

Albus Potter and the War Within

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Chapter 1: Fairhart's Final Farewell

The dedication of this book is split seven ways:

To my friends, some of whom are aware of this series, others who are not; to Bryan, Chris, Pj, Nastia, Brittany, Meg, Kyle, and so many others who have shaped this series in ways they'll never know.

To my editors, of which there have been many, some of whom are included elsewhere on this list; your hard work has been instrumental to this series, and will always be appreciated.

To my parents, who I know always did their best.

To my brother, Michael, for enduring things with me that no one else in this world could understand.

To Yelena, for breathing new life into me when I needed it most.

To my readers; to you, whoever you are, for taking part in this adventure with me- this series is yours as well, and it has been an honour to write for you all.

And last, but most certainly not least, to J.K Rowling; for letting a muggle like me take shelter in her world of magic for so long.

And now, the final installment of the Albus Potter Series, by Vekin87:

Chapter 1: Fairhart's Final Farewell

Dead leaves crinkled underneath his feet as he walked, each crunch punctuating the chorus of the hollow wind in his ears. The March chill was not unnerving, or ominous, but it was poignant, sharp in the way it bit into his skin, almost as if to urge him forward. Ducking under branches and slipping on the glossed over grass, a shape came into view.

For a moment, memories burned through his skull. The trees, the shadows, the smell of nature. The sight beyond was larger in these recollections, towering and grand, and he was infinitesimal, a speck, a shadow, with another shadow beside him-

Now the structure ahead was old and small, and cramped, but even with as little time as he'd spent there, Albus remembered it well. Fairhart's cabin seemed to extend invisible arms towards him as he worked his way through the bramble, the loose strap of his dark backpack occasionally snagging to halt him. The sight of it soothed him, though he wasn't quite sure why; perhaps it had become symbolic in some way. His life seemed divided into two separate, yet

related parts-the first was everything before the cabin, and the attack on the train. Memories so rich and vivid that he could see and feel and taste them like they were right before him; laughing with James, pillow fights with Uncle Ron. Seeing his mother fly, being terrified of heights; Scorpius' scowl, Morrison's chortle, Mirra's soft kisses. And then there was the second part, the part that had started with the cabin. It was briefer, and more crude, but it was more recent too. And soon, he realized, as he exited the dense wooden area and made for the homely abode, it would serve as another beginning.

Fairhart's wooden residence was not his first stop, but it was close. Immediately following his departure from the Potter residence, he'd gone to Hogwarts, almost instinctively. Not in the castle, not even on the grounds-powerful magic made such a thing impossible. But just outside of the grounds, where the majestic castle still loomed, watching him, comforting him. There was no real point to it outside of to stare, but he'd camped there for at least more than a night, if only to accept that what he'd heard was true; the school was closed. The lights had still flitted about into the night sky, but Albus somehow knew that it had an empty interior, a piece of history temporarily subdued by the capricious world around it. After Hogwarts he'd went to Hogsmeade, which had seemed an appropriate and effective way of gauging what he was up against. There, in the wizarding village, he'd observed and absorbed, and had gotten a grasp of the contents of the Wizarding World following the destruction of the United Ministry. It had proven to be a most unique experience-familiar yet incoherent, almost like being in a dream. It had all looked the same, with people interacting and shopping. Albus had spent a few nights (and already an exorbitant amount of his gold) at an inn, spending his days listening in and watching, and learning for himself what his family and friends hadn't told him.

The people, he now knew, were neither afraid nor brave, but rather living in a society destined to explode at any moment. People talked loudly about whom they'd pledge their support to-some still supported the fragmented WAR, and Waddlesworth, others wanted the Ministry back. Some embraced the anarchy, and that was when fighting started. There were whispers and growls about Darvy-about "Death's Right Hand"-and how he was in hiding, about the Dark Alliance severing incrementally, dividing somewhat just as the numerous Renegade factions now were. How many days he spent hiding in plain sight he wasn't sure, but now that he'd Apparated to outside the cabin-to where he could begin to apply this knowledge-he felt himself shake. Was it excitement? He didn't know. But as the sweat defied the cold and ran down his free hand-the hand with a mesh of flesh in the center-Fairhart's words came back to him in a rush of wind.

Back at the cabin there is a silver box.

Albus hadn't forgotten. He'd played around with the words in his head daily since he'd left the island, searching their context for some hidden meaning, some posed riddle. But his memory served him well, and Fairhart's last true sentence to him had made sense in the end. *Back at the cabin.* Albus recalled this mysterious box, this item that he'd made no passing thought towards the entire time that he'd been training alongside the Renegade, and as he neared the cabin, he found himself almost bursting with intrigue. It was an idea that he'd voiced to no one-not his father, not Mirra, not Scorpius or Morrison-but in his head he had a deep hope, almost an expectation, that Fairhart was still guiding him.

He'd wondered often what would be concealed within the silver box, even if it only was to himself. His first, immediate thought had been of a weapon; a powerful magical weapon that would serve to aid him in whatever endeavors Fairhart had expected to remain after the island. Fairhart had not taken it with them, he realized, as a precaution-if they never did leave Azkaban, it was best not to keep something so powerful there with them. He speculated on its use-it pertained to those fierce objects that Darvy possessed, he figured; or at least, two of them, as Fango Wilde now seemed to have one. But the idea of a powerful offensive force seemed too good to be true, and too potent to have not been mentioned.

So then he imagined some sort of a tool. Nothing to be used in such a manner as a wand, but something that would help him nevertheless. Fairhart could not have possibly known that Azkaban would be his end, but he was tactical enough to leave something inopportune for another moment. He couldn't begin to fathom what the tool could be-what it would look like, or its exact usage-but the idea still lingered in his mind nevertheless. Soon enough, he realized, as the cabin grew larger in his wake, the mystery would end.

He pushed the battered door open with his scarred hand, his other fingers clasped around the strap of his backpack. Albus had put little thought into the trivial aspects of his journey-having left in such a hurry, and with such a clouded mind-but he'd proven to be overall prepared for concealing himself in the shadows, at least. He wore a dark, long sleeved shirt, and worn out jeans, and he could practically feel himself blend into the darkness of the cabin. Breathing in dust, he whipped out his wand and murmured, "*Lumos!*"

The beam of light hovered in the air, sliding over the decaying walls and splintered ground. It was night time, but it would be morning soon, and he crept about accordingly, eyeing what little he could. He saw a moth-eaten couch and felt himself cringe-that was where he had slept. Striding by it, he inhaled sharply as he entered the next room, and here he saw that his wand light wasn't needed. An opened window allowed the moonlight to pour in easily, and the resulting image was enough to make him give an audible groan. The room was in disarray.

The United Ministry, he remembered at once. Picking up the pieces from the events before he and Fairhart had arrived at the island that month or so ago, he recalled the visit to Lambshire that preceded their departure. It had been there where they'd encountered Waddlesworth's mix of Aurors and Renegades, and where Fairhart had revealed their hiding spot as compromised. He had not been incorrect. The old and decrepit books that Albus had vaguely paid attention to were scattered about on the floor, along with an overturned cauldron. With grim satisfaction, Albus realized that Waddlesworth's dogs had found nothing, as there was little to find-he and Fairhart had lived almost solely by their wands during his training. In fact, the only thing that could even be worth finding was-

"The box!"

It was the first word that he remembered uttering in a few days, but he didn't bother to count, instead looking around wildly in the moonlight. His eyes passed over an untouched cupboard in the corner, scaling around the room rapidly, so much so that he seemed to see the contents of the room in a blur. Finally, after a moment of searching, it appeared to him, exactly where it was

in his memory-on the floor, placed up against the middle of the wall adjacent to him.

It looked, like only a few other things, completely untouched. Hanging above it was still the odd piece of rectangular cloth, and both of them had an almost eerie visual about them, looking entirely motionless, as though two stones uninterrupted by a storm. Albus approached the box quickly and crouched down, then ran his hands over it. It was cold and made of metal, just as he'd predicted, but a bit smaller than it had seemed before as well; he wondered just what Fairhart could have managed to fit inside of it that had such great importance. When he went to lift it to examine it more, however, he found that he couldn't.

Agitated, he grasped the smooth sides of it with his palms and gave an almighty heave, only to feel a terrible pain in his back a moment later. Gritting his teeth, he went for one more unsuccessful pull, and then aimed his wand at it.

"*Adlevio!*" he thought in his head, jolting his wand forward. The Featherweight charm now successfully applied, he reached down for another tug-

The box still wouldn't budge, but beyond that, it had changed. Atop the silver cube four blue lights had appeared, organized vertically, illuminating the room even more so than the presence of the moon. Albus gazed at it, hauntingly entranced by it, and saw shapes in the four lights, four of them, all rounded. When he touched the first light on his left it changed; the rounded shape vanished, followed by a smaller straight line.

He realized what was going on immediately. *Numbers*. There had been four zeros there, and at touching one of them, it had changed to the number one. To test his theory, he touched the third light twice rapidly, and sure enough, a shimmering number two greeted him. To investigate further, he tapped all the way up until nine, but after another touch, it reset itself to zero.

Standing up, he rubbed at his chin. He recalled thinking before, upon seeing the box, that it resembled a safe of sorts-a container for precious belongings; indeed, Fairhart might have even specified this as well, though he wasn't sure. Obviously, this idea had been proven phenomenally correct regardless, but this didn't help his situation. Whatever was in the safe was undoubtedly important, but the combination was going to prove tricky to bypass. He immediately thought of the most powerful spells that he knew of-spells to destroy, to conjure fire, an array of destructive curses and hexes-but he tossed away the idea almost at once. This was Fairhart's safe, and Fairhart was twice the wizard he was, and would know enchantments to protect such a thing of importance from those kinds of spells. Albus would need someone like his father here to break through such defences, but he had no intention of having that occur. Looking around the room, he realized that he may not have been the first to meet such a struggle either; if the United Ministry had done even a pitiful job of searching about, they would have encountered the unmovable box and tried to open it as well, and if they couldn't do so by force, Albus was sorry to say, then he definitely didn't have a shot. On deeper thinking, the mess around him could even have been a sign of their frustration-a childish tantrum, thrown over a box to which they had no idea of the contents.

Albus sat down in the dust, legs crossed beneath him, deep in concentration. Was there any

point to trying? He tried to think of a time when Fairhart had mentioned a sequence of numbers, had mentioned *anything* that could be of assistance here, but it seemed as though he was on his own. Whether the combination was random or specifically designed, it took him only a moment of thinking to realize that he didn't know it.

Sliding himself up against the wall, he tried to think again of the last words that Fairhart had aimed at him. It was hard to remember the situation exactly, hard to remember everything word for word. Albus had called him by his first name, "San"; he'd started doing that. But Fairhart had cut him off hurriedly, and hadn't even finished his sentence before the Silhouettes had attacked. He'd mentioned the box, that much Albus knew, that was why he was here. He'd said something about opening it, but that was where the details of the recollection died out, and Albus realized, with a heavy heart, that Fairhart could not have possibly known that he'd have only a few words left to aim at him. Whatever crucial piece of information intended for him, had died when he'd tumbled through the Veil. The sound of Darvy's laughter punctuated his head following this thought, and he removed his backpack and slid it across the floor furiously, not wanting to remember...

Think. Had he done all of this for nothing? How much of his plans were dependent on opening this safe, Albus couldn't say, but he knew that that he had more to lose by not seeing its contents than by spending a few more minutes on it. *Numbers*, he repeated in his head. *Numbers.* What could the numbers be?

It had to be something personal. Albus had learned enough in his lessons from Fairhart to know that all clues left behind were personal-but he wasn't tracking anyone here, and the person of interest had more secrets than almost anyone Albus had ever met. But he had known Fairhart-known him as well as he could have hoped, given the situations presented-and there *had* to be meaningful numbers in there, somewhere. He tried thinking of birthdays, of a certain year...

Blackwood came to mind first. Albus still grimaced at the complex relationship between his two former professors. Whatever emotions had been there were gone from this world now, but could some sort of link remain in this safe? But he didn't know anything about Blackwood, not even her birthday. He didn't even know *Fairhart's* birthday, he realized, and he felt a twinge of guilt at that. How well had he known the man?

He addressed the notion that it may have been a random sequence, but only because it was the best that he was going to do, it seemed. Turning around and pressing randomly on the lights, he allowed different combinations to flow through him. 5-3-3-6. Nothing. 3-1-2-5. Nothing.

This is going to take a while, he realized, breathing in the cold air. He wished that he knew some sort of spell to perform such tedious tasks, but again, if the United Ministry hadn't been able to get into it with magic, it was unlikely that he'd be able to either. It had to be something personal.

His stomach began to churn. Truly digging into Fairhart's personal life had made him nothing but squeamish in the past, and that was not likely to change by reliving it all now. He went back, deeper than Blackwood's death. What about his life? What about WAR?

When had Fairhart joined Wands and Redemption? With such a large portion of Fairhart's life tied to such an act, was the year in which he'd made that decision so prominent? But no, that wasn't right. Fairhart had loathed those years in hindsight. He would not have wanted to be reminded of them when opening his safe...

A small lock slid open in his head. What *would* Fairhart want to be reminded of? What would he himself want to be reminded of? Numbers-combinations of them-were used to identify many things, but which ones brought him the most joy? He'd been fourteen when he'd first kissed Mirra. He'd met Morrison on the first of September. He was sure there were numbers for Scorpius too, for those of his family...

Sam. He almost had to say her name aloud, to register it fully. That muggle woman that he'd never met-that poor woman whose death had been the last, sickening blow to Fairhart before his own demise. *Sam...*

It was the fourth of May.

Albus felt each of his individual nerves burn. They were to be married, Fairhart and that woman. A number from a happier time. *The fourth of May.*

He was never going to have a better guess than that. Not even believing it himself, trying to not allow himself to grow excited, lest he be disappointed, Albus began to touch the lights on top of the safe. How well did he truly know Fairhart? 0-4-0-5...

A low clicking noise bounced around the room. It was a fragile sound-the snapping of a twig might have concealed it-but Albus heard it as though it were a gong. *No way...*

He touched the sides of the box and lifted; the cold metal now moist from the sweat of his fingers. His mind still wrapped around the impossibility of his triumph, a thin lid slid from the top of the small box, revealing a small area inside-there was no magic to its dimensions. The first thing to grace his green eyes was a sparkle-a flash of light that seemed pointed, as though it were gesturing towards him. This is where the grin sawed itself onto his face. It was a weapon...an item of immense power...

But no...it looked familiar. It was as delicate as glass, and built in the shape of a pyramid. Dusty and looking thoroughly unused, Albus examined it closely, panic coursing through him with every moment. Once it was fully analyzed, an unbearable disappointment overcame him. He recognized it entirely; it was his trace.

Fairhart had locked the damn thing up for what he could only imagine as two reasons: first, to ensure that they weren't tracked if the cabin was compromised, and second, to piss him off. What good would his trace do now? He wasn't even sure if it still worked, and even if it did, was there any point to uncovering it?

Seething, he placed it down at his side-the contrast of his previous excitement to his current frustration made him numb. He gazed at the empty interior of the box now with loathing, never

more upset with his mentor, and given their stained relationship, that was saying something.

There's nothing, he realized grimly, *nothing here for me*. There was no guidance, no tool to use at his disposal. He was all alone, and he'd forced it upon himself.

His heart began to beat quickly. It was the strangest thing, how his body worked-his eyes had registered something while his mind had been busy whining. There was something off-something strange-about the inside of the box. One of the corners looked different, like it was protruding upwards. Albus reached down and felt it; it was smooth, but not cold, or metallic. It felt like...

Parchment. His grin returned, though it was a savage one this time, he was sure. He reached his hand into the box and began grabbing roughly, trying to pick it up all as one piece; the feeling of it lifting into his hand was extremely satisfying. It was thick, that was for sure. There had to be a lot written on it.

And there was. Albus removed the entire sleeve of it from within the box, and saw that it had been folded over several times. Fairhart's writing was a mixture of both neat and rushed, yet it was legible, and his pounding heart missed several beats as the first line came into view, illuminated by the moon's good grace.

Albus,

What a curious set of circumstances you must be in right now. If you are reading this, the firmest, most unbiased estimations that I can give are that I am gone. I write this to you now as a means of leaving you some truth, and it is in strange form, for currently you lie sleeping as the quill touches the parchment.

We leave for Lambshire soon, and from there, I cannot imagine any deviations of the plan. Azkaban is in our wake, closer than it seems-closer than any map would have us believe. I write this to you not with the intention of it being important, but with the hope that-should the scenario present itself-you have much to gain from it. Never is the future truly certain, so long as human beings are involved. I cannot help but allow the images to float through my head; pictures of the situation you are now in. Perhaps we have succeeded in most of what we had attempted, and you read this now being one step closer to ending the tyranny of Sebastian Darvy. Perhaps you read it bruised and bloodied, your spirit broken, entangled in the chains of failure. Perhaps-and I find this most unlikely, but one can hope-you read this laughing, me standing at your shoulder. And perhaps you do not read it at all, though it is this thought that saddens me most. I have every intention of keeping you alive on this journey, Albus, and I can think of no greater failure on my part than for this letter to go unread. I fear that if you never get to read it, it will have meant the end of more than just you.

You may be wondering why I would bother-what the purpose is of such correspondence, when we will have had an agonizingly uncomfortable amount of time together during the duration of our venture. That these things will not have been said to you while I was alive may seem surprising; may even seem as betrayal. But there are some things, I'm afraid, that are better left

unsaid until they make sense. If you have returned from Azkaban, with or without your father, with or without Darvy defeated, with or without me-then you have a right to know everything.

I will explain the complexities of your importance and Azkaban soon, but first I must elaborate on the lies in which I've told you. The lies have not been blatant and outright-they have been omissions, designed to prevaricate for you, to alleviate burdens and to simplify, and it is here that I feel I have committed the most egregious of my errors. We leave for Azkaban with the intention of setting your father free, and of greatly weakening Darvy's forces. You will have noticed, I am sure, that my personal mission has revolved mostly around the Foulest Book-you've had inquiries before as to its prevalence, and I have explained them as loosely as I can. I wished to not overwhelm you with too much, but now it seems as though not laying the burden upon you would result in the most strain. My ambition in finding the Foulest Book first and foremost relates to its importance as an item; as I discussed with you before, it represents knowledge. Knowledge that I do not possess. I told you that I had plans to destroy Darvy's three evils, the items that grant him his power, but in truth, it was all contingent on finding the first. The Dragonfang Wand and the Executioner's Veil are too magically reinforced for one of my talents, and too mysterious for even me. The books on these shelves pertain almost exclusively to the Book, for the Book is the greatest weapon Darvy-or anyone else-can wield. It is my hope that we-that you, truly-will have returned with the Book in hand. I told you that it needed to be destroyed, and this is the truth. But it needs to be used first.

It needs to be used Albus, because you need to learn everything that you can about the Dragonfang Wand. When this task is complete, the Book must be eradicated; wiped away. The thick, intimidating books on these shelves contain techniques for destroying its particular brand of magic, one of which I'm hoping will be of certain use to you. But the Book must be destroyed only after you know how to destroy the Wand and the Veil. And only after you have learned what the result could be.

This may mystify you. It may seem sudden, or even idiotic. You already know of the importance of learning about these powerful objects, and thus, the immediate reaction to these statements may be dismay; that I have wasted valuable time in telling you what you already know. But it needed to be reiterated, for it prefaces a solution that I have constructed from your words alone. You asked me, Albus-just hours ago-why strange things happen to you. Why you hear voices; why your eyes glow gold. Why you feel surges of power, unmistakably malicious power. If you have returned from Azkaban, Albus, then it is very likely that your curiosity has only grown, for I foresee this strangeness having a part to play. And now, I feel, you are ready.

I do not know for sure of all that I am about to say, but if I am wrong, then you may rest easy in knowing that there are no viable answers. I believe, Albus, after hearing your testimonies, that you are the owner of the Dragonfang Wand-and that you have been for quite some time. I have never been one to ignore research, and the little that I've uncovered about the Wand is scrambled, with no true set of rules or properties. While some might consider this an indication of little thought, I consider it evidence of something much worse. The Wand is an unfinished product, and this means that its nature is shifting; that it has created its own nature and adapted to it as it sees fit. I believe that your ownership of the Wand can be pinpointed to a single moment, even if the moment only split that mastery. You had the option of killing Reginald Ares,

Albus, if your story is true. And you didn't. Your inner conflict could not have been more opportune. The Wand, I believe, was at that moment primed to take on an owner. But as it has no true set of criteria, it split its ownership. Ares was an immensely powerful wizard, and thus, the Wand gave its abilities to him-I have no doubt that Ares was the first to be able to conjure creatures from another realm. But instead of detecting power within you, the Wand saw other traits; it familiarized itself with your character. There are things that certain wizards possess, Albus, that are unusual in their own right, without any raw power attached. The Wand goaded you into killing Ares-made you goad yourself, truly, and when you questioned this urge, you ensnared it. To value life even when all things-even one's own reason-calls for it to be taken, is a unique principle. Whether it is good or bad is irrelevant. You amused the Wand, by showing it something that it had never seen before. I can't imagine how often someone elected not to use it, given its purpose. And the Wand, as nefarious as its design is, aimed to keep you alive.

The times of your great spurts of power-of those sudden rushes of magical ability-when did they come to you? Was it conscious? I find that unlikely. The most amazing thing about you, Albus, is that for all you do wrong-for all of the foolish decisions that you might make-they are done with the intention of limiting harm. I believe that the Wand has aided you most in times, not where you were in peril, but when others were. This foreign feeling, this empathy, is a channel for it. When your loved ones are in danger, the Wand strengthens you, coursing through you, that the link might allow it to feel that unusual emotion that is compassion. Compassion, Albus, is your greatest strength.

