailed off, the sentence leaving his lips with a sour taste. "They both protected me."

He croaked his way through the next two or three minutes of the story, quickly recapping the arrival of both WAR and the Silver Wizard. There was a collective sound of surprise when he'd mentioned the latter. Albus turned his head away when he mentioned the Dark Alliance member getting away with the noises of surprise shaped themselves into hisses and groans.

"Really Al!" Morrison bellowed, throwing his hands up in the air. "All that and you didn't even get the Veil! Was it worth it?"

Scorpius hushed him and inclined his head back to Albus, signaling him to continue. Albus didn't get very far before the next interruption however. Soon after, Fischer had killed Blackwood. They all turned to each other, horrified, Mirra with her hands again returning to her mouth. Scorpius was the one who spoke however.

"Hold on a second mate, back up. You-you mean to-you mean to tell me that-that Blackwood is...?"

Albus could only nod his head sullenly. He knew that Scorpius had not liked their old Potions professor-loathed her in fact-but she had still be an ally.

"And then-and then-the Silver Wizard went over to her and-and took off his mask. It's Fairhart. Fairhart was the Silver Wizard."

No noises. Just blank faces. Morrison was the first to speak.

"No he's not-" he said in a dismissive manner. .

"I'm telling you!" Albus barked. "Fairhart was the Silver Wizard! And then he-he killed Fischer. I watched him do it, I swear."

He did not need to bother them with the extraneous details of her painful death, nor did he think that the memory that he'd witnessed afterwards was important. No one was asking about Blackwood anymore, or why he'd described her as so disoriented and confused. No one cared; they were all too shocked at what else he was saying.

"Fairhart...alive..." Scorpius said, looking winded.

"What happened next?" Morrison said sharply, and Mirra nodded, her face barely visible from behind her slender fingers now.

Albus was incapable of getting this next part out. What had followed had been, somehow, the biggest atrocity of the day. His father, adorned in all silver. Ready to take the blame for innumerable crimes that he had not committed. Ready to lose everything, his dignity, his reputation, his freedom...

With a sudden jolt in his stomach he realized something else; his father had told him not to say nothing until he'd heard from Uncle Ron. Could he do *anything* right?

As if on cue, yet another interruption entered. This time, however, it was a far more collected appearance. Headmistress McGonagall had entered, her mouth as thin as string, her eyes bulging out of her wrinkly sockets from behind her square spectacles.

"Potter!" she exclaimed at once, grasping at her chest. "Potter! Potter you must tell me everything that happened, at once!"

"I can't" he said stupidly, realizing that he was twisting his father's wishes completely. "Not until!"

"I have already spoken to your uncle!" she said crisply. "He has passed along word for you to tell me everything. He's currently dealing with a media storm!"

Albus began to open his mouth, but before he could so much as utter a syllable the Headmistress had quickly added something.

"And before you begin, Mr. Potter, I must inform you that this ends here! No more plans, no more ideas! I have heard from your father, and his imprisonment is final!"

Albus felt as though his skin had been washed over in icy water. The three others in the room were looking at one another confused now, as if they'd missed something in his story.

"Wait," Morrison said started, "Al's dad is going to Azkaban! For what!"

"For being the Silver Wizard!" the headmistress shouted to him, and Morrison looked as though his head was going to explode.

"Hold on, Al said!"

"Let me explain!" Albus growled to everyone in the room, but even as he'd said it, the door had opened up once more. An entire line of people stretched into the cramped room, James leading the way, followed by Lily, then Hugo, then Rose, Molly and Lucy at one another's side, and finally Fred bringing up the rear. Albus knew what was going on at once. McGonagall had been instructed, by Uncle Ron no doubt, to bring everyone in the family under the same location, for Albus' debriefing. Family, after all, was who his father had said were the only ones that Albus could tell. He made eye contact with his brother briefly, then cleared his throat.

For twenty minutes straight he spoke, retelling everything exactly as he could remember; again cutting out the details of Blackwood's relationship with Fairhart. On several occasions someone made to speak and cut him off, but McGonagall-now sitting behind her desk-silenced them with a single look. When he had finished explaining everything-including stammering his way through his father's deception-there was a deafening silence. It was finally broken by Rose.

"Albus you buffoon!" she shouted, leaping towards him and attempting to throttle him, her bony fingers snaking their way around his throat. "You idiot! You got your dad arrested and you-"

There was yelling from everyone else in the room, but only Mirra stepped forward.

"Don't you dare call him an idiot!" she spat hypocritically, and ignoring the fact that she was a witch entirely, she made a grab for Rose's hair, twisting it in her hands with a savage look on her face. Rose gave a screech and more people yelled-

"Stop it! Both of you!" came McGonagall's booming voice. There was a flash of white light, and the two of them had been separated. Rose was seething and shaking. Mirra was looking fierce, a small clump of fiery red hair in her fingers. Albus grabbed hold of his girlfriend while his brother restrained Rose.

McGonagall had her wand raised high. "Stop it! Whatever squabbles exist between you two, or anyone else here, they are to end now! We are all united in that we know the truth!"

Everyone looked at one another, ashamed at their yelling. The Headmistress stuffed away her wand and rose from her chair. Albus had never seen her this pale before.

"What must be understood right away is that you are all here for a reason. Harry Potter's imprisonment in Azkaban is his own choice, but he needs us to contribute to his overall plans, whatever they may be. Secrecy is of the utmost importance. Harry Potter has-somehow-managed to convey instructions to me through a series of messengers, all while simultaneously dealing with his detainment. The most prominent of his wishes is that everything discussed here today is told to no one else-*especially* the information indicating that his son left the Hogwarts grounds."

Albus felt his face burn red. James gave him a quick, unreadable glance. McGonagall continued after they'd all soaked this in.

"Apart from that, there are other topics of a delicate nature that must be addressed. Harry Potter has already given his story; it cannot change, or suspicions will arise. Everyone in this room now must keep to the story that you will all soon hear; that Harry Potter is indeed the Silver Wizard, and that he-that he is also a murderer."

She finished her sentence with something that resembled a whimper, but it was covered by an outburst from Rose.

"You mean I can't even tell my *boyfriend!*" she gasped. Scorpius opened his mouth, but it was again Mirra who took the challenge.

"Shut *up!* No one cares about your stupid boyfriend-"

Albus pulled back on her, but McGonagall's nostrils flared as Rose rounded on her angrily.

"Enough! Did you not hear what I just said! We are among the few who know the truth of what actually occurred today! We now band together, not by choice, but by necessity! Shake hands! Now! Go on!"