Sebastian Darvy, I believe, knew of this link. There is a plethora of psychological reasons behind why he may have wanted to murder his brother, but I believe that the most pure reasoning lies in the net gain of it. Darvy killed Ares in the hopes that his half of that great power would pass on to him. But like all who seek the shortest route to ability, he fails to understand its origins. The moment that Ares died, Albus, it was no longer bound by its former obligations to two individuals. You inherited the other half of the Wand's power, not Darvy. On the surface you will deem this incorrect-question how this is possible, given what Darvy can do-but I see through this. Darvy has needed to resort to alternative means of generating his army of the undead, because the Wand only serves him in moderation; due to fragments of control still left from the connections forged by Ares. Likewise, I would be astounded if the creatures themselves harbored any loyalty to him outside of the superficial; of his physical control over them. Regardless, true magic trumps shortcuts, and you are the true owner of the Dragonfang Wand. Again I must confess to having lied to you. I told you that I wanted you to come to Azkaban with me because I could use your talents. While you are a skilled wizard, Albus, you are still developing, and I do not expect you to contribute in areas in which you are unlearned. I want you to accompany me because I believe that your mere existence might prove as a barrier between us and Darvy's works. I sense great feats of power have yet to be seen from you, Albus, and whether I live to see them or not does not matter. It is Darvy that I want to see it. Darvy and you; that you might both realize the truth.

But this cannot be revealed until after it has already happened. This seems paradoxical, but too often, this is the case for the bizarre. What am I going to tell you next is what I dread telling you the most, for I fear that you might never forgive me. I have waited to inform you of your power, Albus, because I believe that revealing it to you has taken it away.

The Dragonfang Wand belongs to you only so long as it is still entertained by your complicated heuristics. You may still hear those voices, for the Wand has poisoned you. You may still have control over Darvy's creatures, for you are their master. But the Wand will no longer aid you. Now that you are familiar with the root of your power, there is no other way to prevent you from abusing it. The Wand has enjoyed aiding you in desperation, but now that you are aware of its source-now that you might start to manipulate it as you see fit-you will have lost your appeal. If Darvy has not yet been defeated, and you still aim to stop him, you will have to do so without the Wand's help.

You may be wondering why I would do such a thing. Why I should kill you with the truth, strip you of your greatest weapon. But the truth is, Albus, this power is a crutch. The Wand fuels you with the ability to destroy; I know this sensation. I joined WAR, and was never more powerful than when I killed for them. But I was a better wizard before that. The measure of a man is not what they can do, but what they can refrain from doing; from what they can walk away from. The Dragonfang Wand did not measure your worth by your ability to destroy, and neither should you.

You may hate me now; I deserve some hatred, after how I spent my life. This letter must draw to a close soon, and postponing it will serve only as a symbol for the prolonged comeuppance for all that I've done. I do not wish to elicit any pity when I tell you that I have done nothing with my life. All that I love is gone; my parents, Sam, my son. Ida. Even the companionship of Fango is tainted. I leave behind nothing but vague memories, vague memories and destruction. I succumbed to the virus of grief and spread it; my time in WAR is irrevocable, and haunts me to this day. I live now for the hope of what might come after me. What do we fight for, if not tomorrow? It is the obligation of life to ensure that it continues, and with death as an absolute, this is accomplished only through others. The only talents I ever had I squandered selfishly. I implore you to not make the same mistakes. I don't know what you strive for now, or even if you still mean to continue. I could never be so callous as to leave my ruin upon you; what you do now is up to you. I have left you tools, and left you a schematic, but the option to walk away is yours. I fear that that I will leave a world on the brink of destruction-but there are many who might restore it. I believe that you are one of them. But only you know if you can do it; if you even want to.

This may sound strange to you, but I do not want you to mourn me. Death will be a release for me, not because I have loathed life, but because it ran its course for me too early. I sense my demise is on an island not especially far away, but I am calm as I write this letter. I am calm, Albus, because whether you want me to be or not, I am proud of you. Those words may mean less to you than the parchment on which you read them, but to me, they are everything. Whether the world ever knows of what we try to do-whether we accomplish or fail at it-is irrelevant. What it is important is that we did not eschew that responsibility. In spending time with you I have seen the promise of youth, and this instills me with a sense of peace. I am fortunate to have learned, before the end, that people like me and people like you might exist together. I do not believe myself some monster, like Darvy. But I can acknowledge that I let go of life, and never had the strength to find it again. I don't know where I am now. Magic has not yet granted us the privilege of seeing the beauty in the world that comes next-or if there even is one at all. But I can hope. I can hope for a place where I am with those I love. And I feel no

shame in this uncertainty, for hope is what drives us beyond all else. I hope that you have learned more than magic from me, Albus; I hope that you have learned of the ephemerality of life, and the great importance of cherishing it. I hope that you will have come to consider me as a true friend, as I have you. I hope that you are happy, in whatever it is that comes-and that when it is time for you to write your own letter, your heart will not weigh on your chest, but pour through your words freely.

I never got to watch my son grow, Albus, but I can only hope that, if he had, he would have turned out a little like you. Not with all that you are from what you've experienced; but from all that you are despite these experiences. As I near my end, I hope that I will soon hold my son for the first time. I have many things to tell him. And I hope that one day-not too soon, of course, but one day-he will get to meet you. That he might meet the boy-the man-that I will have undoubtedly told him so much about.

Farewell, Albus. Whatever the state of the world now, may you find many things to hope for-

Your friend,

-Sancticus Fairhart

Albus grasped the long roll of parchment tightly in his fingers. He felt every emotion fathomable pulse through him at once; or maybe there was none at all. The truth of it stung, but it was a relieving sting, and it was the manner of Fairhart's last message to him that bothered him the most. This was a letter cast in uncertainty. These were the words of a man who wanted to leave behind something, but had nothing but advice and admonitions, nothing but hope. And beyond it all, he was disappointed, and he hated himself for that. He hated himself because he had expected Fairhart to help him, not even realizing that he already had. That it had been unfair of him to view Fairhart-his friend-as the means to stopping Darvy, when Fairhart had never expected to be the one to do it. And he hated himself for suddenly, after so much deliberation, wanting to give up.

Tears burned his eyes as he rose to his feet, shaking. The paper slid from his fingers, but not before he'd read part of it over again. *Taken it away.* His power, the mysterious strength that he was counting on...gone. Just like that. Whatever Fairhart's reasoning, whatever his nonsense about it being a crutch, it was his *only* chance. He'd left his father knowing that his abilities were linked to the Dragonfang Wand, but believing that he was learning to control it. Now it had been stripped from him, like a sword ripped from his hands the moment he entered an arena. And that wasn't all. Not only had Fairhart taken his only means of stopping Darvy, but he'd revealed how truly impossible the task was. There was no plan past Azkaban. Fairhart had expected death from it. The Foulest Book was the only piece of the puzzle he'd ever planned on obtaining, and they'd even failed at that! The weight of it all was crashing down on him with staggering force, and yet, he stood, taller than ever, his face burning.

He screamed. An ear-splitting shriek that nearly put the howling of the wind to shame. His cry of rage echoed around the cabin, taunting him, and he sank to his knees, eyes closed, unable to accept it all. He reached down and seized the first thing that he could-the tiny glass pyramid

found his fingers. And in a desperate bid to displace his ire he spun around, in a full circle, looking for a place to chuck the useless object, kicking the box in the process and jamming his toe, giving another growl as he released the item in his hand arbitrarily-

It crashed right about the box. Albus heard a ripping noise just as he fell down once more, tears now falling faster than ever. He coiled into a fetal position, hyperventilating, cursing to himself, writhing in the wreckage of the cabin, hating how alone he was-

"Stop it!" boomed an oily voice, and Albus froze at once, gazing at the rotting ceiling above.

"Stop it! You disgrace my name with your childish wailing!"

Chapter 2: The Greatest Brew

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Albus felt his heart skip a beat. That voice...

"Get *up*," it repeated, its tone acidic, and reeking of malice.

Albus fidgeted on the ground, his hands sliding against the cold cabin floor. They touched shards of something-something sharp-and he realized that his Trace had shattered.

This didn't distract him from the voice, however. Slowly, he brought himself to his feet, slipping on the pieces, and he needed to back up-and look around quite a bit-to see the source of the noise.

His jaw dropped.

"*You!*" he shot out, gazing at the wall.

Severus Snape's visage glared back at him. "Yes, Potter. *Me.*"

The face was sour and sallow, complete with the oily, long hair of a fiend and a prominent hooked nose that he recognized from an unforgettable tapestry. The portrait was identical to the only other that he'd seen, in the Headmaster's office, and this idea frightened him quite a bit- he'd never been particularly fond of that portrait.

Staring at it made him feel as though he was in a dream, and yet, his hand was starting to sting from a minor scratch on his palm. How he was able to even concentrate on it though, he didn't know, for his mind had just shuffled itself violently, trying desperately to make sense of the situation.

Here was a portrait, and the portrait was in a familiar place too. Hanging just above the safe, the murky covering had been torn, a result, no doubt, of the angered heave of his Trace, and the oiled canvas behind it now showed, fully, the portrait of one of his two namesakes: of former Hogwarts headmaster Severus Snape.

"What- what are you *doing* here?" he asked, blinking furiously, to ensure that what he was viewing was entirely correct.

"I could ask the same of you," the portrait drawled.

Albus stepped forward to it, ripping at the corners further, to better widen the surface. But Snape made a noise of indignation, and he backed off accordingly.

"This is Fairhart's cabin," he insisted, ignoring the dead man's comment.

"Is that his name? The man with the disgusting face?"

Albus clenched his fists. "What are you doing here?" he repeated.

"I'm out for a stroll, Potter, what do you *think*? I was placed here, obviously. I've been here for quite some time. I can assure you," he went on, "I did not ask for it." His eyes then swept the wreck of the room. "Though I concede that it is to my taste..."

"Who put you here?" Albus asked, though he already knew.

"Why, your dear father. Who else?"

Albus heaved a sigh. Backing up further, he picked up an overturned stool and sat on it, running his hands through his hair. His father. Of course. But the portrait had been here before, long before. Albus remembered seeing it...

"When?" he asked, looking up. "When did my dad put you here?"

"Years ago, it must have been," Snape responded icily. "I was quite content moving between my two worlds-the Headmaster's office and your father's office at the Ministry-but he had the latter given away."

"You were a messenger," Albus stated. "Your portraits used to connect him to Hogwarts...and then to Fairhart."

So that was how his father had stayed in perfect contact with Fairhart during his return to WAR-just months prior to when he had faked his death.

"But then you were covered up?"

"Obviously," Snape replied, his words dry and condescending. "And I made no complaints. Having a covering in front of me was a blessing, really. A respite from the chaos at Hogwarts. A delightful place of darkness and quiet, until of course you started crying right next to me-"

"I wasn't crying!" Albus interjected, wiping at his eyes instinctively.

"Fine, then dying, or whatever it was you were doing so *loudly*," Snape spat. "And what was the source of your whining? Where *is* your hapless father?"

Albus scratched at his nose, trying not to concede to Snape's taunts. He felt as though a train had just hit him. Fairhart's letter had floored him, and angered him, and done a whole host of things to make him miserable, but somehow, talking to the canvas in front of him had kept him sane, though also a little bit more depressed.

"He doesn't know where I am," he admitted. "At least not...not currently..."

"Ahh," Snape's voice was frigid, "like father like son. But why here of all places?"

I don't know, Albus wanted to say, and it was the truth; but uttering it aloud would only make it that much worse. "I was looking for something," he instead claimed. "I...I thought that something was here for me."

Even as he said it, he picked up the letter from the floor, where it had been reduced to a crumpled, though still quite long, sheet of parchment. He scanned over it, then felt himself wipe at his eyes again. Snape was quiet now, at least for the time being, and this brief moment of silence gave him the chance to peer over the contents one more time, clinging to each maddening word.

Fairhart *had* left something, but there was no use to it. He'd left instructions, but they were instructions that mattered little to him; instructions left from a false premise.

Fairhart had hoped for-or had at least assumed-that they would have returned with the Book. This one act would have set off a series of events, it seemed, events that would have had Albus actually make use of some information; actually allow him to concoct a plan. But they'd accomplished no such thing. Despite Fairhart's adamancy to retrieve the book, they'd been deceived by Fango Wilde.

Wilde. He felt hatred surge through him, more now than ever before. Wilde had not just betrayed his former friend yet again, but had betrayed any plans that he'd formulated too. The Book was gone now, in his possession, if what Albus' father said was true, and all that was left for him now were these useless books.

He looked around the room as he mulled this. There were an awful lot of books, though they littered the floor as a bleak, yet somehow colorful mess, a souvenir of the United Ministry. He picked one up at random, dusting it off with his sleeve. Though he initially tried to read its cover, he found himself quite disappointed; it was in a different language.

He chucked the text away from him, eliciting a snort from the former headmaster. "A dislike for reading. Hereditary, it would seem..."

Albus threw him a volatile look, but said nothing. For a fraction of a second, he'd thought of persuading Fairhart's ludicrous mission anyway; of actually trying to learn something about the Foulest Book, despite not even having it. But the letter, as it turned out, was the only set of discernible advice given to him. And with this thought in mind, he stalked about the room, greatly contemplating exiting the cabin.

"Did you find what was left to you? Snape asked softly, and though his voice was drroll, Albus felt obliged to answer.

"Yeah, a whole bunch of books that I can't read," he spat.

"Can't read? How old are you?"

Albus felt his blood boil. Pacing back and forth, he picked up the first book that he almost tripped over—a massive volume—and held it up to his face.

"Not quite old enough to read '*Quam Mortem Superare*'" he said sarcastically, and he dropped the book. It fell to the floor with a boisterous thud, the dust on it rising slowly. "I'm out of here," he said, not even wanting to hear the retort, and he turned away.

"For the better," he heard Snape say as he gave him his back, "the idea of overcoming death is a bit beyond your mental capacity anyway, it would seem."

Albus stopped with one foot through the doorway to the main room. He turned back, a curious expression on his face. "What?"

"The book," Snape informed him. "It was Latin. 'How to Overcome Death!'"

"You speak Latin?" Albus asked, not even fully registering the title yet.

"*Anyone* can speak Latin, if they can speak English."

Guess I don't know English, then, Albus thought bitterly, though he didn't voice this gripe. "But you...you could read that, then?" he asked cautiously, and he found himself inching towards the book.

"I would imagine so, yes," Snape answered. "You were leaving?" he reminded him.

"One second," said Albus, and he picked up the book again, just now fully taking in its features. It was thick and grey, the color of pure stone, and as he ran his finger across the collection of pages, they felt as though they'd been wet before, only to dry slowly over a century or so. Eyeing the cover in particular, he saw that the text was smaller underneath the heading, though still as esoteric as before.

"Can you read that?" he asked, now moving towards Snape's portrait. It was absurd what he was doing, trying to have a dead man decipher an ancient text for him, but all the same, the deceased Headmaster seemed to have no issue with complying.

"The Secrets of Necromancy," Snape read for him, as fluently as though it were written in English. "Techniques for Communication, Resurrection, and Destruction."

"Destruction..."

Albus moved the book away, now peering through it himself. It was heavy, but he managed to hold it up by placing it tenderly on his forearm. Each individual page felt like cardboard, and often he wasn't sure if he was lifting two or three pages at a time. Still, he felt compelled to peruse the volume. Though the text seemed faded, he could still make out grisly pictures;

interestingly, none of them were moving.

"Is this a muggle book?" he asked aloud, momentarily forgetting that he had some sense of who his companion was.

"Unlikely," Snape responded slowly. "But from an older time, yes. So old that the spells for animation may have even worn off; or been disenchanting. But what are *you* doing delving into that?" he asked, his sneer now again heard in his voice. "Are you even finished school?"

"Everyone's finished at Hogwarts right now," Albus commented off handedly, still distracted by the book. His back was to Snape, and his attention was turned completely to the text in his hand. Few things looked familiar through it, but then-in the middle of the book-he saw something appealing.

Potions.

It was a list of ingredients and steps, just the same as he would have found in his textbooks at Hogwarts. He appeared to be in the middle of the instructions however, and upon flipping back and forth, he found that there appeared to be many different recipes available to him.

"Okay," he muttered to himself, trying to calm his own nerves. "Let's find the beginning..."

He knew that it was impossible, but somehow it felt like the portrait was breathing down his neck. Trying his very hardest to concentrate on the wrinkled pages, he finally found something of use.

"What's this here?" he asked, spinning around and practically shoving the book into Snape's caricatured nose.

The portrait took a moment to scan it with its dark eyes, before speaking in a soft voice, "It's a table of contents."

"Right, okay, I figured that out-"

"For potions," Snape cut him off.

"Okay, but what *kind* of poti-"

"Why are you doing this?"

Albus shut himself up immediately. Before he could even muster an adequate response, the portrait was leering at him once more, an odious expression playing on a face that showed apathy at best.

"Why are you making me read dead languages? Why are you disturbing me while I'm trying to sleep?"

"I- I- I just-" He didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure if there was an answer. All he knew was that the longer he stayed here, the longer he postponed leaving, the better he felt about the incredible disappointment that Fairhart's letter had been. "I'm sorry," he admitted. "I just...I can't read it. And I really need to be able to read it. I'm sorry- I- I'll go-"

He went to lower the book, but before it could drop from his sight, Snape had responded.

"You're asking the wrong questions," he said. "There's many potions mentioned, less than half of which would have any relevance to our time period, from a cursory glance. What are you looking for in particular?"

Albus perked up, immediately trying to launch into an explanation. "Something- something to destroy things. But not just regular things, dark things, things that- that- just evil things-"

"Then the first potion listed is the one you're looking for. *Mortem Necavero*."

"*Mortem Necavero*," Albus repeated, first out loud, then in his head over and over again. Turning away without even so much as a thanks, he carried the book to the center of the room, where he realized that there wasn't even a place to put it. The United Ministry had ransacked everything, destroying what little furniture that there had been.

Albus found splinters of wood by his feet, however, and piecing them together in his head he found that they may have once been a table. Doing his best to use his wand while also holding the book at the correct page, he thought of the repairing spell, and at once the splinters began to assemble themselves into the structure that they'd once been.

Pleased, Albus dropped the book on the table carefully, noticing that it didn't give him much room for other things. Walking around the cabin for another minute, he found the overturned cauldron that he'd recognized before, and then positioned it right next to the book.

"Making a potion, are we?" Snape quipped from across the room.

"With any luck," Albus rebutted, and he could have sworn that he heard a *tsk* behind him. Ignoring it, he turned the page and immediately began trying to decipher the necessary components. With some degree of relief, he found that it wasn't tremendously difficult; the majority of things needed were derived from creatures whose names hadn't changed all that much over the centuries. He could make out words like Grindylow, and Ashwinder, and even what appeared to be an older term for Bowtruckle; the other words, however, required a bit of work. He could not be sure right away which was skin or spit, or blood or tooth or nail, but by association he could work things out fairly well. Seeing the same set of terms next to Ashwinder and Runespoor alike let him know what the word for venom was, anyway, and he used this as his jumping off point. If anything, he could risk asking Snape for more help.

Measurements were much easier to decipher, as numbers, it seemed, hadn't changed much in the last few centuries or so. Having a rudimentary understanding of the instructions presented to him made him feel a powerful sense of pride, as though he wasn't quite as overmatched as

he'd originally thought. True, this was nothing-nothing yet, but if this potion was what he thought it was-if *Mortem Necavero* was one of those things that Fairhart might have been counting on-then he had to go for it.

But first, he needed the proper materials. He recalled a time when Fairhart had been alive in which he'd indicated a cupboard as being something of value; Albus could see the cupboard now, one of the things apparently untouched by the United Ministry, and he worked his way towards it with trepidation. He could only hope that Waddlesworth's cronies had deemed slime and toenails nothing to be concerned about-

Albus popped the cupboard open and allowed himself a moment of indifference. It did not appear as though anything had been taken, but at the same time, he had the sense that Fairhart hadn't put much effort in stocking the shelves anyway. He could see dusty jars up top that were poorly labeled, and there were minute vials on the middle shelves that seemed to contain some of the more rare items that he'd managed to obtain. There was an additional cauldron below, and more jars, and he received a nice surprise in finding that the insides of the doors were packed with little cups and beakers to service him.

It's either this or nothing, he realized, pulling things towards him arbitrarily. Most of the items were things that he recognized, but Fairhart had, it seemed, done some research of his own on what might be needed for a potion of this kind; he saw slivers of Occamy tail, a rather uncommon constituent that he'd never before used and was certainly in the ingredients listed.

He dumped nearly everything that he could fit into the additional cauldron, then levitated it alongside him back to his work station, feeling rather excited. No, it was not quite the jubilation that he'd had when opening Fairhart's safe, but he supposed that this was for the better-he did not think that he'd be able to endure such crushing disappointment again, and here, at least, he knew that he was in control. If something went wrong, he'd only have himself to blame.

He caught a glance of Snape's shrewd, skeptical look as he began to set himself up, though the former Headmaster made no comments of any kind. Partly, Albus wanted to cover the face again; he wasn't sure how he felt about being watched, especially by someone so generally condescending. He decided against it, however, and right away went to work.

"Okay," he muttered under his breath, walking himself through the steps. "Need to boil water first."

Aiming his wand at the empty cauldron-the one not floating at his side-he nonverbally filled it with clear water, and then set to work on making a flame. His station was hardly prepared for this, so he first needed to levitate this cauldron as well, carefully, and then localize a flame underneath, also not allowing the embers to scorch the table. Unable to concentrate on all things at once, he lowered his pot of ingredients to the floor by his feet, and then allocated his attention towards keeping the water just over the flame. He did this for several long moments, until he finally saw bubbles-

"Yes!" he exclaimed, immeasurably proud of having boiled water with nothing more than his

wand.

"Truly phenomenal," drawled Snape's voice from meters away. "Future generations will marvel at the innovations introduced by you today."

Albus turned back slowly, still trying to concentrate on his bubbling cauldron. "You know I'm thankful for your help, really," he said, "but if you could stop talking now, that would be great."

The portrait opened its mouth at once as though to respond, but then halted this movement and seemed content with a curled smile instead.

Albus turned back to his work, satisfied, now trying his very best not to pat himself on the back. Again, this was nothing-he hadn't even started yet. But if he could make this potion, and then maybe find Fango Wilde, or something along those lines...

He pushed the matter from his thoughts as much as he could, realizing that it would do him no good to dwell on future steps when he'd just started on this first one. He had a bubbling cauldron in front of him now, and this, at least, was familiar. It was familiar enough that he could start reading, anyway.

He traced his finger over the steps of the potion, trying to remember what he had just deciphered. Grounded up betony was first, it seemed, which was a little strange, given that he'd only before used the substance for remedies. All the same though, he wasn't going to doubt a book this old and this big, and so he delved through the contents of his supply pot next to him, until finally he had something to pour in. At once the fluid turned light blue.

Easy enough, Albus thought, before proceeding.

The next twenty or so instructions were among the most irregular and difficult that Albus had ever dealt with in making a potion. The combination of ingredients was so absurd-so incredibly dissimilar from all of the conventional means that he'd become accustomed to-that on several occasions he was forced to double check his work; to make sure that what he was doing made sense in a greater context. He was mixing asphodel and armadillo bile, bloodroot and dead lacewing flies, an entire assortment of components that he rarely conceived of being used with one another. Within ten minutes his potion was dark pink in color and extremely thick. As he could hardly read the descriptions presented between steps, he could only hope that he was doing it correctly.

It became readily apparent to him, as he brewed a potion that he'd never before heard of, let alone studied at length, that Fairhart had not had a very good understanding of just what it was he would one day be trying to make. He'd collected some rare things to be used, in addition to the most common, but on several occasions Albus had hit the snag of realizing that what appeared to be a major ingredient would have to be substituted. *Mortem Necavero* called for three dried Hungarian Horntail scales-something that Fairhart had, understandably, not been able to procure. Albus did his best to mimic its apparent effects with some powdered Bicorn horn and a pinch of Hellebore, only to concede five minutes later that this was not in his best

interest; as it turned out, the potion also required two drops of Mastic, which were not going to respond well to the Hellebore. And so, to counteract *this* issue, he found himself doing some critical thinking on the spot, carefully tipping lionfish guts into the concoction-to great success.

Albus smiled gleefully at his work; though he knew that he was nowhere close to finished, the fact that this potion hadn't exploded in his face yet was reassuring. Flipping the page of the ancient text, he realized again that he was going to need to provide substitutions for nearly a quarter of the pieces necessary. Chimera hair in particular was not available to him, though Albus was somewhat glad that Fairhart had not went out of his way to attain something of such incredible magical properties. He'd spent the last moments of his life dealing with such creatures, after all.

This sad thought hung over him as he continued to brew diligently, stirring with more precision than he ever had and taking the time to analyze and complete every step to the fullest of his ability, foreign to him though they were. For what felt like another thirty minutes Albus tossed items into the cauldron, the potion changing colors rapidly as it reacted to each subtle difference in its composition. The Occamy tail, it turned out, had come in quite handy, used in two different parts for two entirely different steps. Things seemed to be falling into place rather well, actually, until a voice interjected from behind.

"What are you doing?" came Snape's dry tone.

"Not now," said Albus, turning the vial of Runespoor venom over slowly, praying that he didn't overdue it-more than a lone drop could be disastrous, if his knowledge was correct.

"Why are you adding Runespoor venom?" he asked, his tone condescending. "It's much too acidic for what you're doing; you've already added Bicorn horn, you're going to ruin-"

"I have Motherwort on hand," Albus said, not even bothering to turn; instead he kicked the cauldron next to him lightly. "I know Calbert's Law okay? I know what has alkalinity, just let me do this..."

He heard Snape scoff, but no further advice was given to him. Albus added the Motherwort immediately after the drop of venom, and the spout of steam that erupted was abated immediately. His potion was now ten times lighter than it had been, which he thought was a good sign; to be sure, however, he decided to lower the flame and let it simmer for a moment.

If there was one good thing that could be said of the potion, it was that there was seldom any waiting in between steps. It required constant attention, much more than anything else that Albus had ever done, though thankfully, this attention that he was giving it seemed to be paying off. Perusing the next page of the book anxiously, it seemed to be nearing completion.

You can do this, he told himself, again and again. That first step was almost complete. He'd have no way of knowing how effective his product was, as there was hardly anything to test it on, but simply having it to use would be a huge benefit, both for his physical endeavors and his mentality. His next step would be to get the Book. To learn from it, and then to destroy it. That

meant finding Fango Wilde, though, and Albus had few places where he could start from. Though there was at least one...

His potion had turned into a thick slime, more viscous than any creation that he was familiar with, though it didn't look dysfunctional by any means. He realized that the hour or so of work that he'd put into it equated to a single Potions lesson at Hogwarts, something which he deemed impressive; very rarely was an entire lesson spent on making a complete potion. Some of his work had even needed full nights in between to sit and stew, or to be stirred at certain times of the day, but this thing bubbling here in front of him was serving almost as a microcosm of the complete task at hand; it didn't dig into his time, but rather effort, and was made more difficult by the fact that he wouldn't get another chance. Not without visiting an apothecary with some highly unusual requests, anyway.

Desperate not to get distracted, Albus set out on the last page of work, already finding himself needing to improvise. As he whirled his wand overtop the liquid in a counter-clockwise fashion, he grabbed a handful of shredded moonseed from the container that he'd placed next to him, the only adequate replacement that he could think of for the Acromantula venom that he lacked. It was a different texture completely though, so he again found himself prodding at the flame and stirring carefully, determined to let *Mortem Necavero* get all of the poisonous juices that it needed.

Ten minutes later, he was preparing for his final steps. The potion resembled curdled milk now, but Albus had the sense that it was only a few minor transformations away from resembling something more effective. Albus carefully held up the flask of Antimony that Fairhart had left for him—he needed to ensure that just the right amount flowed in. He uncorked it with his wand, and then wiped the sweat from his brow anxiously, trying not to give in to the heat that his work was emanating. It was odorless, and yet, there was a sinister aura to it—something that unsettled him despite having no pull on his senses. He derived reassurance from the feeling.

"Don't do that."

Albus bit his lip, irritated at the distraction. "I thought I asked you—"

"Fine, you can do it," Snape drawled, "but could you be so kind as to toss my portrait fifty meters or so away first? I'd rather not see you choke to death on your own ignorance."

Albus spun around angrily. "What are you talking about!? I told you, I know what I'm doing—"

"Antimony is not something to be played with, Potter; it is highly poisonous—"

"I know that, that's why I added Jewelweed earlier, okay!? Now once I add this I'll have plenty of time to stir in Olibanum—"

"You can't do that—"

"Well I have to do that, because I already put in the damn Jewelweed!" Albus growled, and he

spun back around, furious; he couldn't believe that he was being held up like this at such a late stage in the potion's development. He was just about to drop in the Antimony when Snape spoke up once more.

"You're going to add Olibanum to a potion with betony in it?"

Albus stopped. "There's no betony in here," he said aloud, to both himself and to the nuisance on the wall behind him.

"Really? What was that first powder that you poured in, then? About an hour ago?"

"That was-"

His heart sank. He slowly pulled the bottle of Antimony away from the cauldron, still trying to process everything in his head. *Okay, you can fix this*, he said to himself. *You just need to...*

"Dammit!" he roared, and he actually banged his unoccupied fist against the table. Drops of the milky substance flew into the air from the force, and turned to nothingness before they could return to their place of origin. Albus felt the blood in his veins turn to ice. There was no way to fix this, he'd made an elementary mistake, a mistake that could only arise from including numerous substitutions without keeping track of what they would add up to. Never before had he felt more desperate, had he been more disappointed in himself. His work was ruined-his work and any thoughts relating to it.

Gritting his teeth, he put the Antimony down and seized the cauldron by the sides, preparing to dump it out the window of the cabin. Cleaning up whatever mess he'd made, in this waste of an hour spent in this cabin with nothing to offer him but the words of dead men, both on paper and in paint, would be his last act here before leaving.

"Stop," came Snape's voice, as he lifted the cauldron with little care, taking his fist steps away from the table.

"I don't want to hear it-"

"Stop."

Albus turned carefully, trying not to look to in anguish; he knew that his quivering lip was betraying him, though. "What?"

"Put it back down."

"It's useless now-"

"I said put it *down*, Potter!"

"Fine!" Albus retorted, and he all but slammed it back down onto the table.

"Good. Now, search that container there for some baneberries."

"It's not going to matter-"

"Have you ever made Wolfsbane? Or Deadsalt?"

"What?" asked Albus, taken aback at this. "N- no. When would I-"

"Then shut up and do what I'm telling you to do! If you'd made more complicated potions before, you would know. Search for baneberries."

"Okay, okay," Albus said, kneeling down into the severely depleted contents of the extra cauldron. He found a vial of baneberries, and held them up.

"Good," Snape said, his hooked nose upturned in deep thought. "Now, crush that up into juice, and try and find some-"

"Flutterbloom!" Albus explained, finding the vial of it at once. He smacked his head against his hand. How could he have been so stupid?

"Make sure it's not Devil's Snare," Snape warned him.

Albus nearly rebutted sarcastically, though he refrained; he suddenly wasn't eager to champion his abilities, given the current state of things. Instead he nodded, and silently went to work. When he'd saturated the Flutterbloom in berry juice, he siphoned it into the potion with his wand, and his spirits raised once again, if only slightly.

"Good," Snape said, "now stir. Three times clockwise."

"Got it," Albus complied, without even looking at him. "Have you made this before?" he asked, becoming aware just now of how familiar the former headmaster seemed with things.

"No, but I don't need to have," he said lazily. "All potions follow the same laws, like any other discipline. Now, do you have any *Potio Nimbus*?"

"I don't know what that is," Albus admitted, as he stirred the moist Flutterbloom into the potion.

"Doxy eggs?"

"I have Fluxweed," Albus told him, looking down at the few items remaining to him.

"That will have to do, then. It's only serving one purpose, and shouldn't affect the desired potency..."

Albus nodded, reaching down for it. "Should I add the Antimony after?" he asked.

"Yes. Last. You want the Antimony to bring it to equilibrium, not to add anything to it."

Albus nodded again, now dropping in a handful of Doxy eggs. Feeling that he might be able to salvage something after all, he returned to the book and tried to complete his task, his Olibanum problem solved. Five minutes later, he was but a single step away from completion.

The *Mortem Necavero* was still giving off no smell as he prepared to add the drop of Antimony, though the steam rising from it was now forming very unusual, disturbingly spiky shapes. Albus swallowed before taking a look back at the portrait on the wall. Snape gave the smallest of nods, and Albus added the final ingredient.

The effect was immediate. At once the steam slowed, and the milky white color turned clear; it appeared as water again. Had Albus not just spent the last hour or so slaving over it, he never would have been able to tell that anything had been added at all. At once he whipped his wand through the air and conjured glass vials-three of them-from nothingness. There were three objects he would need to destroy, he reasoned, and thus, three vials would have to do it. If he ever needed any more, he knew, it would mean that he'd probably failed his mission.

He transferred the clear potion into the vials carefully, and then held one up to admire his work.

"You did it," said Snape, his tone flat.

"We did it," Albus corrected him, and unable to help himself, he flashed the dead man a smile. No such expression was returned, but Albus thought that he registered another, approving nod from the portrait. Whatever the case, he felt satisfied with his work. Something had gotten done. Whether it would amount to anything or not, he couldn't be sure, but he knew that it felt good to have done something-anything, really-and that was what he needed. Scanning the room, he picked up Fairhart's letter from the place where he'd left it, shoving it hastily into his pocket; perhaps there was some merit to it after all.

"Right," he muttered, this time entirely to himself. "Okay, I can spend the night here I guess." He looked back at Snape. "Erm- I- I'm sorry," he said. "About before, really. You helped a lot actually."

"I know," Snape said plainly, and Albus felt himself frown.

"Right...well look, I was going to stay here for a night or so, before getting on the move. I sort of- I have somewhere I need to go. I can put the hanging back up if you-"

Crack!

Albus froze. That sound...he knew that sound.

He heard more cracks, followed by voices. They were muffled outside, and Albus knew that they were not terribly far away, but not close enough that being stealthy was immediately imperative. Not really knowing why, he locked his green eyes onto the blots of ink that were Snape's; the

portrait of the dead man was now also still, void of expression. He shimmied his way over to the corner of the room, where the lone window in the entire cabin was, and peered out at its contents.

For a second all that he could soak in was the winter scenery; wet grass and dead, swaying trees. But then the voices grew louder, and a flash of red hair in the trees made him press himself into the wall.

Damn.

It was his Uncle Ron. And if his Uncle Ron was here, then that meant-

"Easy now," his father's voice said, in a low tone. "Check for intrusion jinxes."

Just how many people were there, Albus wasn't sure, but he knew that he was outmatched all the same. Frantically, he tried to orchestrate a plan; he couldn't Apparate out, not in the cabin. He needed to hide...

As quietly as he could, he stooped below the level of the window and grabbed at his back pack, lightened through magic, and tossed it over his shoulder. Carefully he slipped the miniature vials of clear potion into the compartments on the side, and then scoured the room for something-anything-that might give him an advantage.

He settled on the ingredient cupboard. It was his size, but he couldn't fit in it with the shelves taking up space. Not even bothering to use magic, he pulled at the tender strips of wood and discarded them into the remaining rubble of the room, where they would hopefully go unnoticed. Then he climbed in, spun around, and closed the door over.

This is absurd, he told himself, just as he heard the cabin door open.

"Room by room, now," his father's voice came again.

"Place looks empty," came a more sly tone. *Professor Malfoy*.

Scorpius' father had taken up the task of searching him out as well it seemed. This made an additional ripple of panic run through him, but it was nothing compared to what the next voice did.

"It doesn't seem like the ransacking of this place is recent," came the calculated voice of his Aunt Hermione. "But that doesn't mean that no one's hiding here...*quarare*," she muttered.

A moment later, her husband spoke. "Anything interesting?" he asked, and Albus could only assume that she'd said an incantation.

Her answer was swift and to the point. "A lot. There's been a lot of magical activity in here."

"This is where they must have stayed before," his father was speaking again, and now the voices were growing closer. "And look here-proof that someone came back."

The potion, Albus realized at once. Though he could see nothing, he knew that they were all in the same room. His father-and his companions, most likely-had noticed the remnants of his work.

"Brewing a potion, were we professor?" Uncle Ron asked cheekily; it seemed as though they'd taken note of Snape as well.

"That you can distinguish a potion from any other liquid is a startling revelation indeed," Snape drawled. "It seems as though your years in the shadows of more skilled wizards has had some minimal effect on your magical knowledge, Weasley; now tell me-what is the difference between a ghost and an Inferiu-"

"So this is where Fairhart kept you," his father interjected. "And I suppose that that cloth there kept you in the dark this whole time?"

Albus cringed; it sounded as though his father was only feet away.

"Correct," Snape answered.

"Professor," his Aunt Hermione started, in a much more pleasant tone than her husband's, "who removed the cloth from over you, if you don't mind us asking?"

"Are all of you asking that?" Snape retorted immediately, his voice sour and disdainful.

"Let's cut this out now," Albus' father said, and his tone was strict and business-like, compared to the others. "I know that Albus was here. Did you speak to him?"

"He was and I did," Snape answered briskly. "But he's gone now. Left hours ago."

"Is that right?" Uncle Ron asked, sounding sarcastic. "Cause I reckon the cauldron here is still rather hot, isn't it? Wonder how that happens."

"I've no doubt that you do, Weasley-"

"Look," Scorpius' father interrupted them all, "if Albus is gone then he's gone. There's no way to trace his next step-this is just one more dead end. We need to go back, regroup, and put some more thought into this-"

"No," Albus' father replied. "We're close. Closer than we've been so far, that's for sure. Professor," he started again, and there was a note of pleading in his voice now, "I don't think that you understand-Albus is in danger. He didn't just run away from home on a whim. He means to get himself in a lot of trouble."

"From the little I've been exposed to, Potter, it seems to me that the boy is more capable than you think."

Somehow, even as foolish as he felt cooped up in a dark cupboard, Albus felt pride make its way through him. When his father answered, even he sounded as though there was a wry smile on his face.

"That he may well be. But he's still not as capable as *he* thinks he is, either, and that's what I'm worried about. You'll have to trust that I'm a good judge of ability when it comes to my children-"

"I have to trust nothing because I don't care," Snape said, and now he sounded angry. "You have asked me to tell you what I know, and I have now unless you have something different to discuss, I suggest you leave me in the peace that I *think I deserve*."

"Let's not make this difficult prof-"

"And how would that happen?" Snape interjected derisively. "Going to search my thoughts, Potter? You think that would work, don't you? That's how little you know of the art. You haven't changed at all, have you? Still incapable of grasping anything beyond the fundamentals of the magical disciplines you attempt to grasp-"

Albus heard his father sigh, then say something to his group that was masked by Snape's tirade.

"-Unskilled in nonverbal magic, needing to steal the work of others, unable to follow directions-"

"We're not going to get anything here," Scorpius' father chimed in, as the rant showed no signs of slowing down.

"-And those Occlumency lessons! A catastrophic failure by any measurement-"

"Well we can still look," Albus' father said, though he sounded mildly dejected. "I'll check the area outside. Ron, Hermione, search for any extensions to this place-primarily magical. Draco, scan the house."

"-Never seen someone less equipped to perform a task, like teaching a cactus to make balloon animals-"

Snape's endless insults seemed to be effective in concealing what Albus was certain was heavy breathing. He managed to remain still and rigid though, yet he was also aware that, at some point, his position was going to be revealed. He could hear movement all around him, the bustling about of his soon-to-be-captors changing in volume as they tore their way through the residency.

"Clear!" came Uncle Ron's voice, from what may have been a full room away. Then his aunt echoed him. And then-

Light flitted into his eyes. It was the squeaking of the door that alerted him first, but less than a second later, he'd been exposed. Squinting, he made out the visage of his former professor, whose cold grey eyes and slicked back hair were almost comforting in how much they reminded him of Scorpius.

But his face lacked the usual cheer. He and Mr. Malfoy stared at one another for a moment, his professor appearing thoroughly taken aback, he himself squished in the most uncomfortable position possible, and then, Mr. Malfoy opened his mouth to yell-

"Cl-"

"AAARGHH!" Albus lunged furiously, somehow bursting from the wooden box with no prior momentum to speak of. One hand still clasped around the strap of his bag, he shouldered his way through his obstacle, briefly catching a glimpse of the state of the room as well, in particular the surprised look on Snape's face.

Then there was the sound of thundering footsteps, but Albus paid them no mind. Flinging his wand around behind him, he casted what he hoped was an adequate enough shield charm to buy him a few precious moments, then dove for the open window from before. He could hear his aunt and uncle yelling after him, but there was no time to register what they were saying. Already he was on the slick grass, his trainers sliding about with every erratic step, the wilderness his only hope for escape now.

He ran as fast as his feet could take him, his mind only barely managing to remember that the vials of hope were at risk of being damaged within his bag. He thought he saw a streak of red light soar by him, but couldn't be sure-all that he could do was his keep his eyes on the trees, where he could Apparate away-

"Stop!"

He wasn't sure what made him do it, but Albus turned. He nearly fell from the force that he put into his spin, but he managed to stay on his feet and glare back at the man who'd called for his cessation.

"Albus...let's- let's just talk for a moment..."

His father had his wand extended, but he was gripping it rather loosely, as though to show that he meant no harm. Albus had his own raised though, trying to show concentration despite juggling so many thoughts at once. His father was here, and they were pointing their wands at one another. He looked identical to how he had the last time they'd spoken, at their home, only his clothing was a bit dirtier, and his robes showing wear.

For a moment they stood in silence together, only two dozen or so steps apart, but then Albus made to take an extra step back, closer to his point of escape-

His father noticed, and a jet of red light burst from him. Albus waved his wand in a circular

motion, and to his immense surprise, the bolt of light veered away, into the trees behind him. *I did it*, he told himself. *I blocked my dad.*

But then there were more spells coming from his father, all of them silently, and Albus could see his Uncle trying to climb out of the window of the cabin, though falling over as he did so. Albus made to back up faster, now swerving each stunner that his father fired, but then the plan changed, it seemed, as his father had fired thick ropes from the tip of his wand which coiled themselves around Albus' feet, pulling him to the ground.

"Stop struggling!" his father called to him, and as he whipped his wand back through the air, Albus felt himself being pulled magically, slipping and sliding along the grass like a dog on a leash. "I'm trying to help you!"

Albus gave a roar of anger of this statement, but stopped his squirming nonetheless. Instead he flung his wand through the air, concentrating intently on the Severing Charm, and his spell proved proficient enough to extract him from his bondage. The pulling motion now stopped, he leapt up once more, trying again to run away-

"Albus get back here!"