Albus and James both loosed their grip, and, slowly, the two girls moved towards one another with contempt. Mirra was the first to raise her hand, but Rose was the first to make a shaking motion with it. Albus could not remember ever seeing a more irreparable friendship, but at the same time, McGonagall's words had seemed to affect them both a great deal. Perhaps the idea of being united by the truth had not been entirely lost on them...

"At the same time" McGonagall continued, and Rose and Mirra separated their hands at once, "I can now only warn all of you of what will soon come to pass. I cannot even begin to guess as to what Harry Potter plans on doing to end this situation, but it must come from him! His only request, other than that you all keep silence about this ordeal, is that you stay strong and firm. I have seen it happen before and I expect it to happen again. Everyone in this room is now-they now have-there is a very good chance that they will endure some sort of social repercussion do to these falsified events."

"You mean we all have to suffer because Albus screwed up!" Hugo blurted out. "*Again!*" he added scathingly, and Albus ogled him. How had Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron created two children with this level of belligerence? He supposed that Hugo was partially his own fault, however, after the events of last year...

"Shut it, kiddo" Morrison said, and soon there was more yelling, quickly silence by McGonagall's inarticulate yell of rage. She looked as though she was going to burst.

"If you are all unable to cooperate on this, I will wipe all of your memories to make sure that no secrets are divulged!" she said, and they all fell silent at once. "I cannot stress enough the importance of unity here! We are all in on the secret! All of us here, and very few others, know of what actually transpired today. And according to Harry Potter, it must stay like this for some time! If you trust Harry Potter, then you must trust that what he knows is best, and that includes following his wishes! Now I must ask you all-his children, and nieces and nephews and friends-*do you trust Harry Potter?*"

Albus watched as, one by one, they all nodded.

"Then it's settled" she said crisply, letting out an exasperated breath. "We all keep to the same story, and we all deal with what is to come because of it. I know that a great deal is being asked of you all, but we do not pick our responsibilities, nor do we get to decide the way in which they are tended to. Now-all of you-to your common rooms. I must alert the staff and then...I will call for everyone to meet in the Great Hall. I will give a succinct summary of what I know-or at least what everyone must believe that I know-and then tomorrow the storm will truly begin."

They all turned to file out, but McGonagall called to Albus before he could so much as move; not that he was going anywhere, of course. His hands were balled into fists, and his body was shaking. He couldn't believe that this was happening. McGonagall had consistently referenced his father's 'plans'. Didn't she understand that there was none? That the plan was just to keep him from getting kicked out of Hogwarts? That the only plan had already come to fruition, and that his father was now going to serve a sentence in Azkaban as a result?

"Potter, I failed to notice before, but you are injured. Go to the Hospital Wing first and foremost-"

"I can't do this" Albus cut her off, pleased that everyone else had left. His voice was shaking. "I can't do this, I can't sit here and pretend-"

"Yes, you can Mr. Potter" McGonagall said to him strictly. "You can because you must. Trust in your father. If I am sure of one thing, it is that he knows best."

Albus looked down at the ground determinedly, unsure as to if this was even possible. But still, his father had requested this of to him-didn't he owe it to him to follow at least one order right?

"Don't bother coming to the announcement" the headmistress further added. "Go to the Hospital Wing and then go to your dormitory and get some rest. I-I'm glad that you're okay" she added awkwardly, her tone full of a sincerity that caught Albus off guard. He looked up at her as she continued. "I'm glad that you're okay, but the worst has yet to come. Get some rest while you can, Mr. Potter. Once the morning edition of the *Prophet* hits tomorrow, I daresay that you'll have your hands full."

Albus nodded, then promptly turned to leave, noting that there was no viable argument that he could finality of everything made tears swell up in his eyes. He looked over his shoulder and glanced up at the portraits. Snape was still scowling, but Dumbledore was no longer pretending to be asleep. He was wide awake, and he too had a tear in his eye.

As Albus could have expected, the headmistress' prediction proved to be spectacularly correct. Having his face cleaned by Madam Clearwater had taken only an instant, but the sleeping draught he'd been given had rendered him incapable of conscious thought for several hours. Awakening to the sight of his sleeping girlfriend sitting by his side, he slipped the morning edition of the *Prophet* from her fingers and felt his stomach lurch.

The Man Who Murdered

He read the first page with a frown on his face, his throat feeling tighter with every word.

Ministry of Magic representatives confirmed earlier this morning that Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter has been formally charged with the murder of Co-Head Auror Janine Fischer. In

addition, a record of Potter's confession, as well as evidence provided at the scene of the crime, have confirmed his identity as that of the elusive Silver Wizard, a Renegade that the Ministry has been on the verge of capturing for months now. The following is an excerpt from Potter's confession:

"I had no intention of taking it this far. My actions were done in response to my own frustration about the lack of results in the ongoing war against Sebastian Darvy, and my own personal beliefs that Wands and Redemption has become militaristic in its methods. The Silver Wizard facade that I created was my way of dealing with two issues simultaneously, both that I did not feel were being accurately addressed. I understand now that my actions were juvenile and have no place in the Ministry of Magic, and I fully accept all punishments given to me. As for Janine Fischer, her death was a terrible accident in the heat of battle; a foolish attempt to conceal my identity. My actions are irrevocable, and I can only apologize to her loved ones, as well as to the Wizarding World."

Potter's full confession has provided so much detail that little investigation has been done on the scenario surrounding Fischer's gruesome death. The battle-which included members of the Dark Alliance, as well as members of WAR (though Warren Waddlesworth has dismissed them as not being actual members, but rather adamant followers) took place in a secluded muggle residence just two miles from a muggle town. Potter admits to having used the muggle residence as a hideout during his frequent escapades as the masked vigilante. When his whereabouts were tracked by both the Dark Alliance and the unaffiliated Wands and Redemption members, a battle occurred. Fischer was able to track the Dark Alliance members and appeared at the horrendous scene, discovering Potter there. After investigating the matter, Fischer concluded from unspecified evidence that Potter was indeed the Silver Wizard. Potter's testimony later states that in his desperation to prevent this information from reaching others, he initiated an attack that later proved to be fatal. Potter's confession has led to a series of comments from Ministry of Magic representatives in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in addition to members of the Wizengamot and famous wizards of our time. On the topic of whether Potter's actions should be weighed in accordance with his history as a world renown hero, former Wizengamot member Demetrice Free had this to say:

"The Wizarding world owes Harry Potter a great debt for his actions during the war with Voldemort. But that does mean that he is to be judged on a different scale. The death of Janine Fischer, whether accidental or not, can be accounted for by Potter, and he must be punished accordingly. Likewise, whatever his intentions, Potter broke numerous laws during his time as the Silver Wizard. No exceptions can be made for those who have done exceptional acts of heroism. It will be saddening to see Harry Potter imprisoned, but any other outcome will be a travesty to what we know is lawful."