More streaks of light were following after him, and even with his body turned he knew that his father was now giving chase. Albus managed to make it to the trees, however, where the thick trunks proved to be staunch defenders, taking the brunt of the assault for themselves. Once far enough into the forest area, Albus spun around again, this time just long enough to see the fragmented outline of his father, trying to aim around the hollow obstacles that separated them. And then, he spun on his heel, focusing on the only place that he knew to go to next, his entire existence being compartmentalized in space, his father's shriek of ire the last thing audible to him before everything went dark and silent.

Chapter 3: Tracking

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He felt his feet hit solid ground-though only for a moment.

Albus gave a howl of surprise as his rematerialization took an interesting twist, the floor giving way beneath him and sending him crashing down to a floor below. Why he had Apparated to the second floor of the home he wasn't sure-perhaps it had been an unconscious decision to not return to a scene that had been burned into his head for so long. But all the same, he was paying for it, as he lay at ground level, breathing in thick particles of dust and feeling a headache like few others in his life. He tried to stand almost at once, only to feel a sharp pain sear through his ankle, which had apparently twisted itself on the way down.

"I deserve that," he admitted aloud, grimacing as he stood shakily and looking down at his quivering foot. How could he have been so foolish as to look back behind him, when his father had called for him? What had made him betray his own task of escaping? He supposed that it didn't matter now, though; he'd gotten away and that was all that there was to it. He'd fled one of Fairhart's homes to go to another one.

2791 Woodlard Way looked almost identical to how it had the last time he'd been there. Despite a throbbing forehead Albus managed to peruse the contents of the sitting room with a fair amount of attentiveness, and already, things were coming back to him. The debris of broken tables and gauged walls, the smashed picture frames-the overturned grandfather clock, lying flat on its face and hiding its frozen scowl.

That's where Blackwood died, Albus recalled, and he winced again at the thought, though it was not a physical pain that plagued him this time. It took only a second for him to reconstruct that memory from two or so years ago, of Fairhart, adorned as the Silver Wizard, cradling Blackwood's body. And there-he looked over at the opposite end of the room-was where Fischer's life had ended.

And here's where my dad stood, Albus realized, looking down at his own feet. Yes, it was here, in this very spot-in this room and in this abandoned muggle home-where his world had truly been turned upside down. Prior to this there had been Ares, yes, and Waddlesworth, and of course Darvy, but it was here in this home where his father had been arrested, and here where he'd learned of Fairhart still being alive, the two things that had led him directly to Azkaban...

He felt a shiver run through his spine, but then he remembered that he had more going on than just reliving the worst moments of his life. Suddenly becoming aware of the tremendous fall that he'd just suffered, he whipped his backpack around and off of his shoulders, immediately searching for the vials of *Mortem Necavero*. He breathed a tremendous sigh of relief when he saw that they were safe and sound, having endured the crash from above.

Without even really thinking about it, he unzipped the main compartment next, checking to make sure that the remainder of his belongings were intact as well. A pellet of Instant Darkness Powder from his own personal collection had went off during the fall, making it impossible to discern much, but through his sense of touch he managed to search out a delicate square and pull it out.

It was the picture frame that Mirra had made for him, and the photograph of his dad within it. Albus stared at it for only a second before stashing it away-now was not the time to get sentimental, he knew. Transferring the vials over to the main compartment, he put his backpack on once more and began to adjust himself to the new setting.

While it felt strange to be back in a place that was the cause of so much trouble in his life, there was a practical application to it as well. Fairhart had wanted him to get the Book first and foremost, and with that in Fango Wilde's possession, he needed *somewhere* to begin his search.

Albus looked up at the destroyed ceiling at the thought, trying to construct a makeshift map in his head. He'd Apparated into the study where Blackwood had once written him letters-the floor of which had not been prepared for his arrival. He was in the sitting room now, but he knew that upstairs and not far from the study was a room designed for an infant. Albus felt his heart pound twice as fast at the thought-immediately, he decided that he would postpone searching that room for as long as he could, and hopefully avoid it completely.

Much more difficult than searching proved to be finding an adequate place to start. The house was in ruin, with large chunks of drywall missing, furniture shattered at his feet, and general clutter marring all of his movement. More than this however was the initial inhibition of wanting to search out the remnants of lost lives. The first time that he opened a creaking drawer in the sitting room, it felt like a terrible invasion of privacy- but this was abated after having sifted through it. It had contained only paper clips, unused parchment, and some splintered pencils, and these simple findings helped to ground him in reality. He could not simply hope to stumble on information-thoroughness would be required to track Fango Wilde, and that meant that his prying was, for possibly the first time in his life, mandatory.

He shuffled through the other portions of the room next, opening more drawers and examining pictures at random, looking for anything that might help him to ascertain what his next step was. The photographs were cringe worthy; now that he could inspect them unimpeded, they were beyond settling. They all showed some combination of Fairhart or his murdered fiancée, sometimes together, sometimes with individuals who had long been lost to history. Albus wished that he could focus more on the minutiae of these images, but again and again he found himself drawn to Fairhart's unscarred face, laughing, looking positively alit with joy. That none of the photographs were moving made everything just a little worse. Unlike in the wizarding world, the inanimate nature of these relics gave off an air of complete and utter death; of the cessation even of past activity. There would be no moving pictures of Fairhart and this Samantha woman, he knew, and to Albus, that was as good as saying that they were in no way together anymore.

The sitting room proved to be unfulfilling in its findings, and though Albus knew that he had the

remainder of the first floor at his disposal, he decided that it could not hurt to check the study upstairs. He made a mental note of what he left uninvestigated at ground level, though, noticing briefly that despite the destruction of the room, the fireplace looked new and refurbished. It didn't take him long to figure out why. This had been a crime scene, after all. The Ministry at the time had needed easy access back and forth between it.

He moseyed up the stairs with trepidation, trying to figure exactly what it was that he didn't know. There was his general location, for starters, he realized. The exact address of this home he knew, but he had the distinct feeling that it was a muggle suburb somewhere in England, and thus he was unlikely to have heard of the place before.

That's okay, though, he reasoned. Just have to figure out where to go next. He was having difficulty in this regard even as he reached the top of the carpeted stairs, however. There was the study, yes, but there was also the master bedroom-the place where the Executioner's Veil had been held.

Albus strode straight for it, realizing that if he didn't work up the appropriate courage now, he never was going to. Upon entering the bedroom he recognized that it had been virtually untouched from his last moments there, when he'd been trying to defend the Veil from being taken. Yet another shudder went through him at the thought; how many things might have been avoided overall, with different choices on that day?

Nevertheless he worked his way through the bedroom diligently, the whiteness of it marred by the dust and dirt that had accumulated over the years, but the room unblemished aside from this. He went through the dressers first, but found only clothes. Then there was a bedside table, with a few drawers to it-

The first photograph that he saw numbed him. It was not in a frame, but rather a stand-alone, something so forgettable that it had been made and then left to reside in a drawer for the rest of its life. It was Fairhart again, looking young and handsome, and next to him was Fango Wilde.

They were dressed in suits; and matching, fancy ones at that. Wilde looked a little bit uncomfortable, being shorter than his companion and the image having been captured with a hand scratching at the back of his neck. He was ageless, really; he had plain brown hair, a simple nose and even more average eyes that seemed to be constant features of his appearance, a stark contrast to his always shifting identity. He was smiling though, a small one, and Fairhart next to him seemed to be the reason for it. He had been caught in mid-sentence, his face turned to his friend, his hand in his pockets and his hair shorter than when Albus had known him, though still somewhat unkempt. There was a circular table behind them with a candle on it, partially cut out by the edges of the picture, and Albus could just barely make out the bodies of other well-dressed people behind them, captured blurs serving to detail a single moment in time.

Where were they? He would never know. It could have been anything-a nice dinner, a birthday party, a wedding for a friend. How many other stories would go untold? How many other relics of the past would he view, as he searched out the past of people who had tried their hardest to

leave it behind?

He stashed the photograph away in his pocket, keeping in mind that it might benefit him in the event that he needed to go door-to-door. Wilde's static appearance meant that this picture was something to show people when seeking him out, and as it hardly took up space, there was no reason not to take it. On another level, though, Albus supposed that he simply wanted it out of this house. There was too much strife between the men in it for him to think that it belonged here. At Wilde's house, maybe, but not Fairhart's.

Wilde's house. That's where he needed to get to. Wilde was not a vagabond, as far as Albus knew. He had some sort of permanent residence, of course, a place that he went home to at night, after his day job of betrayal and cowardice. He just needed an address, or any form of readily accessible information...if only there was a book of sorts that contained such things...

Didn't muggles keep those? He'd gone over this in Muggle Studies before, he was sure. Muggles had much more than addresses to keep in mind didn't they? They had all kinds of devices, according to his textbooks, and Albus had not grown up unfamiliar with them either; they had telephones and machines that sent letters to one another instead of owls. He'd needed to remember them all for an exam before; Professor Verage had gone over it extensively. But where would a muggle keep such information on their friends and family?

Without even knowing why, he worked his way back downstairs, this time heading straight for the kitchen where he'd once barricaded himself with Fischer and Blackwood. The tiles were lime green, but the paint was peeling, and it was a small, rather cramped thing, made even more noticeable by the chunks of it that had caved in. The bar top had been reduced to rubble, as had the small table near the window. Albus gazed outside momentarily, noticing that night was beginning to fall. How early had it been that that he'd gone to Fairhart's cabin? And how many hours had went by since then?

He began snooping again. He checked the pantry and found nothing of interest; only old cereal boxes and unopened packages of house wear like napkins. He had no interest in digging through the kitchen sink, either, as it was full of shattered dinnerware that had fallen from the cabinet above it, presumably during that battle more than a year ago. Albus couldn't help but feel slightly frustrated with the uncleanliness of the place. The Ministry had probably spent days searching the house; could not even their combined magical efforts restore it to something a little less obstructive?

The cabinets underneath the sink hailed nothing of interest either, as it seemed to be filled primarily with standard muggle cleaning supplies. The only reasonably exciting occurrence came as a cockroach scampered out from underneath it, causing him to recoil; he recovered a moment later, however, upon remembering that a month or so ago he'd faced off against a Nundu.

All that was left was peering through drawers again, this time the ones at the sides of the variously scattered electrical appliances. These were much more varied in their results-he found more parchment, yes, but also kitchen scissors, holders for corn cobs, more photographs that

seemed to be of Samantha's childhood, thumbtacks, small packets of expired medicine, and then more and more parchment with scribbled notes on it. They all seemed to have a degree of randomness within them; he also found a device for opening cans, batteries to reinforce their devices, *more parchment*, a bottle of lotion that was somehow supposed to protect them from sunlight, a device that he couldn't even begin to get to what it was, though it wouldn't turn on for him, and even what looked like spare shoelaces. It was not until he reached the last drawer-the one nearest the wall that had been gouged at from spell work-that he felt excitement jolt through him.

There, beneath rubber bands, packets of tea bags, old peppermints, and a single, fancy earring, there was a little red book that seemed sealed over by Velcro. Albus removed it from its area of dormancy and blew the dust off of it, then opened it and rejoiced inwardly.

It was information. There were names jotted down on every inch of the tiny notebook, names and numbers and all sorts of things that seemed designed to reward people who were in his exact position. He skimmed through it eagerly, realizing that technically, all of it was leads-all of these people had known Fairhart, or someone close to him, and possibly Wilde as well-and then he found the crown jewel, scribbled sloppily under a page headed with the letter "F", the first name on the list.

Fango-

There was a series of numbers following it, but more important was what was written underneath. *1506 Playne Rd.*

Albus felt his body shake. He'd done it-what it was he'd done he couldn't quite articulate in his head, but he knew that he'd done it. This was his next step, and it had come only hours after the previous one. This morning he had brewed possibly the most complicated potion that he'd ever make, and now, he knew of Fango Wilde's residency. How foolish he'd ever been to think that this day was a waste...

He turned around slowly, peering back through the destruction and at the corner of the sitting room. How much further was he willing to take it? There was a fireplace there, and probably floo powder as well, unless the Ministry had been stingy with it. Would he be able to floo into Wilde's home?

He hesitated for only a second before making up his mind. Every moment counted, he knew, and that meant that idling about in Fairhart's old muggle home was among the least productive things that he could do. He could not slow down this burst of progress that he was on-he wouldn't let himself.

Albus marched out of the kitchen, stepping over chunks of deteriorated living quarters absently, his eyes focused intently on the refurbished fireplace. Once he neared it he saw that there was indeed a small pot of floo powder atop the mantle; he had everything that he needed, then.

"*Incendio!*" he uttered, whipping out his wand in a fluid motion, and at once, the fire was lit. The

flames crackled inches away from him, radiating immediate warmth, but before he could toss the powder in he took a moment to contemplate the potential outcomes here. He could end up in Wilde's house, as expected, but then, what if Wilde had no fireplace? Or one that didn't operate magically? How often did Wilde change residencies? What were the odds that he'd end up stuck in some chimney in the middle of nowhere, in a state of infinite abeyance while the world moved on around him?

It would still be better than doing nothing, he reasoned, and he scraped up a pinch of floo from the pot. He noticed that it had a mustard hue to it, and recalled that for a time the Ministry had been using Insta-Floo; just another thing that had worked in his favor today.

Deciding to capitalize on what was certainly a valuable resource, Albus conjured yet another vial, identical to those stuffed away in his bag, and this time siphoned the powdered commodity in it with as much care as he could. Then, it was time to leave.

"1506 Playne Road!" he cried, giving the vial a small thrust and tossing a bit of powder onto the flames, and with the burst of yellow temporarily scolding his eyes, he threw himself into the embers-

The familiar spinning sensation of travelling by floo powder took over him at once, but for some reason this particular occurrence felt longer than what he was used to-much longer. His elbows tucked in and his eyes jammed shut, Albus did his best to cling to the straps on his shoulders as he flew through space, twisting within a field of soot and holding onto his breath dearly-

He managed to emerge on his feet, but it was into darkness.

"*Lumos!*", he sputtered out, now wiping at his mouth with his other hand. The beam of light flashed first against a wall parallel to him, and upon scanning the scenery, he was certain that he was in a home as old as the last one.

There was faded wallpaper all around him, some sort of mundane, brown design of circles that all but corroborated this being the living space of Fango Wilde. Albus first turned to catch a glimpse of the fireplace of which he'd just used, taking note that it was indeed a wizarding fireplace; unlike Fairhart, it seemed that Wilde had not needed to sacrifice magical living for anyone. Moreover, the furniture just *looked* like a wizard's furniture as he glossed over it all; the velvet armchairs, the bookcase in the corner, it all carried that inexplicable sense of magic to it that only someone who'd lived in a wizarding household could truly understand.

Albus tip-toed about the dark, the silence of Wilde's home perturbing him in a way that even Fairhart's hadn't. Here he was truly an intruder; whereas Fairhart might have presumed that Albus would one day be combing through his past, it was highly unlikely that Wilde thought the same thing. It was not so much this that bothered him; he couldn't care less whether Wilde would be offended by his actions or not. His disquiet was instead a result of unfamiliarity; this was an entirely new place to him, an entirely new scenario, and one where he might find very much that he wanted nothing to do with.

Wilde's sitting room was small and circular, but upon leaving it Albus found himself in the midst of a much larger study, one with even more bookshelves, and a full writing desk that stretched across a murky wall. The carpet was as thickly contaminated as Fairhart's had been, and the light of his wand revealed a dull grey color as a result, but all the same, Albus detected a hint of organization in Wilde's old home that he hadn't noticed in that of the scarred Renegade's. This place was abandoned, he'd reckoned after only a few minutes inside of it, but there was seldom a thing out of place. Albus was sure that if he went digging through drawers here he would find things color coded or sorted by size, or something of the like, and again he was forced to remind himself that he was exploring a different time. These were the lives of men before they'd been tested and triumphed over; these rooms were more indicative of personality than anything that Albus had experienced firsthand.

The study would be a good place to start searching for more leads, he knew, but first he tried to get a better idea of the home in its entirety. Meandering through, he hit a kitchen area just as he had in Fairhart's, and as he'd predicted, it was immaculate in comparison. True, Fairhart could hardly be to blame for the destruction caused by the fighting there, but here his wand light was revealing an almost *unusual* sense of cleanliness, even with dust and dirt having accumulated over the years. The counters were completely clear of clutter, the candles on the window sill in the corner were perfectly arranged; even the sink was clear of dishes. Albus had the distinct impression that it wasn't so much that Wilde had left it one day as it was that one day he'd simply never returned to it.

Maybe he thought that Fairhart would be looking for him here, he reasoned; and if this was the case, then Wilde was right to flee. The contempt that Fairhart had for the man was equal to little else that Albus had ever seen, and he had seen it all *after* Fairhart had left WAR, joined the Ministry, and tried to gather his life again...

Albus peered out of this window now too, and saw that he was actually in a neighborhood, albeit a rather lifeless one. It was officially night now, the light of the stars flittering in to give him what little assistance they could in his journey, helping to illuminate the room in a way that a simple beam of his wand couldn't. Albus revolved on the spot in the kitchen, a little unsure as to what to do now.

Again, he needed to first figure out what it was he needed to know. Another, more recent address would be nice, but would there be any leads to it here? He couldn't hope for a marked map of sorts, he knew, but at the same time, he was not ready to give up just because he'd entered territory that was foreign to him. What was it that Fairhart had told him before, about leaving tracks?

Treat each area as its own footprint.

This was just another step in the mud, where he was now, and no matter how shrewd Wilde might have been, Albus was certain that there was something here that could lead him in the right direction. He just needed to accomplish a little more, that was all. He needed to get a bit closer, and then he could find a place to sleep; he really did not want curl up in Wilde's old bed tonight.

And the bedroom would be a good place to start looking for that escape, he knew. He gave the downstairs area a few light glances as he tip-toed through the pristine household, then made his way up a set of circular stairs, carpeted in the same dark colors, up to a corridor that seemed to have much less going on with it than at Fairhart's place. There were only two doorways that he could see, one at the end of the hall and one just as its side, the door slightly ajar even, and as Albus walked past it he saw that it was a bathroom, again spotless; the seat of the loo was even down. When Albus opened the only remaining room, his eyes widened.

"That's creepy," he said aloud, unable to help himself.

Wilde's bedroom was as plain as the rest of his home, but for one glaring exception; a photograph on the wall adjacent his bed, engorged and framed. It was of that woman, Samantha, though the photograph had a much more formal tone to it than those in which Fairhart was also present. This one was almost entirely of her face, ginning, dolled up slightly but still looking as though she was very much unaware that a man was going to emblazon her across from his bed.

Albus stepped towards it, examining it for a moment more, before turning away defiantly. Wilde had obviously been obsessed with this woman, and for the first time this night, Albus was glad that he knew so little about him; he did not want to know what went on in that traitor's head.

But nevertheless, he still had to find him, and so it was with a strained sigh that Albus began working his way through this bedroom as well, digging through the drawers of the night table and finding it organized, but ultimately fruitless. There was a trunk as well, opposite what Albus now realized was actually a rather small bed, and excitedly he tapped it open with his wand at once, eager to delve into its contents. Again, however, it amounted to nothing-only dress robes and rolled up socks where to be found.

He left the bedroom shortly thereafter, making it a point to close the door tightly behind him; in the event that he came back up here again, he wanted to have the option of viewing that absurd talisman hanging on the wall.

Returning to the downstairs area, he headed to the study first and foremost, intent on doing some digging there. The massive writing desk would be his best bet, he knew, and so for the first time since being in Wilde's home, he allowed himself to feel anxious as he opened the top drawer.

It was a mess. Albus stared at it for a few seconds, soaking in the disarray contained within the small compartment. It was parchment-all of it-but it was all jammed inside and ruined, some of it curled into balls, other pieces flat but pressed to the sides of the drawer, and some pieces so crinkled that he knew that it would take magic to read them. Which, of course, he had every intention of doing.

There must have been a hundred individual slips in there, he reasoned as he grabbed one at random, and the first that he selected was among the most distorted of those available. It had been folded over several times, and when Albus finally managed to flatten it out, he needed to

squint intently to decipher its contents. The sentence at the top of the page alone told him two things; first, that this was the middle portion of a letter of some sort, for it started unevenly, and second, that it had been written by Wilde.

when we had spoken at the Andersonses' home, while San had been away, and you had told me "Fango, sometimes he frightens me!"

Albus glanced at it, that sensation of discord that the house brought him now surfacing again in his torso. He thrust the letter back into the drawer at once, wanting nothing to do with it, but then immediately he found himself grasping at another one. This one needed only to be unrolled slightly, and it at least had a definite beginning.

Sam,

I don't know if you're getting these-I can only hope that I have your address right. I'm not used to mailing in your way, to be honest with you (not that there's anything wrong with your way!) and sometimes I do have to wonder if it's as reliable as you say. All that aside, however, I wanted to let you know that I spoke to San. It was the first time that we'd talked since the incident I wrote to you last, and I do hope that that one in particular you received, for I would not be able to forgive myself if I found that you were thinking of returning to a life that you are not prepared for.

When I spoke with him, San seemed ambiguous at the idea of meeting with you again. I can hardly blame him, with what you've both endured-

Albus stopped again here, and suddenly, he had the urge to vomit. He did not like this; he did not like toiling in these matters. He hadn't known these people, not during these events of their lives, anyway, and it was with this bitter thought that he finally found himself thinking of Fairhart aggressively. How much of this had been personal for him? Is that what he had wanted, when he'd told Albus how imperative it was that Wilde be found? That he be traced like this, through bizarrely enlarged photographs and old letters?