Potter was immediately tried following his confession, and is currently awaiting his sentence, expected to be anywhere from twenty to forty years in Azkaban prison. In one years time,

however, Potter's case will be re-examined, and if more evidence comes to light, the option for a temporary, monitored release will be noted.

Albus stopped reading there, flipping through pages frantically so see what else he'd missed during his sleep. Headlines caught and burned his eyes at every second.

Minister To Announce Retirement?

Waddlesworth Speaks Out

Was The Silver Wizard The Ministry's Idea?

Mirra was beginning to stir. Albus stared at her calm demeanor, a stark contrast to how she'd been hours ago. He felt guilt boil in his gut as he reminded himself of the lie he'd told her; the promise that he'd broken. He had the feeling that things were not quite sorted out with her yet.

By the time that Albus entered the Common Room it became readily apparent to him that everyone had seen the headlines. He was met with stares and whispers, points and grunts. Some expressions were confused, others irate. It wasn't until he saw Morrison and Scorpius in his dormitory-both of them staring at him with their own wry expressions-that he learned about what had transpired.

McGonagall had announced the news to the school last night that the Silver Wizard had been caught and exposed, and that the Head Auror that they'd all met months prior was now dead. Puckerd had sobbed for a moment at the high table, and then left without another word. He was not expected back, and Potions classes were cancelled. The actual occurrence itself was not elaborated upon by the headmistress, and it was thus not until the morning news came that the students learned the details.

"I'm guessing you guys read it?" Albus asked both of his friends. They both nodded solemnly. Morrison, however, came forth and clapped him on the back.

"We're with you mate" he said, and Scorpius nodded again in agreement. "You're not going through anything alone."

The next few days passed by in a blur for Albus, a series of familiar faces wearing completely new emotions. No Quidditch game or previous news could compare to what he was becoming accustomed to now. He, and his siblings, he knew, were met with dark stares at every corner, from every hall, from different members of every house. People had cheered the Silver Wizard along when he had been defeating Dark Alliance members, but murdering a member of the Ministry had proven too much. Whatever credibility his father had worked so hard to achieve over the last year had diminished; he was even worse off than he was when he'd been a disgraced ex-Auror.

He was only comfortable when around those who knew the truth. Not because it was ever discussed, but because it hovered around them all; and intangible, ubiquitous idea that united them exactly as McGonagall had said that it would. He felt terrible that his friends were receiving stares as well due to their connection with him, but they didn't seem to mind. They talked loudly about predicted exam scores, Scorpius was always asking Albus for a game of chess, and a few people were not as stringent in their loathing of Albus due to his father's alleged actions. A tearful Melonie had told Albus-her arms around Morrison's neck as she spoke-that she didn't care what his father had done, because Albus was a different person entirely. Lance, possibly for Rose, had simply walked by expressionless when seeing him in the halls. And the teachers, whether those specified by his father or not, were only different around him in that they now smiled apologetically when they looked at him.

Albus felt most bad for those family members whose lives were affected. Hugo's relation to the "Man Who Murdered" had lost him the circle of friends that he'd accumulated last year, and the Weasley gang was now sticking closer together than ever. Lily, who had never really developed many friends outside of family anyways, had been reduced to tears after being harassed by a group of sixth year Ravenclaws, all of whom had consequently and suspiciously been sent to the Hospital Wing a day later. From what Albus had heard, they'd been hanging around a hallway that James usually loitered in at the time of their attack.

And James, in Albus' opinion, had it the worst of them all. This was supposed to his year; he was graduating, and he'd won the Quidditch Cup. Now he'd have to take the ceremonial boat ride back across the lake with thoughts of his incarcerated father in his head.

Albus allowed the days to fizzle out in a series of conversations with his peers, allowing seemingly endless days to serve as a time schedule for those who he was still on talking terms with. He stopped by Hagrid's for tea about a week and a half before term was to end, quaint conversation pertaining to exam results the only real highlight. Though Albus knew that Hagrid was one of those who was most trustworthy, his typically kind and gentle demeanor made it difficult to mention things of a more sensitive nature. Likewise, he had taken part in a private, one on one chat just the next day with Scorpius-a talk about how he was trying to completely forget his feelings for Rose.

"I never really got it anyway, to be honest" Albus said to his friend, walking near the edge of the lake carefully with Scorpius at his side. The beautiful weather made it impossible to stay inside, and as Melonie and Morrison were actually playing in the water, they could speak uninterrupted.

Scorpius frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "I wouldn't expect you to" he said dryly.

"I'm serious!" Albus said, nearly tripping over a rock and falling into the water. "I mean-she's my cousin, so it may be a bit hard-but even outside of that..."

"It was the chase mate" Scorpius answered him quickly. "Smart, pretty, and makes you work. I like a challenge. I guess for the first time though-this year-I realized that her personality kind of gets in the way."

Albus patted his friend on the shoulder. "And whenever you look at her mate, I want you to remind yourself of that. Good news though, Lance is leaving this year" he added.

Scorpius gave a weak smile. "I admit, that still brings me comfort."

Though Scorpius had managed to attain some semblance of closure with his romantic endeavors, Albus found himself struggling to even predict the outcome of his own. For the first time since their first year, Mirra was acting unpredictable around him. At certain moments she clung to his shirt as though fearful that he'd somehow endanger himself in the confines of a classroom; at others, she would ignore him entirely when he was speaking. Albus knew that she was having conflicting emotions about how best to handle the fact that he'd outright lied to her. On one end, she must be extremely angry with him. On the other, this only proved how much she still cared.

The struggle came to an end just a few days before term was to end however. Albus, sick of being thrown contemptuous or disappointed glares everywhere but his own dormitory, had decided that his usual sanctuary-the Room of Requirement-was the best place to spend the majority of his last few days before the train ride home. As Mirra tended to accompany him half of the time, she went along with him.

There was no palpable romance in the Room upon entering, nor any indication that something other than idle chat would occur within its confines. Upon entrance the Room of Requirement had shaped itself into a cozy room that looked designed for lounging rather than thrashing around, complete with a green carpet and a comfortable looking sofa near a fireplace. Albus-discerning the point of a sofa rather than two chairs-laid down on the soft cushion and felt Mirra join him, her back to him, his chin position directly above the top of her head. They laid in silence watching the fire crackle for sometime, before someone finally spoke.