He refolded the letter and tossed it back into the drawer, undecided on if he wanted to go any further. Is this what his life was, now? Scavenging the homes of men both dead and alive, judging their proclivities and preying on their secrets for information? Albus nearly slammed the drawer shut, ready to forsake the letters entirely, before something dawned on him.

These were never sent. It was an obvious thing, but one that had nearly eluded him. If what he'd already read gave him any indication, Wilde had sought correspondence with this woman, after her separation from Fairhart. Whether his anecdotes were true or not was irrelevant; it seemed likely, though, that he had indeed sent her some letters. And yet, these here had all never left. Albus doubted very much that Wilde had been unwilling to tell this woman things, given how personal they seemed already, but what were the chances then that these unsent letters were simply first drafts? Crinkled and crumpled and never given a second thought? What kind of information might be found, on the messages deemed unfit to be read?

Albus dove into the letters again, but he was careful now to select which portions of them he'd be reading. Samantha, it seemed, had never written Wilde back, or if she did her responses were not kept here; all of the letter fragments were written in the same cramped and slanted technique that Albus knew belonged to Wilde. They were legible all the same though, and so he scanned them without really reading them, eager to pick up words or phrases that might stick out beyond their context. Years of cramming for tests hours before they were to be taken had exercised his mind for the task, and here, he would see it put to its best use yet.

It wasn't difficult to ignore the bulk of the letters, but it was rather strenuous to avoid things that seemed destined to reoccur. Wilde seemed to have once had a sister-Albus wasn't sure if he already knew that or not, but nevertheless, he had written of her often, the details of which he tried his best to ignore. Then there was fragments where he seemed to have trailed off in his writing, going to great lengths to describe magical processes as one would to a child, before finally scribbling them out and trying to compartmentalize them again paragraphs later. And Fairhart, of course, was mentioned consistently as well, and here Albus sometimes simply could not distract himself from the words presented to him. Wilde had went out of his way to recount elaborate instances of where his former friend had voiced aloud his anger at the women who'd fled from him, and in truth, he wasn't sure if these were falsified or not. Albus had seen Sancticus Fairhart enraged before, at the height of it, even, and often enough to know that not all that Wilde had written was out of the realm of possibility...

But he was not going to stand here in this old house and contemplate what Fairhart might have once been; no, the time for that was over. He had a letter of his own stuffed away in his pocket, a more recent one, one that revealed to him the man that Fairhart had died as, no matter what he had been at different times in his life. With this to comfort him, he managed to ignore Wilde's statements contrary to the matter, digging further and further into the unsent letters until finally, one ended with something that made his heart skip.

Perhaps it's foolish of me to bother, but I find myself unable to bear the idea that you will never respond, so I want you to know that if you ever feel compelled to reach me, you might find me in a town called Mottley, in London. It will not appear on your maps or in your books-it is a place of my people, but if you send a letter there with my name, it will reach me, this I promise you. I will wait for it.

All of my love and more,

-Fango

Albus stared down at this final paragraph for a few moments, allowing his eyes to bore into the signature as he contemplated the situation. So Wilde had been planning on leaving after all, though whether his departure was sudden or not he wasn't sure. It didn't matter though; this was his most firm lead yet. A town, a wizarding one, and one more recent than this one here. Albus stuffed the letter away and closed the drawer gingerly, knowing that his time in this ominous house was finished. There was only one more place that he wanted to go tonight, to cleanse him of the negativity that he felt from all that he'd done today, and then he would permit himself the respite that he so desperately needed. Being a wizarding dwelling, Mottley would have a

general area for flooing like how Diagon Alley did, he reasoned, and maybe even an inn too. *Where I can rest*, he told himself gleefully. Whatever energy had been surging through him this morning, when he'd been making the potion, had been replaced by hunger and tiredness- Mottley would be the location of his first, well-deserved break.

Fastening the straps of his backpack around him tightly, he strode over to Wilde's fireplace and brandished his wand. Once he'd lit the fire, he removed the vial of Insta-Floo from his pocket and gave it another sprinkle, and the flames turned a dark yellow again. "Mottley, London!" he called, and for the second time today, he entered the flames.

He was only travelling for a second before he realizing that something was wrong. Even with his eyes tightly closed, he detected a disturbance in his movement-it was as though he was being pulled towards something, rather than simply falling freely in space. The motion dragged him along in a straight line, and then he felt his ears preparing to burst at a sudden sound, a sound not generally associated with that of flooing-

It was a repetitive, violent shriek, once that accompanied him for several more agonizing moments, and it wasn't until the journey ended and he was thrown from the grate that he realized just what it was; a Caterwauling Charm.

Albus lay face down on what felt like a slab of stone, gasping and sputtering ash, his eyes and ears burning, his previously twisted ankle sore again and his knees and elbows throbbing from the way he'd been spat out. Flat down on his belly, he clenched his hand tightly to make sure that he hadn't lost his wand, but froze when he heard a voice.

"Don't move," someone said swiftly, their voice soft yet menacing.

Albus opened his eyes. Only at ground level, he could see the predicament materializing around him. He saw no less than six pairs of shoes in front of him, and felt others behind them. Lifting his head slowly, he finally obeyed the command when he saw a wand pointed between his eyes.

Chapter 4: The Unwanted Voice

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Albus felt a sharp tug, followed by the release of his wand from his hand. Then, his backpack was ripped from his shoulders.

"Don't move," he was warned again, this time by a different, gruffer voice.

Albus took several deep breaths, his hunger and weariness not subsiding, but pushed from his thoughts for the time being. Carefully tilting his head about, he took in more information from those encircling him. They weren't uniformed, and seemed almost makeshift in their dress; though he could only see legs and shoes, they all varied, from jeans and muddy trainers to slick trousers and more fanciful footwear. This was an odd bunch, whoever they were.

"Anything in there?" one of them asked, and he listened as his bag was unzipped.

"Nothing," someone retorted a moment later, and Albus actually watched as his backpack was tossed to the ground recklessly.

It took him only a moment to realize how the mistake had been made; the darkness powder that had went off in his bag was still in effect, and given the Featherweight charm, it seemed empty. He barely had time to count his good fortune though; a moment later, he was seized by the scruff of his neck and pulled to his feet.

He stood still, head lowered somewhat as the man who'd first aimed a wand at him surveyed him. Albus tried to shift his eyes around to get a better look at his surroundings, but found this effect limited. He was outside, he now knew, and could see that the man standing across from him was tall and thin, middle aged and with cropped red hair that was going white. At his sides were two young women who might have been sisters, but the encroachment didn't end here. He tried using his peripherals to count just how outnumbered he was, and settled on anywhere between eight and twelve.

"What are you doing here, boy?" asked the redheaded man across from him.

Albus tried to answer as quickly as he could. "I-I ran away from home," he half-lied, and he felt that this answer might be sufficient in ameliorating the situation somewhat; hopefully they viewed him as the lost teenager that he needed to portray himself as.

"Really?" the man continued, as the others whispered around him, and Albus realized for the first time that the cries of the Caterwauling Charm had ended. "And you thought that flooing to Mottley in the middle of the night was the best way to do that?"

Albus swallowed, unwilling to answer this follow-up. *I need to find my wand*, he told himself instead. Someone had taken it, and if he was going to do anything about this predicament, recovering it would be the first thing that he needed to do.

"He's just a boy," came another woman's voice, this one behind him, but then the voice from before answered her.

"He's got a wand though, and that makes him worth taking a look at, don't you think?"

Albus shot his head upwards to detect the source of the voice; sure enough, there was a man standing to his right, examining his wand up close. He seemed to be the biggest in the group, with a square face that sported a grizzly black beard, and a winter hat that hid the rest of his visage. With his head elevated he could fully make out the attire of those interrogating him, and saw that they were sporting all different colors of long sleeved shirts and boisterous jackets. As he'd previously discerned, they were not uniformed, and this told him at least that they were not part of any formal organization; sadly, he felt that this made matters worse.

"Blimey, that's Potter's boy, isn't it?"

Albus lowered his head again, turning it away from the source of the voice, but already there was muttering again.

"Is that right?" the redheaded man asked aloud, and Albus immediately began to stammer to the contrary.

"I- I don't- I don't know what you're-"

"I'm going to ask you one more time," the redheaded man interjected, and his previously crisp voice had turned heated, "what are you doing here?"

"I left my home-"

"I see that, but what are you doing *here*?"

"Dangerous time to be leaving your parents, isn't it boy?" spoke up the young witch on the right. "All kinds of things that might get you out in the real world, what with the Hand's little fingers scuttling about-"

"-and young cubs always scrounging about for something to eat-" continued the one on the left.

Albus ignored these nonsensical claims, still paying close attention to the big wizard with his wand. It was only when the redheaded man actually stepped forward that Albus remembered that he had a question to answer.

"I was hungry," he told them, and this, he realized, was the most honest thing he'd said yet. All around him he heard sniggering, and then the red haired leader addressed him in a more

sarcastic tone.

"Hungry, were you? And you thought that Mottley was the right place to fill an aching tummy, did you?"

"I- I'd read about it-"

Now even his primary interrogator was laughing. "Oh you read about it, eh? And what book was that in, that you read about some rookery at the edge of London being the perfect place for a midnight snack?"

He raised his arms up as he said these words, as if to show the town in all of its glory, and Albus couldn't help but feel embarrassed at just how ignorant he'd shown himself. He should have known that he was in a rather minor wizarding dwelling when he'd been thrown to the cold ground outside; looking around now, he saw that the grate from which he'd emerged was actually attached to the side or back of a building. The town itself seemed lackluster just from the cursory glance that he was permitted following the man's declaration; even in the distance he could only see small homes, all of them nearly identical in their shape, and the gaps between them each forming small alleyways that made the setting look like a maze for a mouse.

"Tell me the truth, boy," he was asked swiftly, "are you Pot-"

"There's no reason to ask him that," came forth another voice, before Albus could even muster an interruption. A younger boy had come forth from the circle, and for some reason, Albus found him mildly familiar. "That's Albus Potter, for sure," he said. "I recognize him from Hogwarts."

Albus now recognized him as well, but not by name; he was one of the boys that had bullied Roxanne when he'd been at Hogwarts. Thinking of this, he was certain that he hadn't been angrier all day, and given that just this morning he'd read Fairhart's letter, that was saying something.

"It's not sufficient enough just to know *who* he is," the tough looking wizard that was holding his wand said. "We need to figure out what to do with him."

"Hand him over to his father," said a muffled voice from behind him. Albus turned and saw that it was another woman, this one more stout and bundled up to the extent that her long, dark scarf was obscuring her words. "We've got no qualms with Potter or his fragmented Ministry."

"Nonsense," one of the other wizards spoke up, "we shouldn't do anything that is going to involve us with Potter."

"So what do we do then, just hex the boy into dust and leave him here?" spoke up one of young witches in front of him.

"Would serve him right," the gruff one answered her, "seeing as how he probably woke the whole damn town up-"

"No," cut in the leader of the squad, and he actually pocketed his wand. "No, we do nothing rash. Something suspicious is going on here. Let's take him back to Larson."

There was murmuring of agreement, but Albus was too busy hanging on to that last word to register any of it. *Larson*. He knew who these people were now, though of course, he should have figured it out sooner. These were the Protectors—a fragmented chunk of WAR that had broken off for good following the implosion of the United Ministry. Larson had been the man coaching Hogwarts youth into how to be effective soldiers, but their calling having never come, he'd taken them aside for himself and formed something different entirely. But what were they doing in Mottley?

"Walk," said the big one, and in his lapse of concentration, Albus realized that he'd lost sight of his wand. He felt someone jab into him from behind, though, and at once he started to stroll forward—but not before surreptitiously leaning over and scooping up his bag.

No one said anything at the gesture, all apparently deceived by its contents, but Albus clung to the bag tightly as he walked, swarmed by members of the Protectors, all of whom seemed to be waiting for him to make a move, given the way that they placed themselves around him. It was in these first few steps that the depth of the situation really hit him; he was been taken captive, and if he had any chance of escaping these clutches, it would have to be in this walk through the rundown town.

It was amazing, he thought as he paced along deliberately, just how much had happened today. Fairhart's letter was still stashed away in his pocket, with a photograph too, and unbeknownst to those walking alongside him, his bag actually contained three very important vials from his work in the morning. He'd managed to track Fango Wilde too, at least to some extent, but here he was faced with what was perhaps the first true barrier of his quest, in addition to his own idiocy, anyway...

There was simply no escaping that the complication that engrossed him now was the product of poor thinking. Why had he not simply stayed at Wilde's home, where he could have rested for the night, and possibly done some more research on Mottley? His eagerness to make progress every moment had cost him dearly, it seemed. Sleeping would have resulted in hours unused, but the situation that he was in now would undoubtedly set him back further in terms of time elapsed; indeed, if he did not act fast, it might even halt him permanently.

The cold wind whipped at his face as he marched along in unison with the Protectors, trying his very best to avoid eye contact with any of them. As he'd predicted when first glimpsing the town, Mottley was a simple thing; he passed by small battered flats as he went, many of them which seemed to have but one floor, and the front yards of which contained little more than grass. He saw few buildings used for something other than living space as well; only dinky shops that seemed to have no roots in the big business endeavors of those that he'd seen elsewhere, like in Diagon Alley. In truth, the town reminded him forcibly of Lambshire as he strode through it, though of course, the degradation was not nearly as severe. Albus kept his eyes peeled as he looked for some area where might be able to break free from the gathering; there were alleyways abound, but he needed to work out a way to escape his encirclement first

As inconspicuously as he could, he dipped his hand into his unzipped backpack, feeling around for objects in the dark. He had to be careful here; while some of his escorts were whispering, all of his movements were making noise. It was only when members ahead of him started speaking that he could begin searching his bag in any meaningful way.

"So what do you think Larson's plan will be?" someone asked the big one that had snatched his wand.

"No idea, but something that will put him to use, I'm sure."

"Bait for Death's Right Hand, maybe?"

"Unlikely, we have nowhere to dangle him-"

Albus traced his fingers along the vials of *Mortem Necavero*, as well as additional pellets of darkness powder. Dirty and worn clothes from his journey coiled around his fingers as well, and it was here that he tried to focus his efforts most, for he dimly recalled having wrapped his soft clothing around things that were very delicate...

"I don't see how it would hinder us to hand him straight over to his father," came the muffled woman's voice again. "It's not like we're assisting him in his antics; just bringing his son back."

"It's the principle of it," insisted a voice ahead of him that hadn't spoken yet. "We're not out here trying to return lost children to their parents..."

They took a sharp turn here, all of them, and Albus was careful to lag behind as best he could in that crucial moment. He still had two or three Protectors strolling behind him, and one at each of his sides, but they too seemed involved in the conversation at hand. This served him well, for he'd caught his fingers around something of use; wind up fireworks from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, products brought along with their darkness powder counterparts.

They took yet another sharp turn, and Albus, realizing that their movements were now getting more meticulous, understood that they were not far at all from what seemed to be their terminal destination. It was going to be now or never-

He tripped; or at least, he pretended to. Stumbling over lazily, he knocked his feet together in a charade of imbalance, bringing himself to the ground in a hasty, rigid fashion. It hadn't been difficult at all to sell, given the actual pain that lingered in his ankle, but more important was the swiftness of his hands before the two Protectors behind him seized him roughly and pulled him to his feet.

"If you walk faster, that won't happen," one of them whispered menacingly in his ear, still grabbing him by the collar of his shirt.

"S- Sorry," he stammered out, though in his head, a countdown of sorts was going off. Three...two...

"They're behind us!" he blurted stupidly, and he'd timed it perfectly. His bellow complimented the whizzing and banging behind him to the millisecond, the little wind-up rockets that he'd planted exploding upwards in showers of streaking pigments. They all turned to observe, their wands drawn-all but Albus.

"Aim to kill!" one of them shouted, and already there were streaks of light issuing from their wands-mostly green. It was for naught though, the curses instead colliding with the colorful diversion to create more havoc. Albus located his target in the frenzy at once.

"Gimme that!" he roared without thinking it, diving forward and grabbing at the big man, who had been aiming his wand at the foray behind him. Albus tried to wrestle him to the ground, but was nearly lifted from his feet as a result. Knowing that it was a poor matchup in terms of raw strength, he decided to use his head-

The blow was swift, but effective. Using the bulky man's own force to propel himself upwards, he rammed his skull into the chin of his adversary, the smacking of his jaw and front teeth audible even among the sounds of the fray around them. He fell, and fell hard, and Albus immediately climbed on top of him, knowing that it wouldn't be long before his captors realized just how stupid they all were.

"Come on, where is it- where is it!" he groaned, rifling through the man's large overcoat, just as he heard someone utter a frightening cry behind them.

"There's no one there!"

"COME ON!" Albus eventually roared, and he could actually feel eyes turning to him now. "*Accio Wand!*" he cried desperately, and to his tremendous relief, it flew from seemingly within his victim, and into his hands-

He rose from the spot and made a quick turning motion, waving his wand in a circular form, just in time to deflect the Stunner coming his way. It rebounded out into the sky, but the next one that he deflected managed to hit one of the apparent sisters in her pretty face, sending her slumping to the ground.

"GET HIM!" roared someone who may have been the leader from before, but Albus gave the group no time to follow his commands. He tore away that same moment, one hand dangling his backpack from a lone strap, the other holding his wand behind him, waving it about as he tried to concentrate on circular, fluid motions.

He heard someone utter a spell behind him as he tore into an alleyway, watching as a stray cat hissed and ran between his legs, a dark blue hex just missing his shoulder. Albus turned to catch sight of the aggressor that had followed him into the alley, and indeed, it was the redheaded man from before. Albus turned slightly to face him as he ran, taking careful aim with his wand.

"*Fracturus!*" he thought, though careful not to give his opponent the foreknowledge of the curse.

There was loud bang and a wretched crunch, and his follower fell over, clutching his broken hip and colliding with an aluminum rubbish bin.

Albus turned again as he left the alley, then again down a narrow street, then tore across someone's front yard, nearly tripping over a toy ball on the way. Only two sharp changes of direction later and he was met with a metallic fence.

He swiped his wand across it, and thankfully, his severing charm was potent enough to break through it. Albus swung his body through the metal, and then repaired it once he'd done so. Then he took his first fresh breath in minutes.

He'd done it-for now. All during his running he'd heard movement behind him, be it loud steps or the huffing of tired adults. Now, however, he had glorious silence, though he knew that he couldn't rest yet, no matter how badly he wanted to.

It was the darkest part of the night, he realized, and he found himself praying for morning. Only then, it seemed, when the sun rose, would this day have *actually* ended, and become anew; apparently only then would he be granted the great pleasure of sleep, presumably on some random bench, or curled up with stray cats.

How did Fairhart do this? he asked himself, as he limped about, away from the fence and into what looked like a separate neighborhood. They would be looking for him, he knew, but hopefully he'd altered his path enough that he could amble along in the darkness now, further assimilating himself into the eeriness that now seemed to greet him at every step. As he wandered aimlessly, looking over his shoulder every odd second or so, he attacked himself mentally for having left behind his Invisibility Cloak. It had seemed noble at the time, he remembered, to have left it behind in the event that he never returned. Now it just felt stupid.

He was no longer running, his ankle now paining him more than it had since he'd crashed through the house on Woodlard Way hours and hours ago. Bearing with this ache as best he could, for what felt like half of an hour he winced and grimaced his way between hovels, trying his hardest to not let a single noise escape him.

Then he tripped over something-he couldn't see what it was, but he was certain that it had enjoyed obstructing him a great deal-and finally permitted himself a strangled gasp of pain. He actually had to bite down on his tongue to prevent any more noise from eliciting naturally, but as he looked up, he saw the strangest deviation from the dark scene that he'd grown used to.

It was a face; what had looked like the face of a young boy. It had been in the window of the house across from him, a meager thing, and he could see faint light coming from it as well. Albus rushed towards it, not really knowing why-all that he knew was that someone else was awake at this hour, and someone much less likely to want him dead than those who he'd just absconded from.

He reached the door of the house a moment later, a plain thing with no knocker on it, and without even a single rational thought fluttering through his head, rapped it gently with his

knuckles. He tried again a moment later, and when no one responded, he resorted to magic.

"*Alohamora*," he whispered, though he was certain that the basic spell wouldn't be sufficient. He was proven spectacularly wrong though, as a soft clicking followed this incantation, and with a delicate push of the door, he'd officially invaded someone else's home.

He closed the door gingerly behind him, realizing that he had seldom felt much stranger in his life. How things had reached this point he wasn't quite sure, but the comfort of the hall in which he now placed down his backpack was much too great for him to consider turning back now. It was a darkened corridor, with hung coats and hats and mittens adorning the walls. He walked through it with his wand drawn, though his nerves were considerably calmer than they'd been not long ago. It wasn't until he entered the sitting room that he became disoriented again.

It was a simple thing, with a couch pressed underneath the window, a small, square table in the center, holding a lantern on it as the source of light in the room, a bookshelf in the corner, and what looked like a very unused fireplace at its side. There was a divot that led to another room as well, and a child's play things littered the floor; Albus caught sight of a miniature train, colored blocks, and even a toy broomstick that he somewhat recalled James having when they had been very young. The setting was appropriate, though, given that there was indeed a child on the couch.

It was the same boy that had been peering through the window, and as Albus gazed upon him, not even knowing what to say, he couldn't help but think that the child looked peaky; a scrawny thing, no older than five or six maybe, with a tuft of straw for hair, round blue eyes, flushed cheeks, and an old, wool blanket wrapped around him. His legs were poking out from underneath the covers, and Albus could see that his pajamas sported a circular pattern of blue and grey.

"Uhh...hi," he said quietly, not really sure of what else to say. The boy opened his mouth as though he was going to answer back, but only a scratchy cough came from his lips.

"I- I'm Al-" he started, but then there was thundering footsteps, followed by a cry of indignation.

"Ethan!"

Albus turned just in time to see an adult come bolting from another room; a tall, gangly man with wispy hair of his own and square spectacles. He immediately grabbed hold of his son, as though to shield him.

"Get out!" he roared, and Albus, recalling that there were people after him, held up his hands in an attempt to quiet the man.

"I'm sorry!" he said at once, not knowing what else to say. "I'm sorry, I- I-"

"Get out!" the man cried again. "Get away from my son!"

"Hey I'm not even near your son, okay, just let me explain-"

"GET OUT!" the man screeched, and Albus, unsure of what else to do, raised his wand.

"*Silencio!*" he barked, and the man's growls subsided at once, though his mouth continued to move animatedly. His son gave another brisk cough, then screwed up his face as though preparing to cry, and Albus, panicking, was then forced to silence him too.

"I'm sorry!" he said again, now flailing his arms wildly at the silenced individuals on the couch. "I'm sorry, really, just let me explain, I'm not here to hurt you-"

What must have been Ethan's father seized the lantern on the table and heaved it at him. Albus ducked, barely avoiding it, but the sound of it smashing into the wall behind him told him that this situation was too risky to continue on in this way.

Make them stop.

"I know," he said aloud, as the man reached down and started tossing blocks at him "I'm on it-"

Threaten to hurt the boy.

"If- if you don't stop I'm gonna hurt your kid!" he bellowed, aiming his wand at the boy, whose cries still could not be heard. The man stopped at once, horrified, and Albus too felt himself go cold.

"I mean- wait- what?"

His eyes were stinging him, though it felt as though it was a separate pain from the one brought by lack of sleep. That voice...

Just kill them already!

"Shut *up!*" Albus yelled, and the man now gave him the most frightened look that he'd mustered thus far. "I mean- not- not you, *i-it* -just- just calm down!"

He continued to blink furiously. That voice...it had been the voice from before. He'd been talking to himself all day, but those had just been conversations with himself, the standard way in which he thought. *That* voice though...he recognized it from before. But he'd gotten rid of it, hadn't he? It hadn't plagued him in so long. He thought back to Fairhart's letter, albeit only for a moment. Fairhart had mentioned that he'd have lost the power given to him by the Dragonfang Wand...but then why was that voice still in his head?

"Just listen to me," he said, and he actually lowered his wand. "I- I'm not going to hurt you, okay? You or your son. I know that this is your house, I know I shouldn't be here, I get that, but I'm running from people *a lot* worse than me, I just- I just need a moment, okay? Can you give me one second?"

The man was barely listening though. Next to him, his son had started to make movements resembling choking. Hastily, Albus waved his wand, removing the spell at once; as he'd thought, the boy had resumed in his torrid coughing.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he told them both, though when the man looked back at him, he realized that his dark eyes had fallen on his limp wand instead. And that was when Albus realized something.

"You...do you know what this is?" he asked, holding the wand up, and after a moment, the man gave a solid nod. "Okay...so then- then you know what *I* am?"

The man nodded again. Albus pondered the movements of his head. If this man was a wizard, then why had he resorted to tossing things at him like a lantern? Unless-

"Are you a squib?" he asked, and though it took a moment more, the man nodded again.

Albus heaved a sigh. "Okay, if I unmute you, can you *promise* that you'll be quiet? I'm being serious, you just have to trust me..."

The man nodded yet again, and Albus removed the spell. His son was still looking worried, though he, at least, had relaxed in his rigidity, if only slightly.

"Okay, listen, I'm not going to hurt either of you, okay? My name is Al, and I just need to hide out here until I'm sure it's- *what is wrong with him?*"

The boy had started coughing again, this time a dry, rancid cough that sounded particularly painful.

"My son," the man said, his light voice quivering, "is very sick-"

"*Harold!*"

Albus turned and groaned. A woman had emerged in the door frame, looking mortified at the scene. She was holding a tray of food, presumably for the child, though at once, she began flinging the contents of the meal at him.

"Hey- stop- okay, j- just -just hear me out!" he tried arguing, as he ducked just in time to avoid a glass of liquid, which shattered behind his head. "Just stop!" he yelled again, as something soggy connected with his face briefly, before sliding off. "Just st- *did you just throw a sandwich at me!?*- get over there!" he demanded, now jabbing his wand forward, and what must have been the boy's mother gave a whimper before running to her family.

The man that Albus assumed to be her partner pulled her over tenderly, wrapping an arm around her much as he did with his son. Her hair was of a darker color, a fact made all the more apparent by a skin complexion that had turned ghastly in its whiteness. Albus now had his wand raised at the three of them, his mind racing. He knew that what he was doing was awful, but

now he'd *definitely* come too far to relent.

"Okay, listen- I get it. I know that I don't belong here, I- I know that you guys have no idea who I am, I get that you hate me, and that's fine, I hate me too right now, but you *have to be quiet!*" he hissed. "Okay? There are people trying to kill me out there. I just- I just need a place to think for a moment, okay? I'm not going to hurt you; any of you. I swear."

The three of them of stared back at him, looking dumbfounded. It was only when the boy coughed again that the father spoke up.

"What do you need us to do?" he pleaded, his voice still shaking. "Whatever you need- please- just don't-"

"I'm not going to hurt you," Albus repeated, firmly. "I just need a few minutes, okay? So that I can know that the coast is clear."

The father swallowed for a moment before nodding. Albus wished that he was being honest, but in fact, he *did* need more than time. He needed another step-another place to follow this one. What would leaving this home do, with nowhere to go?

"Actually," he admitted, and he now reached into his pocket, digging about for the photograph of Fango Wilde that he'd procured. "I do need help with something-this will get me out of here much faster, actually, if you can. I'm looking-"

"We don't know where anyone is," the man interjected. "Please...we have nothing to do with this."

"Just hear me out- wait what?" Albus gave him a curious look. "How'd you know it was a person I was looking for?"

"They're all looking for people," the man told him. "But we don't know! *We really* don't!"

"Who's all looking for people?" asked Albus, trying his best not to sound threatening.

"*Them*," the man said sadly. "Both of them-the Protectors, and the Lions, they were both going door to door."

"The Protectors..."

"Please, we really don't know anything," the man said again. "We don't know anything about this- this war. I'm a squib," he said earnestly. "And my wife- my wife is a witch, but she doesn't do magic, she had bad experiences as a child- we just live in this town, that's all..."

Albus noticed that he'd squeezed at his wife's hand tightly as he said these words. Albus felt more horrible than he had at any other point since breaking in, but nevertheless, he felt himself drawn to the man's words.

"I know that," he said, trying to sound pleasant. "But please, if you can help me figure this out, I'll be on my way much quicker. You know who the Protectors are, then?"

The man gave a stiff nod, then began rubbing at his child's back, for he'd started to sputter again.

"Okay...who were they looking for before? Do you remember his name?"

The man tilted his head as though to think about it, and Albus felt the seconds drain away painfully. This was Fango Wilde's town, he knew that. And the Protectors were here as well...that couldn't be a coincidence.

"I forget," the man said, and Albus frowned. "Though I think it began with an 'F'," he added.

Albus felt his head explode. "Do you mind if I sit?" he asked anxiously, and the man exchanged a bewildered look with his wife before gesturing for him to do.

Albus brandished his wand-feeling guilty when they all flinched-and conjured the best chair that he could. It was a folding chair, and one that seemed poorly constructed, but he sat on his work all the same, then placed his wand on the floor.

"No more wand," he told them, holding up his hands. "I just want to talk, okay?"

The father nodded, preparing to speak again, but just then, his son had started another tumultuous fit of coughing.

"Do you guys not have anything for him?" Albus asked, momentarily distracted.

"Nothing," the father answered solemnly. "We can't brew potions-neither of us."

"Well can you take him to St. Mungo's? Do- have you heard of St. Mun-"

"Too risky," he was interrupted. "With the way things are now...no one can even be certain that St. Mungo's is safe. And we think it's a wizarding illness too, so no muggle clinic can help...my kind often get forgotten in these times."

Albus looked at the boy; he did indeed seem very sick. Feeling a very different kind of sick himself, he continued to allow himself to be distracted by it. "Do you guys have a cauldron though? And like...just ingredients? Simple stuff?"

"Of course," his father said, "but it doesn't matter, we have those things for when the Healers tell us how to administer- we can't make-"

"I'll do it," Albus told them, and the mother gave an affronted look. Albus pressed on, though. "Look, it's the least I can do. I know what I'm doing. Let me brew him something to help. If I heal your son," he continued, suddenly feeling empowered, "will you help me, and tell me about the

Protectors?"

The boy's father seemed to contemplate it for a moment. "Yes," he finally said, but then his wife made to object.

"Harold we have no idea-"

"Dear, he's clearly a wizard," her husband argued back, though it was in a soothing tone. "We have to do this; for Ethan." He then turned back to Albus. "Give me one moment," he said, and then he rose and departed the room.

Albus watched him leave; the boy and his mother remained though, and were wearing expressions that could not have matched less. The ailing child had a dim look on his face, as though he wasn't quite sure what was going to happen next, whereas she had had one of the most intense faces imaginable, appearing as though she were fit to burst at any moment.

"So you're uh...you're Ethan, huh?" Albus asked the boy, trying to abate the situation. "How old-"

The mother made an odd noise somewhere between a whelp and a gasp, and Albus ceased in the pleasantries at once. He was saved a moment later by the return of the father, though he was carrying a cauldron about two-thirds the size of what he was used to. Stuffed in it was an array of bagged components, all of them emblazoned with the full name of St. Mungo's.

"Okay, this should do," Albus said, as the boy's father placed the cauldron down on the square table in front of him. As he perused the collection more thoroughly, though, he thought that it might prove slightly more difficult than he'd previously anticipated. "What exactly has been going on with him?" he continued. "Has he been, like hurling? Stomach acid or anything-"

"Just a terrible cough," he answered, though then his wife interrupted, apparently with great reluctance.

"And a runny nose," she said, looking away. "And the chills."

"My son has always been a little sickly," the boy's father admitted. "But before there was never any trouble getting him treated-"

"I understand," Albus told him, removing the contents of the cauldron. He took a swift look out the window at the same time though, unable to shake the slight paranoia that those whom he'd eluded were going to start going door to door. Hopefully they'd all turned in for the night...

Albus grabbed his wand from off the floor, eager to begin. "Do you mind if I...?" he started, and at once, the father backed away.

"No, no, go on-"

Albus conjured a small flame, and just as he had back at Fairhart's cabin only so many hours ago, started putting together his work station. The three of them sat there, ogling him as he began, but it was once more the father who raised the inquiries.

"What exactly are you making him?" he asked, sounding somewhat worried.

"Pepperup Potion," Albus answered, already adding the first ingredient-crushed Mandrake leaves-to the simmering water. "Nothing too strong, and I'll go a bit light on it anyway given his size. Should definitely get rid of that cough, and warm him up. With any luck some sleep will just put the whole thing away; the potion will require rest to take full effect."

"Ah..."

He worked in silence for a few more minutes, but the next interruption was one that none of them really had any control over. His stomach had growled.

"Are you hungry?" the boy's father asked.

"Erm- no, I'm okay" he lied, as his insides wailed in agony.

"Let's make you something to eat-"

"*Harold*-" his wife had started again, staring daggers at him, and Albus, keen though he was on keeping himself concentrated on his work, couldn't help but intercept the argument.

"No, really, I'm okay, I ate yesterday-"

"Fine," the mother announced, standing up. "Then I'll go make him something. You stay with him." And without further ado, she departed from the room.

Albus mumbled a "thanks" under his breath, though he was certain that she hadn't heard him. Now it was just the three males there, Albus still leaning over in his conjured chair and preparing his second potion of the day. This one was much easier, of course, but all the same he gave it the same care. The boy's father noticed.

"You seem really precise," he said. "Is this a difficult one?"

"Not really," Albus admitted. "I just take it seriously. Potions was kind of my thing at Hogwarts. And I learned this one early on."

"I see. So you finished school, then?"

"Well...not exactly," Albus revealed, adding the pinches of Bicorn Horn with a frown-St. Mungo's had not provided them with as much as he would have liked. "I was about a year away when the school closed down."

"Ahh yes. I'd heard about that. Tragic..."

There was a brief pause after this, but Albus, growing comfortable, refused to let it evolve into more. "So you're- you're Harold?"

"Yes!" the boy's father answered, and he extended a hand from his seat on the couch. "Harold Brennan."

Albus shook it briefly. "I'm Al," he told them, and then, without really knowing why, he added "Albus Potter."

The man gave him a look of interest. "Potter, eh? As in...?"

Albus nodded, now stirring the dark potion counter-clockwise. "Yeah. That Potter."

"I see the resemblance now," Harold said, and to Albus' relief, he seemed pleased. "He was something of a folk hero for me, growing up. For everyone, really. Even those of us who weren't part of the community like that. My wife," he went on, lowering his voice now, "doesn't like to keep up with wizarding news, but I saw an article the other day that said that there were plans to exonerate him, for the death of that Ministry woman. Once the Ministry gets back on track, that is. I was very pleased."

"Same here," Albus said, a squeamish feeling suddenly coming over him.

"So do you see your father often, then?"

"Er...just saw him this morning, actually..."

"Well that's nice!"

"Mmm," was all that Albus could muster; suddenly he was regretting entering into this conversation. He reminded himself that there was valuable information at stake, though, and changed the topic abruptly.

"So tell me about these Protectors," he said. "What do you know of them? Do you know why they're here?"

"I only know what I've heard," Harold told him, and apparently, he didn't mind changing the conversation either. "And that's really all I can give you."

"That's fine," Albus asked. "Anything is great. The more I can get on them, the better."

"Well the first thing that I know," he was told, "is that they're not supposed to be here. And they weren't here, until a week or two ago."

"Any idea why they showed up?"

"One," Harold said darkly. "From what I've gathered, a man used to live here, in this town. And he was big supporter of-of *The Hand*. But after what happened on Azkaban-did you hear what happened...?"

"I'm familiar with it," Albus told him flatly.

"Well after what happened on that Island, the man fled here, back home. His name escapes me, but all the same, the Protectors somehow got hold of his location, and traced him here. Put the whole town on lockdown, looking for him."

"Why?" Albus asked, now lowering the flame of the potion; it was near completion.

"Well why else? For information on where *The Hand* is. That's who the Protectors want, after all. That's who they *all* want, all of these groups that rose up after the United Ministry fell. They just want it in different ways."

Albus nodded, putting together a slightly cloudy picture in his head. No one really understood that Fango Wilde had not been a big supporter of Darvy at all; no one seemed to know that he'd actually been a prisoner on that island, much like his father had been. They all considered Wilde his second in command, probably because of his notoriety at having been a Ministry leak all of those years ago...and now these Protectors had tracked him down to Mottley, just as Albus had.

"But there's more," Harold said, rearranging the blanket on his son and tucking him in further. The boy was dozing somewhat, apparently oblivious to their discussion. "The Protectors showed up, yes, but then another group, shortly after. The Lions."

"The Lions, huh?" Albus asked, though he knew that there was truth to this claim. Before he'd went to Fairhart's cabin, when he'd spent time eavesdropping in Hogsmeade, the Lions had been a topic of considerable interest, apparently just as organized and hungry for Darvy as Larson's gang.

"That's right," he was told, "and when they showed up, things got a bit testy. Apparently they wanted Darvy's supporter too, and *both* factions went through Mottley, preventing people from leaving and performing random house checks, all sorts of things, really. But that's over now."

"What ended it?"

"Apparently they caught him."

"What!?" exclaimed Albus. "Who?"

"The Protectors did."

Albus could have cursed, though he reminded himself that there was a child inches away from him. Still, though, he found himself inwardly outraged at the situation that he'd weaseled his way out of. The Protectors had Wilde...and that meant that they probably had the Book, too. And

they'd been *taking Albus to it*, just an hour or so ago! How close had he been to Wilde? How many steps away?

"This is about to be finished," said Albus, observing the thick nature of the potion, which was now mauve in color. "I can conjure a goblet-"

"It's fine, I'll get a cup," Harold said, rising. "And thank you," he added, before turning and exiting.

This left Albus alone with the boy-Ethan, his name seemed to be-in one of the more dreary settings of his day. He cast another glance outside, still seeing nothing, but he found himself unable to cheer for this slight victory. On one end, he supposed that avoiding capture had ultimately provided him with information, and would allow him to formulate a plan of sorts. But time had always been of the essence, really, and despite all that he'd accomplished on this night, the knowledge that he could have done a little more irked him slightly...

"What happened to your hand?"

"Huh? Oh."

Albus hid his left hand from sight, but only for a moment. He then gave up in concealing it, stretching his arm back out. "This here?" he asked, spreading his fingers wide to show the mass of ugly scar tissue that accumulated on his palm.

The boy nodded, looking simultaneously disgusted and horrified at seeing it up close.

"I played with fire," Albus told him, now flexing his hand to show the way that the damaged skin stretched. "Scary, right?"

The boy gave another frightened nod, his eyes bulging.

"Yeah. You're never gonna play with fire, are you?"

He then shook his head vigorously, and Albus gave him a weak smile.

"Good-" he started, but then he stopped when he heard noise from the other room. It was a hushed argument, though Ethan's mother seemed to be having a difficult time keeping it quiet.

"-left him in there alone to *poison our son*-"

"Honey, I just told you-that's Albus *Potter* in there. Harry Potter's son. Could we have found someone more trustworthy?"

"Then what's he doing breaking into a house in Mottley!"

"*Would you please keep it down!* And I don't know, but whatever it is, I'm sure it's for a good

reason..."

They emerged from the other room together, the father carrying the glass cup and the mother a plate with sandwiches stacked on it.

"Grilled cheese," the mother said, and Albus, catching on to the scent of it, began to salivate.

"It looks great, thank you so much, really-"

"And what do I do with this, then?" the father asked, holding the cup.

"Here, I got it-"

Albus took the cup carefully, then lowered it into the cauldron, filling it roughly half way. Bringing the cup over to the swaddled boy, he tipped it towards his mouth.

"Here, drink slowly-"

The boy took it all in one sip, and almost at once, steam began to exit his ears.

"It's okay!" Albus told the parents, as they'd both made sudden movements. "That's supposed to happen. Just-just let him drink."

They obliged, and when the boy was finished, he rolled over almost immediately, his soft breathing filling the room in seconds.

"Just let him sleep," Albus said. "And you guys can store this, actually," he added, indicated the cauldron. "Don't have to keep it cool or anything, it'll last a good month, and you can just give him how much I gave him if it acts up again..."

"Thank you," Harold said, looking at him intensely, as his wife gave a rather curt nod from next to him. "Really."

"Was nuffing," Albus answered them, cheese bubbling at his lips-he'd already devoured the first sandwich. When he swallowed, he added to Harold, "but listen, I actually was wondering-would you happen to know where they are? The Protectors, I mean?"

The mother had already seized the cauldron, intent on carrying it away. Her husband was rubbing at his chin though, as Albus tore in to the next portion of his meal.

"Sadly I don't," he said. "But if you just need to know where they are, I know who can give you that info."

"Who?"

"The Lions. They'll know for sure."

Albus nodded. "And you know where they are?"

"I do. And I can take you to them, or close enough, anyway, but it will have to wait until morning-"

"That's fine," Albus started, rising from his seat, but then the mother had returned.

"You can stay here tonight," she said, and Albus nearly fell back over.

"Erm- thank you, but really-"

"Stay here," she insisted. "We have an extra room in the back. It's a small thing, but you can get some sleep in. It'll be light out in just a few hours anyway."

Albus nodded, relief sweeping over him. Finally... after everything that had happened today, with Snape's portrait, and the vials in his backpack, and all the work that he'd done to find Wilde...he could get some sleep.

"Listen," he started, though he didn't really know where to go with it. "I- I'm sorry, really. For all of this. I get that you guys have nothing to do with any of this, any of what's going on, I was just desperate-"

"It's fine, Albus," Harold said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "It seems like it worked out for the both of us, actually. Now get some sleep. I'll show you where the Lions are in the morning."

"Thank you," Albus answered. "Thank you- just- just thank you."

He started to walk towards where the mother had indicated, but when the father asked if there was anything else that he needed, he couldn't help himself.

"Do you guys have a bathroom?" he all but begged.

"It's right next to your room," the mother replied.

Albus nearly wept in joy.

Chapter 5: Inside the Den

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It was his senses that roused him from his sleep. The chirping of birds outside, the warmth of the blanket wrapped around him-the wetness of where he'd drooled on his pillow. Albus lay motionless taking it all in, the flittering light crackling through the window in an attempt to probe behind his eyelids. Once he'd opened them and taken it all in, though, there was no hope for him to close them again.

But this was best, he realized. It was good that he could feel the results of his rest. How many hours he'd been out, he wasn't sure-it couldn't have been more than six or seven-but its effect on his body was immediately relevant. The comparison to how he felt now was as stark as possible; the aches and pains of the awful night prior were still fresh in his memory, but scarcely felt physically. He hadn't needed to sleep at all, he realized-he had just needed to lay down, to rest a sore ankle and a torso that seemed prepared to explode. Though the sleep certainly hadn't hurt.