"I don't even know what to do" Mirra muttered hopelessly, and Albus felt his stomach curl into knots. His mind was always trailing off to his father or Fairhart recently, but now his attention was focused solely on what was laying in his arms.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his tone just as low.

"You broke a promise" she said. "And then you lied to me...you placated me."

Albus was extremely glad that she was facing the other way, for his cheeks had turned a burning red after this sentence.

"I know" he croaked, and she did not answer this. After a moment, he continued. "So are you just done with me then?" he asked, hoping to mask the fear in his voice with a considerable amount of sarcasm, which failed.

"I don't know" she said, and though he couldn't see it, he knew that there were tears running down her face. "I'm afraid that-that-I don't want this to happen again" she said awkwardly. "I don't know if I can do this all again."

"So what, because I-because I don't follow your rules-"

"It's nothing about rules, Albus!" she said, and she rolled over in his arms, now staring up at him directly, and he now knew that his previous assumption about her tears was correct. "I'm not your mother, I'm not going to make you promise me things and then send you to your room when you break them! You *worry* me, Albus! As in, I'm *worried* about you! All the time! In the last three years alone you've been in more danger than any person-not teenager-than any *person* should ever be in! And every single time I tell myself I don't have to worry about you anymore, I get horribly let down!"

Albus had no answer for this, but he could not pull his gaze away. What was he supposed to tell her? That she was absolutely right, and that he'd done nothing but been an idiot? That he deserved to have this relationship-the one sliver of happiness that he could still cling to-end, because of his actions, and his actions only? Is that what she wanted? The truth?

"I messed up" he said, his admittance the catalyst for his own tears, however few that there were. "Again. And I know I say that every time, but it's all that I can tell you. That, and that I'm sorry for doing this all over again...for making you worry. I never want to make you worry" he said, and he was surprised that he was not stammering. His words, somehow, were flowing out of him effortlessly, and as if he'd thought them every day for months. "I never want to disappoint you like I did, or make you feel as awful as you do. All-all I want to do is make you happy. That's it. And if I'm not doing that, then I won't say a word against you for ending this right here."

His tears had increased in the few seconds that he'd spoken, and he knew why; because everything that he'd said was true, and because he was not sure that she even believed him. She continued to stare up at him however, her bland yet somehow beautiful grey eyes peering into his emerald ones, her stare transfixed solely on his face. Slowly, she leaned her head down and pulled herself even closer to him.

"You do make me happy" she spoke into his body. "It's just-it's just that sometimes, you can be a stupid fucking git!"

As they drew closer and closer to the departure from Hogwarts, Albus became aware of just how uninformed most of the castle was in regards to the outside world. Albus realized that with the

newspapers flashing headlines about his father three times a day, it was impossible for anyone to learn anything about Darvy's new acquisition-though of course, the Ministry most likely wasn't writing about the Veil anyway. No one seemed to know that last year's Potions professor was dead, nor did they have any way of knowing the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher from the year before had vanished with her body. All that people knew was what they read. Just as his father had planned it.

Everyday it was the same thing. Another article about the validity of his father's confession, and then another person commenting on it. It was the only thing in the current events of the world that could be discussed, even in the middle of a war and in the shadow of a potential vigilante revolt. Albus quickly grew sick of it all, understanding that the ignorance of those around him only served as confirmation that his father had achieved his wishes. He truly was going to take the blame for everything.

Albus knew that he had to deal with this particular lie, knew that if he didn't he would only be dishonoring the man who had sacrificed so much. But that didn't mean that he had to partake in more. The morning of the last day of term Albus had been greeted by a letter from his mother telling him that everything was okay for now and that he should expect normalcy when he got home. Albus had cringed as he'd read it. Even more egregious however was what he knew would occur during the end-of-term feast, when Headmistress McGonagall, as great a person as she was, would have to pat down the truth once more for almost everyone in the Hall, all on his father's wishes. And so, Albus took no part in it.

He'd left the feast in the middle last year, but this year he didn't even bother showing up. All of the delicious food presented was not worth the uncomfortable stares or the nonsense that he'd be forced to hear and take as fact. Instead, he packed up what remained of his things-that which general lethargy had made him neglect to do so previously-and spent the last of his time in the castle alone in his dormitory, his hands playing with a shiny silver ring for some odd reason as he did so.

Why did he continue to clutch the chunk of metal as though it was something special? He knew that somewhere deep in his subconscious there had to be a symbolic reason for it, but he couldn't quite pinpoint it. Was it to remind him of the man who Sancticus Fairhart had been before he'd reverted back to his ways of anger and selfishness? A man who he had at one time placed on a pedestal as a figure to be admired, for his wisdom, strength, and ability to blur the lines between good and evil? Or was his affinity for the ring, perhaps, yet one more reminder of his father, who had given it to him in the first place, believing it to be rightfully his? His father, who somehow had the presence of mind to know exactly what needed to be done when his son had been in need of something to cling to...

He drifted off to sleep with these thoughts in his head, and by the time that he'd woken up the next day, he was ready to leave his fifth year behind him completely.

The bustle on the morning of the train ride home was always great, but this year in particular it seemed to be at a high. Perhaps it was because he had made sure to pack everything the night before and had simply decided to watch as others gathered their belongings. Stray socks were picked up from the floor, textbooks were jammed in trunks, and, of course, students ran amok to say good-bye to their friends as though they wouldn't be seeing them on the platform. Melonie Grue in particular was saying a tearful farewell to Denise Toils, but Albus had the shrewd suspicion that this was because she planned on spending most of the train ride with her boyfriend.

The letters stating that magic was not to be done for the summer months were finally handed out to students an hour before noon, and it was at this point that they all waved their hands back in the direction of the castle, crowding Hogsmeade station in anticipation of boarding the scarlet engine. Albus could see Rose holding Lace tightly, looking nothing short of mortified at the idea that this was their last train ride together. James too was with his own girlfriend, though he didn't look quite as bent up. He was laughing with her at something.

Bartleby Bing and Dante Haug gave Albus a semi-friendly wave as they went to board the Hogwarts Express, a form of paralinguistics that Albus was now fully used to; those who didn't like his father but had no qualms with he himself tended to use it.

Albus looked up into the gray sky, sensing rain at once. It was a muggy day already, but Albus knew that the chances of leaving the train and entering a dry Platform Nine and Three Quarters was quite slim. It was funny how much he could pay attention to something as mundane as the weather, when intent on ignoring what was going around him. He stepped onto the scarlet train while attempting to clear his thoughts completely, though he knew that it was to no avail. There was something different about the end of this year. Something beyond the ordinary feeling of foreboding or regret. His fifth year at Hogwarts had been going quite well before his fateful decision to foolishly fling himself into uncharted territory. Half of him felt like boarding the train was leaving this error behind him; a cleansing of sorts. The other half of him felt like he was abandoning a situation that he was completely responsible for.

He did not blame himself for Blackwood's death. He had not asked her to make such a pact with Fairhart, nor had he asked Fairhart for this guaranteed protection. He did not blame himself for Fischer's death either-he had most certainly not asked her to track him at her own leisure. The only feeling of true guilt that he could muster-that familiar feeling of guilt that he was previously positive he'd left behind-was for his father. Albus may not have asked for his father to do what he'd done, but every action that he'd taken had given the man little choice. With guilt came the wonder of rectification. Was there anything that could be done to right the wrongs that had transpired?

He felt a small push, then turned to see that it was Scorpius.

"Don't hold up the line mate, you already don't have a lot of fans-"

Albus nodded and moved forward, walking in a daze down the aisle, more and more thoughts pounding inside of his head as he did so. He peered through the glass door of a compartment to check if it was occupied and saw a group of third year girls writing on slips of paper, undoubtedly exchanging information of some sort. One of them was wearing an all black t-shirt that he recognized as one being sold by vendors in Hogsmeade, a shirt with a silver sword like symbol right on the front-

"Harry Potter, the Silver Wizard!" Warren Waddlesworth laughed, holding the wrinkly newspaper up as he did so. "Who believes this drivel?"

He was at his desk, his magnificent red hair combed back down his shoulders, wearing an immaculate and pristine suit of snowy white. Across from the desk and standing up was the tall, leering figure of the Hammer, who looked as though he'd seen better days; his arm was in a sling anyway.

"You think he was framed?" the Hammer asked stupidly.

Waddlesworth chuckled. "I think that poor Harry Potter needed to get his son off of the hook for being out of school, so he created some elaborate hoax to draw the attention towards himself. Oh how I love martyrs..."

The Hammer gave a wide grin. "I could testify saying that I saw the boy there" he said, his yellow teeth bared. "Make Potter's sacrifice entirely in vain."

Waddlesworth laughed once more, this time dropping the newspaper on to his desk and placing his arms behind his head in a relaxing matter.

"I wish, Zydrunas" he said. "But doing so would admit that you were there, which would be a proof that I'd sent you, and it's already taken an extraordinary amount of maneuvering to make it seem like those idiots I entrusted with a simple task of obtaining a piece of cloth had nothing to do with me at all. No, I can't show that WAR had anything to do with this debacle."

The Hammer frowned; for a second he had seemed extremely pleased with himself.

Waddlesworth clapped his hands together however, intent on snapping his right hand man out of his stupor.

"Fear not Zydrunas, we have broader things on the horizon than worsening the already miserable life of Harry Potter. There is much to rejoice at today. For starters, the Silver Wizard is out of our hair."

"But you said-"

"Harry Potter was not the Silver Wizard, Zydrunas, he's too noble to cause such mayhem. From what you've told me, however, one can easily ascertain as to the true identity of the masked 'beacon of light.'"

The Hammer raised his eyebrows, confused. Waddlesworth smiled widely.

"If what you said is true, the Silver Wizard fired a spell at you first and foremost, and failed to fire one towards only Blackwood and the Potter boy. I know of only one person with priorities like that."

The Hammer tensed up, but Waddlesworth again laughed.

"The state that you mentioned our dear traitor Ida of being in is a proof that her mind had been tampered with-thus proving his survival. He is of no threat however. If Potter has taken the fall, then that means he obviously knows that our good friend Sancticus is no longer going to play hero. I can only assume that a certain casualty in the battle proved to be quite tragic for him."

They both laughed at this, the Hammer pleased to this time be in on the joke. He stopped abruptly when Waddlesworth did however.

"With this issue out of our way," Waddlesworth began, "we can begin to progress further. The Ministry has failed its people for the last time-this is the last straw. It is time that we gave the people a government that is not founded on corruption and confusion."

Waddlesworth picked up the *Prophet* once more, this time turning the page and pointing to a headline that read *Minister Confirms Retirement*.

"Zydrunas," he said, his face transforming completely, "I need your opinion on some campaign slogans."

"Come on, come on, keep moving" Scorpius ushered him, jabbing him annoyingly in the back as he did so.

"Alright, alright" Albus said, disgruntled, though he could not imagine how this would help him find a compartment faster. Morrison and Melonie, who were behind Scorpius, were at least not complaining.

He slid the next compartment door open furiously, intent on sitting there even if it was occupied, but this was quickly disproved. There was a gaggle of first years in there, and they all pointed to him in synchronization, whispering to one another so much that it didn't even sound like words-

The Executioner's Veil stood in the center of the dingy chamber, the sole sight to see for the numerous hooded figures surrounding it. They had all removed their red masks, staring at one another now with anxious faces, eager to see the results for themselves. Within the circle of people there was one man however who looked as though he didn't belong.

"Keep hold of him" Sebastain Darvy spat menacingly, eyeing this individual with a twisted sneer. "Let the sneak witness this first hand."

There was no point to saying this however, Fango Wilde was not putting up a fight at all. He was merely standing there, his robes clutched by two Dark Alliance members. Wilde's face was bloody and bruised, his robes singed. At his feet lay a wand that had been snapped in two.

Darvy neared the Veil slowly, his black robes billowing with each step, just as the curtain to the Veil did. His blue eyes glinted maniacally as he removed a wand from his robes-a wand that shined with golden light, despite it's black, fang shaped handle.

"Watch now," he crooned to all of his observers. "Watch as I begin the end..."

He held the Dragonfang Wand up to the Executioner's Veil, which, most curiously, had begin fluttering unusually fast. There were moans of awe from the onlookers, many of them exchanging looks of glee.

Slowly, a decayed hand slipped through the center of the Veil, causing many in the room to jump back in disgust. It began clawing and snatching at air, and soon, there was another hand, and then another...

"You want this, yes?" Darvy cackled.

Too many hands to count now, and still growing. Some of them extended into emaciated, almost skeletal arms, the chilly sound of rattling breath accompanying each one...

"Finally" Scorpius said, as they settled into a compartment at the very end of the train.

Albus slumped himself down into a seat, Scorpius sitting across from him. Morrison and Melonie both went to sit as well, but Melonie exclaimed something to stop them.

"Oop-wait-I just remembered I have to give Denise her make-up bag back-"

"Can't you do it once we're off the train?" Morrison asked, but she looked at him as though he was a different species.

"Morrison that doesn't make any *sense*" she said. "The entire point is to put it on now, before we arrive-"

"Ugh, fine" he said, his hand firmly around hers. "I'll be back guys."