For a few more minutes he stared up at the moss colored ceiling of the room in which he slept, a room that despite being so unfamiliar to him, carried a feeling of security to it rivaled by little else. Then he rose up from the bed-he'd slept in his clothing-and prepared to work his way through a house just as unfamiliar, to have exchanges with people that he hardly knew, and to explore a town that he was entirely unprepared for. But this was his life now, he knew.

But it doesn't have to be, nagged another part of him, yet he knew that that wasn't true. How much had he gotten done, just last night? True, things could have gone more smoothly, but the fact that he was here now, on to something in a place so foreign to him, was proof enough that he could do what it was he was setting out to do-he was farther already, he knew, than his father ever could have expected from him.

As if to champion this feeling, he looked down and saw that in his sleep his backpack had been brought to him, placed next to the small bed in which he'd curled himself up in. He unzipped it and searched it carefully, noticing that the powder from before had run its course-thankfully, though, everything else remained intact. The only thing that seemed to be missing were some articles of clothing...

"I washed some of your clothes for you," came a voice from the doorway, and Albus, who hadn't even noticed that the door was open, jumped in surprise.

"Wh- oh!"

It was Harold, the sickly boy's father. He was holding a few layers of folded clothes, which Albus accepted at once. The warmth of them spread through his fingers, and for a fleeting moment, he

wished that he was home. It went away a moment later, though.

"Thank you," he said.

Harold smiled from his behind his circular spectacles. "It was no problem," he said. "We have some kippers left over for you in the kitchen too, whenever you're ready for them."

"I- thanks, I'll be right in-"

He was given another smile, and then he was left alone, the door now closed to give him privacy. Albus looked around the room first-he'd hardly absorbed an inch of it before falling asleep last night-and saw that it was cramped, but void of much furniture. He then proceeded to dress himself, the warmth and cleanliness of his fresh jeans sending a jolt of glee through him, his grey sweatshirt soft and comfortable pressed against him. He walked around a bit in only fresh socks, to test his ankle, and when he was satisfied with its improvement, he put on his trainers and packed the remainder of his clothing away in his bag. And then he left the room in his wake.

It was very surreal, walking about a house unknown to him as though he lived there. Admittedly, it was rather small, but that didn't change the intense feeling of exploration that greeted him as he took his first steps into the Brennan kitchen, where Harold was sitting at a small, square table, a cup of steaming liquid in one hand and a propped up newspaper in the other.

He didn't look up when Albus entered, but did gesture to the sink, next to which was a small plate with stacked sausages atop. If he had been at Hogwarts, he wouldn't have deemed the sight appetizing, but in the context of the situation, he grabbed the plate and tore into them while standing, as eager to fill his belly as he'd been the previous night.

"Thank you," he said between bites, taking a look around the kitchen. It too was cramped, but fairly nice; a light purple in color and with standard appliances to fill it. A circular window above him guided light in as he ate, grazing his face and serving to awaken him even further, despite him already having been active.

"Do you know what time it is?" Albus asked.

"Around noon," he was answered, though then Mr. Brennan pulled out a chair for him. "Go on, sit. No need to stand."

"Oh- thanks-" Albus did so immediately, finishing off his plate in the same motion. Mr. Brennan had already returned to his newspaper, the pictures of which Albus noticed were moving.

"I don't know if you're in much of a hurry," he was told, taking him away from trying to make out the images, "but we'll leave in just a little bit."

"Take your time," Albus insisted, and he then pointed at the paper. "Is that uh- is that the *Prophet*, by any chance?"

"Yes it is," Mr. Brennan said, giving him a smile. "I can read wizarding news," he announced proudly.

"I didn't mean any-"

But Mr. Brennan had already continued on, "You're welcome to take a look if you like, but it's nothing of interest. *Prophet* hasn't had much to offer since the United Ministry fell. Just more speculation as to where the Hand is and more about Waddlesworth-"

"Wait, it's got Warren Waddlesworth in there?" Albus interrupted, his curiosity piqued. The last that he'd heard of the long-haired agitator, he'd been scrounging together a last ditch effort to take on Darvy. Interestingly, though, in all of his time of eavesdropping in Hogsmeade, Waddlesworth had been mentioned far less than the other Renegade groups abound, in particular those that now occupied Mottley...

"Oh yes," Mr. Brennan told him, "it's not exactly unexpected, but it is still something of note. He's going broke."

"*Broke?*" asked Albus, and he actually found himself somewhat excited. The idea of Waddlesworth being destitute had a profound degree of irony to it, and one that satisfied him greatly.

"For the most part, yes. Waddlesworth invested heavily in his own Ministry. When the UM fell, his gold went with it."

"Serves him right," Albus said shortly, and Mr. Brennan gave him a wry smile.

"I don't think he was all bad," he said. "Though admittedly, he wasn't exactly my kind..."

Albus said nothing, though he reminded himself that the general public knew much less about Waddlesworth's antics than he did. Then, in a rush of memories, Fairhart's voice from months ago worked its way through his head. *Warren will destroy himself*, the scarred Renegade had said.

Albus waited diligently for Mr. Brennan to finish with his reading, a sort of primal expedience surging through him, but nothing distinct enough to make him speak up. For a few moments he sat in silence, trying to assess the situation that he was in with better accuracy. Now that he'd gotten some sleep and avoided the danger of the Protectors, he could take the time to revel in his successes of the previous day. He'd made it to Mottley, he had an idea of Wilde's location, and he had an idea as to what to do, should he make it to the Foulest Book. The connection between the two accomplishments would only be underlined, however, when he actually met with Wilde in person. If he could do that today...that would be quite a bit of progress made in just two days...

He heard low whispering, and upon seeing that Mr. Brennan had not made the noises, turned in his seat and peered out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. Though he hadn't noticed it

before, the rest of the family was awake as well. He could see the young child, still on the couch, wrapped in his covers but sitting upright, holding the toys from the floor in his hands and gently smashing them into one another, absent from the real world completely. Next to him his mother sat, one eye on a book in her hand, the other on her son.

"How is he?" Albus asked, when he noticed that Mr. Brennan was gazing at the scene as well.

"Better," he said, giving a warm smile. "Still resting, but the cough is gone. You did a great job."

Albus nodded, still watching the boy. It felt good knowing that his talents had paid off in terms of his endeavors, but in truth, just having made a child feel better had been quite a reward in its own right. Seeing him engage in playful activities took Albus back to a much simpler time, a time when he hadn't been worried about anything other than coughing and the chills. *I need to stop Davvy*, he told himself, before turning back to the boy's father.

"She's thankful too, you know," he said, indicating his wife. Albus again nodded. "It's just hard for her to admit it. But all the same," he added, and he folded the newspaper over, "I suppose now is as good a time as any. Got all your things?"

Albus nodded, rising from the chair and slinging his bag over his shoulder. He didn't know what came next, but suddenly, he felt very prepared for it.

"Then let's go," Mr. Brennan said, leaving the table himself. They entered the sitting room together, where the boy's father gave his wife a wordless kiss on the cheek, and then delivered one to the forehead of his son.

"Be careful," his wife said, as he was putting on his coat, and Albus could have sworn that she'd looked at him for a moment as well.

"We'll be fine dear, just going for a stroll..."

And with that, he led him towards the exit. Albus caught the boy's eye as he left, giving him a small wave of the hand as he did. The boy's own hands occupied, he simply beamed.

The next moment he was outside, the sunlight intense enough to blind him momentarily, but the cold air of winter's end enough to make his body stiffen as he left the front yard and made for the dilapidated sidewalk. Mottley was a much different place during the day, he realized. There were more people out and about than he'd thought that there would be, though they all seemed lost in their own worlds, walking about and engaging only those in close proximity to one another. He saw two boys playing with sticks in a yard as they walked, and a tall, leering woman crossed over to the other side of the road upon seeing them approach.

"It's a bit...dreary of a place, isn't it?" Albus asked Mr. Brennan, walking only an inch or so behind him.

"It's been rather quiet since the Protectors first came," he was answered. "Though even then,

we're not a big enough town to be loud."

Albus said nothing, still taking in the scenery. The town just seemed a little too narrow to be an urban environment, and the row homes seemed to extend endlessly, all of them similar in shape but in varied enough colors that one didn't feel as though they were going in circles. Albus had the sense that it was the kind of place that had but one market to it; a sort of general area where people gathered to get all of their things in one go, before returning to their private lives. Knowing that Fango Wilde had lived here helped to solidify this view, but there were a few surprises in store for him. Though he'd taken notice of the street signs and parking meters, it took the slow passing by of a blue car to make him turn with interest.

"There's muggles here," he declared.

"Of course. Wizards are a minority in the world. You didn't know that?" he asked, sounding rather taken aback.

"I did," Albus insisted. "I just didn't think these places were so mixed..."

"A lot of towns contain a mixture of both. This one here I think actually used to be completely a wizarding dwelling, but with the way that people can move about...it became more important to integrate than to separate. Muggles have no idea of course-I can't pick up on some of the things that my wife can, for instance-but I'm at least a little aware of what's going on sometimes. The Ministry generally has regulations on how wizards and non-wizards interact, but given the state of the government, things have gotten a bit out of control. Whatever the Protectors and the Lions and these other groups may be, they're not interested in engaging with muggles, so it was quite a struggle for them to go door-to-door and to shut down the entire town under such pretenses. I would be oblivious to it all as well, if not for a magical person in my home."

Albus thought about this as they walked, just now really accepting how the outside world worked. He'd always known that muggles and wizards co-existed; his father had grown up in a muggle neighborhood before, after all, but he'd never considered it a point of interest, as he knew that his kind were the ones ensuring that the boundaries between the two worlds were never crossed. But what happened when there was such a degree of anarchy in the wizarding world?

"Do the muggles here have any idea of what's going on?" he asked. "Like with Darvy and everything?"

Mr. Brennan gave him an affronted look, and Albus frowned.

"Erm, I mean, 'the Hand'-" he said lamely, frustrated that such a change was even necessary. "Do people know-"

"They're aware that something is going on in the world, but they're given different information. It's actually a rather unique position for us to be in. Squibs, I mean," he added, when Albus showed confusion at the term. "We're the only ones that get to really probe it from both sides,

and sometimes I do find myself rather taken aback upon learning just how much of the wizarding world gets glossed over. I remember in my youth-in You-Know-Who's time-reading about the same town being destroyed in two very different ways. We turn here, by the way."

It took Albus a moment to realize just who it was that he knew, but before he could even delve into this Mr. Brennan had already made another sharp turn, and Albus, reminded of his exploits the previous night, changed the subject to something rather more dire.

"Do you know if the Protectors are out around this time?" he asked.

"Unlikely," he was told. "Or at least, not around here. While it is a mixed community, some areas are less integrated than others. I work fairly close to where I know the Lions stay, however-while no one else around me notices them, I do. And that's where we're going now."

"And- erm- what exactly is it you do? For a living, I mean?"

Mr. Brennan smiled at him. "I file paperwork," he said.

They took another turn, this one more slight, and at this point they were walking along pavement rather than the sidewalk. Albus took in the sights of small shops as they went by, detecting that this was one of those areas that was very much catered to a specific group. He saw closed signs on many of the small food huts and equipment stores, written in big red letters and pressed up against glass, but at the same time, he saw that the interiors were very busy. He wondered if Mr. Brennan could see that there was activity inside of these places, but decided not to press the matter.

They only started to slow down when they'd left this area completely, heading to what looked like an encirclement of structures more designated for heavy manufacturing than anything else. These buildings were larger and more square than the homes that they'd passed, all of them some shady or murky brown color and looking rather worn, though the passerby on the street-however few of them there were-seemed capable of ignoring the bleak shapes that comprised this portion of the town. Albus was just eyeing a rather funky looking, particularly worn down establishment, when he felt Mr. Brennan gently steer him aside, into an alleyway.

"Well, this is where we split, Albus."

"Here?" Albus asked, looking around at the interior of the alleyway, and finding nothing but brick and garbage.

"Out there," his guide indicated. "Did you happen to see the rather oval shaped building? With the fire hydrant in front of it?"

Albus stepped out of the alley for a moment, noticing that the only edifice that fit this description was the very one that he'd just been eyeing. He squinted to read the peeling letters from the muddy facade of the premises, and then dipped his head back into the alley.

"That abandoned box factory?"

"That's the one."

"Are you sure?"

Mr. Brennan gave him a smile and a shrug. "I don't know how," he said, "that's for you to tell me. But all the same, I'm fairly certain that that's where the Lions have taken to congregating."

"How do you know?" Albus asked. He recalled that the Protectors that had tried to take him had been dressed quite casually; if the Lions were of a similar vein, he might find himself having some difficulties in confirming the accuracy of this man's statements.

"Non-magic folk tend not to notice what goes on around there," he was told, "but as I've already said, I'm not a typical muggle. I pay attention, and I've seen things about that building, most of all that some people walk towards it and just *vanish*. If that's not magic," he added, "then I suppose I know even less about your kind than I thought."

Albus nodded, now considering this evidence. That *did* seem awfully magical, and familiar, at that; it was not unlike getting on to the platform to board the Hogwarts Express. Not knowing how he could argue this, Albus raised his head up and nodded.

"I guess that's the place I'm going, then," he said.

Mr. Brennan gave him a stony look. "And I'm continuing along this way," he said, pointing in the other direction of the alley. Then, he hesitated, but only for a moment, before finally saying, "This is where we part, but first, I want you to know; I have no idea what you're doing," he told him. "I can't even begin to imagine what you want with these people, or whoever it is they're after, but whatever the reason, I trust that it's a good one. You're a good boy, Albus," he went on, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "I wish you the best in whatever it is you're trying to do."

Albus stared back at him, suddenly feeling very heartened. So often in his life people had made it clear to him just how wrong many of his decisions were, and for good reason; but this man here, this stranger, supported him. Somehow, that invigorated him a great deal.

"Thank you," Albus said, extending a hand, and it was shaken at once. "Be safe, now," he told him, as Mr. Brennan turned to leave.

"You too, Albus," he said. "And my thanks to you, as well..."

And at the next moment, he was gone. Albus stood there for a second, frozen in the situation. It had been very fortuitous indeed, he knew, to have stumbled upon someone so willing to help him, but then, he wondered just how much of it was a product of his name. Despite his father's best attempts to stop him from going after Darvy, was he still, in some ways, aiding him? Even unintentionally?

It didn't matter though, he realized; what mattered was what he did next. Immediately he left the alley and surveyed the worn down factory again, the alleged headquarters of the Renegade group that had, in a single night, topped his list of priorities.

If Mr. Brennan was right, then the people in this misshapen, magically hidden building were his best bet at finding out where Wilde was-and with any luck, the Foulest Book as well. This excited him, but at the same time, he knew that careful observation and study was an important part of this next juncture in his journey. He needed to know what he was up against first...

And so he waited. It was patience of the mobile kind, though; he strolled around the semi-circle of decrepit buildings, feigning curiosity and lackadaisical drifting, eager to keep himself low-key in the eyes of the citizens that were moving around him. This was a different sort of infiltration, he knew, than the one that he had undertaken with Fairhart, those few months ago on that island in the North Sea. This was about predicting human interaction, rather than that of nature, and already he was second guessing himself. As he meandered about he rolled the possibilities around in his head, all while keeping a hidden gaze on his next apparent destination.

Could the headquarters be hidden by means of a Secret-Keeper? This had been the case with Waddlesworth, and WAR, and indeed, this organization *had* used an abandoned shop as its cover, something that bared significance here. But then, would squibs be able to see people moving in and out of freely? And just how practical was it for a group of people that were probably constantly taking on new members to be forced to divulge some sort of secret with each new recruitment?

No, that kind of magic didn't seem likely, he realized. In a time as chaotic as this one, trust was a commodity seldom offered. It would be raw magical enchantments protecting this place, if this place was even to be protected, rather than something of a more personal nature. But this did not help him plan his next move; on the contrary, it forced him to consider that he may not even be aware of whatever magic he was up against next.

And for the first time since his departure, he found himself wanting companions to talk to. He'd thought of Morrison and Scorpius intermittently when moving about on his own, but the more that these thoughts persisted, the more effort he put into forcing them back. Before, circumstances like this one here would call for a group discussion; even if his friends only ended up battling one another with nonsensical banter, the opportunity for Albus to voice his suspicions aloud had always be an effective way of bringing him some new form of understanding.

But alas, he had burnt that bridge, and with vigor. He knew that it had been a crude thing to do, but this was not the fight of his friends; whatever his father might have thought, his best friends were not as prepared for these tasks as he was. It had nothing to do with capability or intelligence, but rather, perspective. Like his father, his friends did not know of the danger that he was. They had no idea of the true, insidious connection that he and Darvy shared with the Dragonfang Wand, a connection now more apparent to him than ever due to Fairhart's letter, and thus they had no idea that his willing removal from them was done out of care, rather than arrogance.

Not that that matters now, he realized, thinking back to the subject matter of that very letter. Albus had been most afraid that he would be unable to control himself around his loved ones—that he would be leading them into situations that they were all unprepared for. But as Fairhart's letter had revealed, this power was brought about by ignorance, a tool no longer at his disposal. And yet, he was not entirely ready to rule out the idea that he was completely stabilized. He'd heard that voice the other night, after all, though now that he'd had some rest, it was difficult to remember the exact circumstance that had been present...

He cut off these thoughts a second later; two men were walking towards the abandoned box factory. Albus turned sheepishly, trying not to stare, though from the corner of his eye he soaked in as much information as he could. They looked like regular people, muggles even, both of them young and fit, and wearing hooded jackets of different colors. He also noticed that they looked rather youthful-inconspicuous if not for the expedience in their steps—and a taller, dark skinned one even looked familiar for a moment. But then he blinked, and they vanished.

Albus inhaled sharply. That was the evidence that he'd needed to see with his own eyes, the magical act that told him that this place was worth all of the careful observation he was granting it. But what to do now?

I need to get in, he told himself at first. But what then? He could not hope that information on the Protectors and their whereabouts would be as accessible and catalogued on an elaborate chart that adorned every wall. At the same time though, he would never know unless he got in...

He strolled over to it, hitching up the straps on his bag as though a regular student from a nearby school, and brought himself closer to the structure. The oval-shaped factory greeted him with boarded windows and what looked like a hastily scribbled notice for the owners to pay some sort of fine. Albus felt himself shake as he neared closer and closer to the door, deciding that his best bet was to see just how similar to the barrier at King's Cross the entrance was.

He walked into the door, felt pain shoot through his nose and forehead, then stepped away, defeated. Rubbing between his eyes, he steered himself away foolishly, and for good reason; a woman passing by with a stroller had given him a look of great interest.

"Erm...doors, right?" he said, not knowing what else to say, and her pace intensified drastically following this.

Hoping that no one else had seen, Albus returned to his status as an uncouth delinquent, prowling about the area with his head always turned just enough so that he could watch the building for further abnormalities. He knew that his constant encircling made him much more suspicious than he was going for, but this was really all that he had to do. He was not going to return to the Brennan household and ask for a few more days of their shelter to carry out proper reconnaissance, and likewise, he had the feeling that his next home invasion wasn't going to go nearly as well. So instead he paced, sitting on stoops and trying his best to look as normal as possible...

Someone exited the factory, this time passing through the door just as the other two men had. It

was a girl this time, one with shiny blonde hair and a brisk pace to her walk, and she seemed to be a few years his senior. Albus turned away as she passed, pretending to be interested in his shoelaces, but he took in her attire as she went, noticing something rather peculiar. Though she had a coat drawn around her shoulders, she was wearing a blue and silver tie...

This was all that he managed, though, as at the next moment she had turned, almost sensing his ogling. Albus did his best to avoid her gaze, and did not feel comfortable in turning again until the sound of her footsteps had vanished completely. It mattered not, however, as only a few minutes later more evidence came his way. Two more people were walking towards the factory, one of them an older man, one a boy of about his age. Both were wearing ties striped with scarlet and gold.

Hogwarts ties, he realized, pretending not to notice as the two disappeared through something just as solid as themselves. He couldn't be certain of it, but the dim idea that there was some semblance of a uniform to the members of the Lions was dawning on him. And if that was the case, why not have that indication double as a means of passage? Muggles wore ties too, and bewitching an article of clothing was easy enough. But it raised some questions too...

Just what were the Lions? The Protectors had been a branch of WAR that had broken off, and true, Larson had apparently taken a fair amount of students with him, but was this the same for their rival? Was there a connection between the Lions and Hogwarts?

Now both determined *and* curious, Albus sauntered back to the refuge of the alleyway from before. It was still bright out, a complication of wanting things to be accomplished as fast as possible, but he thought that he could make something work. It would only take identifying a member on their way in, that and avoiding the eyes of any surrounding muggles. Though, as Mr. Brennan had already discussed with him, they weren't likely to notice much...

His prey fell on him only minutes later. Whoever they were and whatever they were up to, the Lions were a busy bunch; already someone was walking towards the abandoned factory, a mild gait void of any distinguishing characteristics, but with enough of a step to it for Albus to pay notice. It was a younger fellow this time, maybe only a year or two older than he himself, with thick eyebrows and a prominent jaw giving him a rather severe visage. Nevertheless, Albus could see a tie...

He poked his head out of the alleyway as the young man moved by him, and after giving a quick look around to see that the coast was clear, he pounced.

"Hey, would you happen to have the time?" Albus said, jogging up to the figure that was now slowing down. He turned, oblivious to what was about to happen-

Albus had removed his wand a second prior, though, and a flash of red light later, the unsuspecting Lion had crumbled to the ground. Albus looked around one more time, again checking to see that no one had witnessed what was, really, quite an atrocious act. Despite this surge of guilt, though, his glee at not being seen overtook him, and only half of a minute later he had dragged the boy into the alley.