"In two hours" Scorpius mumbled, but Albus simply nodded towards his other best friend, indicating that he would make sure that their seats were saved. Both of them left, leaving the compartment door open so that someone else could slip in. Mirra had been walking behind them the whole time; she'd previously stopped to say good-bye at the platform to Eckley and Hornsbrook. She jumped when she entered though, a terrible rumbling of thunder the cause.

"Here comes the rain" Albus said nonchalantly, staring outside of the window and watching as the first few flecks of water hit. Mirra sat down next to him, then ensnared his arm in her own and leaned onto his shoulder. Albus gripped her fingers tightly. Scorpius was just starting to stretch and get comfortable when he leapt up.

"Great, now I have to go to the loo, save my seat too-"

And he hurried off. Albus immediately waved his hand in recognition, his mind still occupied. For some inexplicable reason, he was now thinking mostly of Fairhart. His hand returned to his pocket, where again he felt the silver ring that had never quite packed from the day before-

The rain began to drop at a tenacious rate, water splashing off of the wild black hair and down the back of his neck. Sancticus Fairhart was on his knees, which were now covered in mud. He was leaning down in a graveyard.

He was not near the other graves however. He was near a plot of dirt that he'd dug all on his own. He had not selected this cemetery for any sentimental value, it had housed no one that he knew up until now. He'd picked it only for its haunting beauty, determining that a place that could inspire such sorrow and aesthetic allure at the same time was the only proper place for this particular burial. He dug his hand into the dirt where he had buried Ida Blackwood, scooping it up and letting it slide off of his dirty fingers before his eyes. No casket. No tombstone. Just dirt. A burial of the simplest kind, the only thing that he could give to a woman who had loved him so much.

Though the rain covered the tears, not even the thunder could cover his sobs. Sancticus Fairhart could only sit there in the rain, his disfigured face illuminated by a flash of lightning. Squeezed in his other hand was a colorful baby toy; a rattle, to be exact. Fairhart clutched it tightly in his fingers and pulled it close to his chest, his tears leaking onto it.

"I'm so sorry" he uttered to the rattle, as though it were a person. "You'd be so ashamed of me..."

"Albus, are you okay?" Mirra asked him.

He pressed his head up against the glass, peering outside and finding that nothing was visible due to the rain; it had picked up considerably.

"I'm okay" he told her. "Just-just thinking..."

This was certainly the truth. The train was going at full speed now, strange, as Albus had not even realized the exact moment when it had started moving. He let go of the ring in his pocket, suddenly feeling sick for holding on to it. Why was he thinking about Fairhart, when it was his father who was truly hurting now? His father...crammed in some grimy cell on some island in the middle of nowhere...

A lone iron door sat at the end of the repugnant corridor, the only thing that didn't look so frail that it could be knocked aside by a gust of wind. A metal plaque on the door bore the words **High Security**.

A man dressed in all gray robes approached the door. He had a long mane of gray hair that matched his robes, as well as a harsh looking face that was almost void of lines. The Azkaban guard removed his wand from his robes and began slashing at the metallic door in numerous different ways, his face screwed up in concentration as he did so. Finally, after more than a full minute of work, there was a clicking noise, and the door opened.

The guard entered and rolled his eyes at what he saw. There was the other guard, just where he'd last been; sitting in a small silver chair and leaning forward eagerly, as if hoping for conversation with the famous prisoner.

Harry Potter sat in the grimy cell, his robes accumulating filth just from how he was laying on the dirty floor, his legs spread out and his back pressed up against his pathetic excuse for a cot. He was saying nothing, and due to the dirt on his round spectacles, it was hard to see whether or not he was even awake.

"Stop talking to him" the guard barked as he entered.

The one sitting in the chair perked his ears up, and this one was much scrawnier, with a younger face and large ears on either side of his angular head. He was holding a dusty *Prophet* in his hand.

"Not talkin', just makin' sure he's alive."

"Well stop it, that's not your concern" answered the older guard gruffly. "We're supposed to switch now-"

"Just a couple more minutes!" the other guard cried indignantly, and the more callous the two rolled his eyes and left at once.

The younger guard waited until his partner was out of earshot before addressing the near catatonic man in the cell.

"Is there anything I can get you Mr. Potter? Anything at all?" he whispered.

Harry turned his head slowly, again, his expression unreadable. "Would you mind handing me that newspaper when you're done with it?" he asked hoarsely. "I miss doing the cross-word..."

Without waiting for an answer he turned back to the direction he'd been facing, staring into the wall rather than at the high security door, which he knew led to a grimy corridor that led to more grimy corridors, each one stacked with cells that housed prisoners that he'd captured, and each hall creating a dusty and decayed floor that belonged to a large, prism shaped building, one with several well trained Aurors for both the interior and exterior, which was hardly necessary, considering the dangerous enchantments that surrounded the mass of island itself, all of which made an impossible entrance or exit that much more impossible-

The rain was pounding so hard against the window that Albus could barely string two thoughts together. He kept his forehead pressed up against the cool glass, which was well worth it despite the dull thudding that punctuated each of his thoughts. It was just he and his girlfriend alone in the compartment for the time being, both of them in silence, her arms snaked through his.

His father was suffering, and there was nothing that could be done. Nothing that the Ministry could do, anyway. In order to have a sliver of a chance at proving his father's innocence, Fairhart would need to be proven alive. And no one in the Ministry was going to go for that. There would be no investigation. It would have to be someone who already knew who proved it...someone would have to find Fairhart and bring him to justice. That was the only way to make things right. With the truth. His father had sacrificed so much to keep him safe in the confines of Hogwarts. *Someone* now had to make the sacrifice of bringing Fairhart to justice as well...

Someone...

"Could you ever hate me?" Albus asked into the silence. Mirra squirmed slightly.

"Of course not" she answered him. "W-why?"

He turned to her.

"I'm-I'm thinking of leaving for a bit next year."

Author's Note/ Book 6 Preview

Hello readers! This is Vekin87, here to present you guys with some info about the next book, as well to answer some questions/criticisms from the reviews. I'm sure you guys are all used to me getting teary eyed and thanking you for your continued support by now, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop! So again, I can never thank you all enough for your readership. The sheer number of my readers is baffling, and the amount of interest that this series has generated has surpassed every intention that I've ever had for it. I'm frequently praised for having made it five books in, but to those of you who give me such recognition, I suggest you look a bit closer to home; I would not be this far today without the motivation that you've all given me. So again, whether you've reviewed every chapter, once a book, or have never so much as left a comment at all, please understand that YOU are just as important to this series as I am.

And now, on to a few things! First, I think I'll handle a couple of common criticisms...

cracks knuckles menacingly

1. The book's length. Book 5 is somewhat shorter than book 4, which I'm sure is a little odd considering the length of OotP. However, is it important to know that though my series draws a parallel to JK's works of art, not everything is going to line up. Book 5 was almost a pit stop in between 4 and 6; a story in its own right meant to serve as a bridge more than anything else. I had numerous other ideas for it, but I have to think of things in terms of a series as a whole, and that means that things had to be excluded from this book so that they could fit better into later installements. Book 6, however, will EASILY be my longest book. The length of 5 wasn't too common amidst reviews, and was never really said as "criticism", but I still thought that I'd address it.

2. A constant parallel. Early on the book, alot of people seemed to think that Silver Wizard was nearly identical to Order of the Phoenix. This was intentional however. I specifically and frequently want my series to parallel the HP series for two reasons; plot purposes, and nostalgia. I don't want Albus to face everything that hasn't been fought before; in a way, I want him to have support. I want his greatest battles to occur on the inside, and that means that his outside battles can't be the show stealers every time...hence why I frequently put him in a situation that Harry is familiar with-like the Ministry interfering at Hogwarts for instance. At the same time, however, its a great plot point to see the differences and similarities between how Albus and Harry handle these respective situations. Though frequently put into similar positions, I really want to draw attention to the things that Albus does to differ himself from his fathers adventures. Though they both constantly put themselves in danger, I think that Albus is more of a loner-in the climax to this book in particular, He's willing to go on his own as soon as he realizes his friends aren't up to it.

And in terms of nostalgia, I like making people cringe when they realize that Albus is making the same mistakes that his father did. I think it adds a nice touch of foreboding to the mix.

3. Albus. My main character is getting more negative attention than ever, and I couldn't be happier. I never intended on making Albus the perfect protagonist. I never even wanted him to be an AVERAGE protagonist. He's a kid; he's an idiot. He makes the mistakes that kid makes, only, his consequences prove to be greater because of his surroundings. Albus embodies many Slytherin traits that people don't typically pick up on. He can be arrogant, extremely cunning (particularly with deductive reasoning and investigative prowess) and, most of all, he seeks glory. How many times has he wanted to be the one who catches the bad guy? Or who saves the girl? So much so that it's clearly to a fault. But I want him to make mistakes because in the end, I want it to be up to the reader whether or not he has the redeemable qualities necessary to make him likeable. He's a fifteen year old, and that means he's going to lie to his girlfriend, pass off on guilt that's clearly his, and have an unquenchable thirst to rectify every problem he's created. At the same time, however, these are supposed to be his most human characteristics. And beyond that, every trait has its good and bad sides. Though its typically covered by his more negative aspects, Albus has shown great courage, perseverance, and compassion over the course of this series. And though it isn't quite definable, Albus still has the same generally good spirit that made him capable of walking through the Dunegon of Merlin's Mist; the same thing that helped him overcome the murderous thoughts provided by the Dragonfang Wand in Book 2. It's thinned out over time, because things have gotten so much worse, but this trait remains. It's what made him capable of pitying Blackwood in Book 4, enough to give her Fairhart's ring, and indeed, it's what makes him question even now whether it's truly right for his father to have to suffer for having done nothing wrong. It's very easy to write him off as just a stupid kid, but my overall plan has always been to make him a stupid kid *and* a generally good person.

4. The Quidditch Final Math Error. By far my most infamous FLINT to date, there is no true excuse for this. My beta/brother pointed something out to me, saying "Wait...Kev, how does this-" and I was all "NO Mike I know how to write Quidditch! Do you want to write the book? Then go back to editing the ***** grammar!" and lo and behold, several reviewers were quick to point out the impossibility of my Quidditch score. It doesn't matter in the long run, because Slytherin was always supposed to lose anyway and it would have happened had I not tried to spice things up, but its still embarrassing. To be fair though, Quidditch is ridiculously difficult to make exciting considering the outlandish point sytem, and my math is downright awful. For reference, I was once microwaving sausages for breakfast, the box said to heat them up for "a minute and a half" and I put it in for 150 seconds _ I'm 19 years old currently and that was like 5 months ago.

Okay, on to some questions!

Q. Why is Mirra still upset with Rose, when Rose tried salvaging their friendship?

A. I'm not a girl, but, to be fair, what little I know of them suggests that they can hold grudges for a loooooong time. I also took into account Rose and Mirra's personalities, and the fact that the neither of them still hasn't really "apologized". There is hope for their friendship in the future, especially considering the state of things, but I wouldn't imagine them as BFF's again anytime soon.

Q. Retrospectively, do you regret saying that ONE major character would die in Book 4 (as it ruined the surprise of Fairhart being alive)

A. Yes, I do regret it, but to be fair, I'd considered this already and thought it irrelevant. I myself didn't consider Fairhart a major character yet (he'd only really been in one full book at the time) so I figured he wouldn't even be considered as the major character that later proved to be Ares. Fairhart ended up being much more popular than I'd thought though, so by the time book 4 finished, it made it seem like he must have still been alive. I only really consider Fairhart a major character now, during this book, but I suppose as others had him in such high esteem, it was stupid of me to specify only one death in that particular author's note.

Q/A. The same person who asked the former question also questioned the treatment of Azkaban prisoners. Yes, the Dementors are gone, but I always considered that an indication that the protection and security would be increased tenfold. I do not actually believe that conditions of Azkaban would have changed much however. Especially with Harry. Astute readers may have realized that Harry was being kept in the same cell that Ares had been in-the one meant for extremely powerful and dangerous people-and that means that the cell isn't used too often or even give much care for hygiene.

Q. What is going to happen to Fango Wilde?

A. Can't answer this, but I can say that Fango will be in dire straits in the next book, and also, that he'll have his biggest role yet.

Q. What new mostrosity will come from the Veil?

A. People may be curious as to why I introduced Necrosteeds in this book, then never really showed them in action. Well, I did this to give you guys a taste of what was possible; not what was guarenteed. Necrosteeds will be among the weaker creatures to come from the Veil once Darvy starts amassing his army, I can promise that much.

Q. Will Harry escape?

A. Oh come on, I'm supposed to answer this without being spoilerish? XD

Q. What will Fairhart do now?

A. A very good question. I can't be too spoilerish, but I can tell you that Fairhart is now almost as lost as Albus. One must wonder at this point, does he even have anything left to fight for? He will be an integral character in Book 6 however, and I'll elaborate on this further later on in this note.

Q. Will Puckerd return?

A. Yes, but his role will never be as large as it was in Book 5.

Q. How will the whole family react to Albus?

A. Things will be tense for a bit, but I'd imagine that Book 6 will be more about banding together than pointing fingers. Albus' relationship with James in particular might be a bit strained, but you can expect his mother to actually have her biggest role yet with Harry incarcerated.

Q. Is Hugo going to play a bigger role later on?

A. Kind of...Albus' interactions with his family as a whole will be bigger, but Hugo's role in particular will not expand passed being someone whose faith in Albus is gone. Fun Fact though: with James gone, Albus and Rose will be the oldest in the family at Hogwarts.

Q. Will Albus ever figure out his gold problem?

A. The reader will probably figure it out completely before Albus does, but I can promise that these strange occurrences will be a main point in Book 6, and most of it will be very well explained. I'll speak about this a bit more later on in the note.

Q. How will Mirra react to Albus' wishes to leave Hogwarts?

A. Al hasn't done anything yet, and I won't even go as far as to guarentee you that he does. Right now Mirra is taking a more preventive position; you can expect her to be pleading with Albus to not do anything drastic at the start of Book 6.

Q. How did Fairhart know what was going? (resources, etc.)

A. This seems like a bit of a cop out, but a recurring character trait of Fairhart is that he's good at tracking. It was kind of his job in WAR (Warren is the brains/mouth, Hammer the muscle, Blackwood capable of blending in socially, and Fairhart would have specialized in tracking). For instance, Fairhart provides Blackwood with information on Lucius Malfoy years before he ever joined the Ministry, a testament to his skill at acquiring information. With the Dark Alliance in particular he has little trouble; they're not exactly clandestine about their activities usually. The wedding, however, is a special case, as is the climax of

this book. Fairhart had a special way of knowing how these things were occurring, to be explained in Book 6. Some sharper thinkers may find the answer somewhat obvious however. Remember, he *was* in the Ministry before he faked his death.

Q. Do you write your stories as post them, or write them out beforehand?

A. I think of most of my story content before I write it, but I'm always posting and writing at the same time. Usually though, I'm a chapter or two ahead of you guys, especially in the beginning.

Q. About when will you be starting to post the next book?

A. I can not say for sure. Book 5 was written during my first year of college, and indeed, the climax was done when I should have ben studying for finals XD I do not imagine the hiatus being quite as long as it was for Book 5, but Book 6 will be quite long, and will require a considerable amount of thought into it. I will, however, let you guys know once writing is underway. I may do other things to keep you guys interested in the meantime however, like posting polls. I've actually had the idea for a series of short oneshots involving some of my OC's, taking place before the series, to give you guys some rather superflous information about their personalities and history.

Q. How many more books?

A. Just 6 and 7 :)

Q/A. Someone asked me to clear up Albus' relationship with Hugo. It's turbulent. It's very easy for his other cousins to kind of ignore the mistakes that Albus makes, but Hugo used to idolize him, so you can expect some natural animosity there. Obviously, he still loves his cousin, but Hugo in particular is wary of Al, and you can expect him to not be as supportive as his parents would like him to be. This will be detailed in Book 6 however.

Okay, that was the bulk of the questions, now on to what people are here for! Some juicy tidbits :)

I can't be as detailed as I was with other books, as not everything is as planned out as it needs to be, and I can't be too spoilerish either. Some things to expect however:

1. Book 6 will have some shades of Deathly Hallows. I'll go no further than that.

2. Someone asked if we'd ever learn more about Fairhart. Fairhart will be a huge part of this next book, and I can promise you that you will know just about everything that there is to know about him before it ends. I want to quickly draw attention to the fact that Fairhart is not right now currently protagonist or antagonist. Albus wants to catch him and bring

him to justice yes, but that does not make Fairhart an *enemy* per se. Likewise, Fairhart in this book showed himself to be fallible; showed his true weaknesses. For all of his knowledge on magic, and his great power, Fairhart lacked the control necessary to come to grips with Blackwood's death and leave it be. Fairhart was clearly not expecting Harry to be imprisoned for his actions (how could he have predicted that?) but one can only wonder what would have happened had he let Fischer live. How much could have been avoided with a single act of mercy? Fairhart had the option to not get revenge, but he did it anyway-he became the very thing that he loathed once being when he was in WAR. Interestingly enough, I must ask: Fairhart has always been considered a generally good person; had it been Albus in his position-cradling a dead loved one and having the ability to exact revenge-do you think that Albus would have killed Fischer?

3. Book 6 will have a powerful connection to Book 4. Darvy has all of the tools necessary to create a ferocious army, and the world has never been weaker with Harry behind bars. Likewise, the Wand will be more relevant than it was in Book 5, and Albus' strange powers and dreams will become frequent once more-and more detailed. Also, their great absence in book 5 will be explained.

4. Scorpius will dabble in dating a bit , and I might as well tease you guys a bit right now when I say that Lance is now gone and that Rose is the type of girl who only really wants something when she can't have it...including someone she may have previously rejected.

5. Harry being in Azkaban-and indeed, the prison itself-will play a HUGE role in the next book.

6. There will be a new Potions professor, and for the first time ever, they will NOT be an original character. In fact, this character is a fan favorite that a lot of people have wanted me to incorporate more, and I think it will work quite well with what I have planned for this book. Small hint: think of a character that could be *available* for the Potions position.

7. Waddlesworth's role will return to prominence, as it was in Book 4.

8. I'll give you guys one chapter title, but it's a big one. "Caleb Fairhart".

9, The title of Book 6 is tentatively titled as-and this *might* change, and if so, it would only be slightly- "Albus Potter and the Fortress of the Dead".

Also, I promised an excerpt from Book 6, and here it is: guaranteed to be in the book. It's short, but I think it'll be effective:

"Tell me Albus, what do you know of Azkaban?"

Albus raised his eyebrows curiously. "I-I've heard it's almost impossible to break out of" he said.

"Indeed. But what do you know of breaking in?"

Well that's it for now! Again, a huge thank you to everyone who is reading this right now; it means more than you think, believe me. I want to give a special thank you to my brother for being so helpful in his editing, as well as a special shout out to my girlfriend Yelena, for keeping me sane as I attempted to write a book and go to college at the same time :)

Also, I have one more comment to make. Writing five books is difficult, but not nearly as difficult (or as rewarding, I'm sure) as motherhood. I want to give a special thanks to my mother, and yet another special shout out to all of the women out there who have one or more little superstars of their own! Happy Mother's Day!

So again, thanks for reading! I hope that you guys enjoyed reading Book 5 as much as I enjoyed writing it, and I hope that you're all looking forward to book 6!

-Kevin