"Sorry about that," he said, rolling him over and prying the tie from around his neck. It was striped yellow and black.

"Figures," he added, tossing it over himself now, where it clashed terribly with a grey shirt that had no collar whatsoever. He then hitched his bag up over his shoulders once more, dragged his stunned victim a little deeper into the crevice of the road for good measure, and then went along on his way.

This time when he approached the residence he could almost feel it beckoning to him. Only an inch away from the sealed door he felt a slight tug around his neck, and then-after checking one more time to see that no one was around-he phased through the entrance magically.

He nearly had to stop himself from whistling at what he saw. It was like standing in a cathedral of sorts; the ceiling was high overhead, much taller than the facade that outsiders could distinguish, and the walls and floor were very neatly kept, made of some sort of fine, polished wood. Albus was forcibly reminded of the Great Hall at Hogwarts after taking his first few steps forward, feeling as though this place would be very easy to get lost in. The entrance itself seemed to serve a purpose, though; there were racks where people could hang up their coats (and ties, he saw) and seats lined up in a rather orderly fashion as well, as though presentations often took place.

Not too far off he could see another emerging hall, this one more narrow and likely to extend into different branches of the interior. Albus hung the Hufflepuff tie up on the rack, though he didn't abandon his bag-there were too many valuables in there for him to risk it being picked up by someone else, no matter how strange it looked on his shoulders. He wished that he could create an adequate enough Disillusionment Charm to conceal it around his shoulders, but he knew that it would be insufficient, as well as likely to attract attention, and so he carried it over him as though it was simply a natural thing; with any luck, anyone bumping into him would pay it no mind.

No sooner did he imagine such a confrontation did one present itself; from the narrow corridor that he'd noticed just a moment ago, someone was emerging. This time it was clearly an adult, with grizzled grey hair and a bulbous red nose.

"Hey!" he said, his voice corrosive, and Albus braced himself, his hand preparing to draw his wand-

"Did you happen to see Carl today?"

"Huh?"

"Carl," the man repeated, and now he was standing somewhat slouched, looking angry.

"Uhhh...no. Not today."

"Dammit, I think he left without me," the grumpy man said, before striding by him and towards

where the coats were hanging. Albus watched as he surveyed the rack for a moment before picking, oddly enough, the same tie that he had just hung. And then, just a moment later, he vanished through the exit.

Albus exhaled, though this brief encounter left him feeling very wary. He'd managed to play it off well enough, but seeing the irate man march towards him made him realize just how over his head he was. He didn't even know what it was he was supposed to be looking for in here; only that somewhere, information was available to him. He would need to get it quickly, and then get out even quicker...

He entered the narrow hall and saw at once that there was a door on his left, unlabeled and with no handle. Pushing it open, he was immediately reminded of the Hospital Wing, again from Hogwarts. Hangings to separate beds punctuated the room into different sections, all of them dark red and still, the room virtually noiseless. Albus tip-toed through it for a moment, taking a peek into one of the sections as he did so; he recoiled almost at once. There had been someone in the bed, their face heavily bandaged.

Having withdrawn himself from this portion of the wing, he took only a few steps further before realizing that whatever it was he was looking for, it wasn't in here. He noticed as well that the entire area seemed to go on endlessly; there was certainly some impressive magic behind this place, to condense it all into what had been a relatively small location to start. He was just on his way out when a head emerged from behind one of the curtains to his right, making him jump.

"Can I help you?" said the shrewd looking man, and Albus backed away from him quickly.

"Erm- n- no, no thank you," he stammered out, before turning on the spot and making a beeline back for the main hall.

"Hey- hey, come back here-"

But Albus had already exited; his steps now twice as forceful as before. He was now seriously considering leaving; abandoning his attempt and regrouping with what little he'd derived from his brief time spent within this place. He had no idea just how dangerous or forgiving these people were, and in the back of his head he knew that at the rate he was going he was bound to wind up in the same position he'd been in last night with the Protectors. And yet, for some reason, he found himself straying away from the exit and deeper into the hallway, where more doors revealed more potential options for him. He opened up one on his right and saw that it resembled a dormitory, albeit more cramped; the two beds were bunked with one on top of the other, and a single writing desk was the only other piece of furniture in the otherwise vacant, undecorated room.

Albus closed the door, then heard a sharp voice from behind him.

"Hey! You there-"

He paid it no mind, his heart now thumping violently. This had escalated much too quickly for his liking.

"Turn around-"

He could hear the footsteps behind him as he progressed along, but didn't turn until a hand had clutched his shoulder-

Albus found himself face to face with a very unlikely counterpart. Tall and dark skinned, with an imposing demeanor, he recognized the elder boy as Carter Montgomery-his former Head Boy at Hogwarts.

Carter stared at him for a moment, wearing a fierce gaze of dawning realization for an instant, before he started to ask, "Aren't you-"

Albus had already withdrawn his wand though, and had slashed it through the air violently. The former Ravenclaw was no slouch, however; he'd also produced his own wand and had countered it, sending his stunning spell into the wall. Albus leapt back to put distance between them, but Carter lunged forward, reducing his mobility, and Albus was forced to aim for his legs-

"*Confringo!*" he cried, but the curse was leapt over, and he was then promptly thrown up against the wall. Overmatched physically, Albus just managed to aim his wand underneath his adversary's elbow, and despite being unproven in nonverbal magic, was able to silently aim a well-placed Stinging hex. Carter leapt back reflexively, and Albus seized the opportunity to make the sharp movement necessary for the Impediment jinx. Then, without even bothering to see if his spell had connected, he fled.

Carter did not call after him as he bolted down the hall, eventually propelling himself shoulder first into the door at the end and winding up in a circular study of sorts. Albus could see tables arranged with numerous leaflets of parchment on them; one of them even looked like a map of the town, but before he could reach for it a shrieking noise had sent a shiver up his spine; despite his state, Carter had somehow managed to trigger a Caterwauling Charm.

Albus semi-lunged for the map, then decided against it, instead evaluating those precious, additional seconds as a means of escape. He was panicking now, just as he had with the Protectors, but as he tore through yet another door he reminded himself that he was not entirely incompetent; he could get out of this.

I need to find another exit, he told himself, as he frantically opened up a door that revealed itself to be a rather untidy lavatory. Slamming the door shut, the wailing of the alarm still in his ears, he backtracked only a few steps before taking another turn in the study, this one leading to yet *another* bleak corridor.

He couldn't tell if this place was reminding him of Hogwarts or Azkaban; briefly, he wondered how many people could actually make the comparison. Then he practically flew down the passage, hoping that it would lead him to some sort of exit, or possibly even a hiding place-

He pushed the door open and had to adjust his eyes. The room was white; and filled with people. He was in a dining hall of sorts, full of large tables situated with long benches, allowing what seemed to be upwards of a hundred people to stare at him, many of them in mid-bite.

Albus raised his wand in futility; he had no target to aim at even if he wanted to. What had been a noisy location prior to his entrance had suddenly went completely silent, all faces now turned to him with a mixture of confusion and severity. And then, they all rose from their seats, plunging their hands into their pockets.

He revolved on the spot as they converged around him, now muttering and whispering to one another as they formed a complete circle that lined the walls of the hall. Still turning about with his wand outstretched, Albus stopped trying to assess their full numbers and instead found himself matching their faces. Some were strangers to him-most, really-but a handful here and there he knew by first or surname, though rarely a combination of the two.

They were dressed in all sorts of attire, generally that of muggles, but none, it seemed, had left their wand behind before going for a meal. Albus swallowed, his breathing now rapid and his entire body lubricated with sweat. Somebody stepped forward-

"*Stupefy!*" Albus cried, not even caring what happened anymore-all that he knew was that whatever happened next, he was going to fight it. The jet of red light was deflected by another's interference however, and Albus turned just in time to see the outline of a burly man come into view from behind an opposing streak of light.

Albus took in his features. He looked vaguely familiar, with straw colored hair, a prominent chin, and a pompous expression that he couldn't quite register. In that lone fraction of a second he determined that the man looked like an older version of someone that he knew, but before he could contemplate this any further he'd been forced to try and block the oncoming spell-

He mustered a shield charm, but the bolt of red light shattered it. And then, he knew nothing but darkness.

Chapter 6: The Truce

Chapter 6: The Truce

All around him, he could see only black.

Albus walked through the abyss gingerly, his footsteps leaving tiny, baleful echoes behind him, his sense of direction as distorted as possible. He didn't know which way he was going-or if there was somewhere to go to, for that matter-but he knew after looking down that he blended in with the colorless void around him. He was in his Hogwarts robes.

He felt himself trembling as he took each step, an odd sensation forcing him back with every thrust of his body. It was like walking through water, only he was not wet in anyway. Each of his marches grew more arduous the further into the darkness he went, until, finally, he was forced to turn around.

A face was looking back at him.

Albus tensed up, his fists clenching. There it was, again, somehow still alive. That perpetual nightmare-that demonic apparition that frightened him beyond all else. Eyes golden and lips curled, it mirrored his body language perfectly, until it tilted its head to the side, almost as though curious as to what he was doing in its realm.

"I got rid of you," Albus told it, standing his ground. Engaging it seemed to drain him, though; already he felt his knees buckling.

"Rid of I?" the second Albus answered back, head still tilted.

"You should be gone!" Albus argued with himself.

"Should you be?"

"I- I defeated you. Before..."

Yes, he remembered that. His dreams had stopped, hadn't they? He'd wrestled his doppelganger to the ground before, and he'd won!

But the nightmarish iteration of himself was shaking its head, almost condescendingly. "Before...I defeated you," it told him, pointing at its chest.

Albus made to argue with it, to deny this claim, but he stopped before he could even begin. Something was different this time...

"Are you...just repeating what I'm saying?"

"What are you saying?"

Albus stepped backed from it, his palms sweaty. He wiped his hands on his robes to occupy them, and suddenly, he had the desire to run-to run as far into the void as he could go.

"Fairhart said that you should have left," Albus told himself, thinking of the letter.

But his double only sneered. "Fairhart left *you*."

Albus roared and flew at it, mustering what little strength he had in him into a single lunge. He knew that this time was different, knew that he wasn't stronger this time, but he didn't care; he wanted only to show that he still meant to fight it. He grabbed at the collar of his nemesis and threw him to the ground, then climbed atop of him and began punching his face as hard as he could-

He felt his strength grow every time his fist made contact. At first there was a struggle, but once he'd developed a motion there was no defending against it. Instead he continued to pound away, feeling his knuckles turn raw as they slammed into bone and tore at flesh, and he only stopped when he could no longer see the face that he was attacking, for a dark yellow light had started shielding his eyes...

Laughing at his immense success, he looked down at his victim, who had stopped squirming a long time ago. His face was a bloody pulp, thick ooze leaking from his nose and mouth, and spread into his hair, but his eyes were still open, only they'd changed. They were emerald green...

Albus opened his green eyes, the darkness evaporating in one smooth motion and being replaced immediately by white. He was lying down still, but he was in the real world, and though the terror that had enveloped him in his dream had made him want to sit upright, he found himself incapable. Only his head could be moved.

And yet, things felt serene. Memories were sifting about in his head now that he was awake, and though he could move his head only slightly to the sides, he recognized that he was still within the headquarters of the Lions; he was in the medical area that he'd seen before. Despite his stiffness he was able to make out the red hangings that separated him from the others, but when he'd fully adjusted to his surroundings he managed to distinguish another presence in the room. Someone was sitting on a chair by the uncomfortable cot in which he was lying, and moreover, it was somebody that he knew.

"No way," he bemoaned, turning his head away from Charles Eckley.

"Someone's cranky," Eckley replied, now rising; apparently he'd just noticed that Albus was conscious.

But Albus was looking away defiantly now, as far as his limited mobility could take him, anyway, refusing to look at his caretaker. He simply refused to believe that Eckley was here, watching over him, possibly even responsible for the magic that bound him to this bed. Whatever his beliefs, though, reality sank in quickly, as Eckley walked around him to look him in the face.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and Albus didn't respond at first.

Instead, he compared Eckley to the last time he'd seen him. It had been in the snow, when the Hogwarts express had been attacked. They'd dueled, albeit briefly, but nothing had come of it due to the events that had transpired next. This Eckley looked somewhat different though; not necessarily in overall looks, but rather, in the way that he carried himself. He still had that straw colored hair, that handsome, symmetrical face, even that confident look about him, but the boyishness of it was gone now, replaced by that intangible, yet somehow discernible appearance of experience. He looked somewhat hardened, his bulkiness toned down slightly, as easily revealed through a red t-shirt, and there was an aura about him that suggested a strong mental composure of sorts.

"Bad," Albus finally admitted, though this time he didn't try working his head away. In truth, things had softened between him and Eckley recently, aside from their skirmish that day in the snow. They'd both matured somewhat, Eckley in particular due to the added responsibilities of being a Prefect, and for the better part of last year they'd managed to reach a mutual state of indifference with one another.

As Eckley surveyed him here, though, like a hunter undecided as to whether he was going to pity his caught prey, Albus felt that ambiguity shift more towards dislike.

"What are you doing here?" Albus finally asked him, finding the situation unbearable.

"Me?" Eckley said, looking confused. "You're the one that busted in here!"

"Right, right, I get that you're part of this lot," Albus said. "But can you at least find me someone in charge that I can talk to?"

"Well that won't take long," Eckley said, sitting back in his seat. "As that would be me."

"You?"

"Me and my brothers," he revealed, and he held out his arms simply. "We started this group, and settled into this place too. It's temporary, but I think it fits okay..."

"You and your brothers, huh?" Albus said, staring at him boldly. "You guys founded the Lions?"

"That's right," Eckley told him. "Chris you already met; he's the one that put you in here."

Albus heaved as much of a sigh as his restrained body would let him. Annoyed though he was that he'd somehow managed to come across Charles Eckley while on his way to finding Fango

Wilde, he was at least pleased to know that things were making sense now. The Eckley brothers-though Albus had never even see the others, apart from just being stunned by one-he knew to all be devout Gryffindors. This explained more than the childish name though; their main place of activity had resembled Hogwarts so much to him because it had probably been crafted in that way.

He supposed that the ordeal that he'd gotten himself into now wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been; he didn't think that Eckley was going to let anyone torture or kill him, anyway, but all the same, he found it difficult to derive any sort of pleasure from his current situation. Eckley seemed to be reveling in it though, or perhaps he was simply taking his leadership seriously, for when he spoke now it was in a tone that suggested a certain degree of authority.

"Look," he started, "however surprised you are to see me, it's *nothing* to what it is for me to see you. So if you don't mind, I'd like to get a few answers from you before this goes any further."

"What, are you going to interrogate me?" Albus asked, half-sarcastically, but Eckley did not deny the accusation.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Just got lost,'s all..."

"Do you think that this some kind of a joke?"

"Honestly?" Albus lashed out, "it's occurred to me, yeah. I'm having a hard time believing that you and your brothers are-"

"Believe it," Eckley interjected. "We started up right when Larson split off and formed the Protectors. It'd been mulling in my head for a while, but after Waddlesworth's Ministry fell, it just made the most sense. Now, I'm only going to ask this one more time. What brings you to the Lion's Den?"

Albus managed a derisive snort. "You are, by far, the *corniest*-"

"You can say whatever you want about me, but I'm not the one that needs permission to get up and use the bathroom now, am I?"

"Oh that's real cute mate, big tough guy when I've already been stunned-"

"Just tell me why you're here!"

"I got lost, okay!" Albus lied, now very angry at the way that he was being ordered about.

"Lost, eh?" Eckley repeated. "And somehow, in your wandering, you managed to pick up a bewitched Hogwarts tie and stumble into a magically hidden location?"

Albus had no response for this, but Eckley did not seem content with him being quiet, as he then proceeded even further in his questions. "And we also found one of our members passed out in an alley. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that now, would you?"

Albus looked away from him. "Times are getting tough," he said, "easy to get lost in the bottle-"

He heard a chair screech, and when he turned again he saw that Eckley had stood and turned to leave. "If you don't feel like answering now, I guess I can let you lie here another night-"

"Another *night!*?" Albus blurted out. "How long have- how long was I out-"

"About a full day," Eckley revealed, turning back for a moment. "We could have revitalized you earlier, but there were things to be done and all."

Albus could only lie in horror at this news. A full day wasted-more precious time down the drain. The Protectors had had Wilde for at least two days now...

"Okay, I'll tell you!" Albus conceded, stopping Eckley in his tracks. "I- I'm looking for someone, okay?"

Eckley slowly turned, narrowing his deep brown eyes at him. Then, he sat back down by the bedside. "Who?"

Albus swallowed, trying to find an acceptable answer. It would have to be something plausible, though not correct-

"Is it Fango Wilde?"

Albus stared at him. "What- what are you talking about? I don't even know-"

But then Eckley had leaned over, and Albus could hear the sound of a bag being unzipped. At the next moment, his rival had produced a still photograph; the picture of Wilde and Fairhart that he'd taken before.

"Bit of a curious thing to be carrying around," Eckley said, looking back and forth between Albus and the image. "Now why would someone need a picture of Fango Wilde on hand..."

"So what, you went through my stuff?" Albus said though gritted teeth, and despite whatever enchantments were on him, he felt as though his body was shaking.

"Just a little bit," Eckley admitted. "Don't worry, I stayed out of your clothes; I'm beyond certain things. What's with the flowery boxers?"

"A gift from my girlfriend," Albus lied; in truth, he didn't want Eckley knowing that his mother still did his underwear shopping. That he'd managed to connote it to Eckley's former girlfriend was something of a bonus as well.

Surprisingly though, Eckley laughed. "Well played," he said, "but that doesn't change the fact you're carrying some pretty interesting stuff on you. So again, mind telling me why you've got a picture of Fango Wilde on you? Or is it the other bloke you're looking for?"

He doesn't recognize Fairhart without his scar, Albus realized, though he still gave no response.

"Not talking?" Eckley goaded. "Fair enough, next item of business then-this is a neat little bottle, isn't it?"

He'd produced one of the vials of *Mortem Necavero*. At this Albus felt his face harden, though now he was working vigorously in his head to defend this particular possession.

"Seems like you've got a few of them in here, actually," Eckley continued, still apparently digging through his bag.

"It's just water," Albus lied.

"Water, huh?"

"That's right."

Eckley grinned, then uncorked the vial. "So if I just take a swig then...?"

"No!" Albus yelled. Whatever his thoughts were of Eckley, he had no way of knowing just how negatively the potion might affect him. What was more, though, he also couldn't allow his work to go to waste. "Okay, you got me; it's an Anti-Anxiety Potion."

"Anxiety, huh?"

Albus gave a minute nod. "Look it- it's embarrassing. Sometimes I just need them though. I started brewing it a bit when my dad was arrested and then...well...you heard that I was on the Island..."

Eckley ogled him for a moment, a coy expression playing on his face. Albus trailed off there, hoping to sell it...

"You know we've made these before in Potions," he said. "I recall them being blue."

"Well that's not always the case," Albus defended. "I mean, we used Knarl quills, but you could substitute- I mean, have you ever used *Potio Nimbus* before?"

Eckley gawked at it. "I don't think so, no-"

"Well if you had then you would know," Albus said, in disbelief that this was actually working. "You know how I am with Potions-look, you can take it if you want! But it's going to mess you up..."

Eckley continued to stare for a moment, but then finally corked the vial again. Albus tried not to let the relief show on his face as the tiny bottle was deposited back into his bag, and when he heard the zipper go again, he realized that Eckley had apparently not found Fairhart's letter. Albus recalled having stuffed it in the pocket of another pair of pants, which had mercifully been overlooked, it seemed. This was perhaps the luckiest that he'd felt since coming to; the details of that letter were much too private for him to want anyone else to read it, and he made a mental note to magically wipe it next chance that he had.

"Fair enough," Eckley eventually said, "though we've still got a bit of talking to do."

"Well can you let me move, at least?"

Eckley stared down at him, bobbling slightly, as though rather indecisive. "I suppose I can show you around," he said. "But are you going to behave?"

"You're really getting a kick out of this, aren't you-"

"It's an honest question," Eckley retorted swiftly. "After what happened yesterday? Carter is somewhere in this wing too. Now I'm going to ask you again; are you going to cause any trouble?"

"No," Albus insisted, though he couldn't quite hide the acidity in his voice.

Eckley gave a mild sigh, then produced a wand from the pocket of his jeans. He gave it a wave, and then at once Albus could feel movement again. He was just about to pick himself up from the bed when he realized something.

"Did you undress me!?"

"Wasn't me, but yeah, we have to do that; just protocol," Eckley told him. "I didn't look."

"Mhm," Albus replied smoothly, wrapping the blanket around him as he rose, and Eckley turned to give him some privacy.

He went into his bag and changed hastily, feeling rather awkward as he did so; nonetheless, though, he made it a point to ensure that Fairhart's letter was tucked away in his pants by the time that Eckley had turned back around.

"And where's my wand?" Albus asked him.

"You'll get that back later. Again, just protocol."

Albus gave a groan; he didn't know if he could think of a peer that would be as bothersome to have this kind of power over him, aside from perhaps Rose.

"Okay, let's give you the tour," Eckley said, and side by side, they passed through the maroon

hangings.

Albus was much further in to this aisle than he expected; it seemed as though he may even have been treated at the very end, given all that he could see ahead of him were more medical compartments. Eckley confirmed this for him as they began their walk.

"We've got a bit of a ways to go," he admitted. "This is definitely the biggest room in the Den..."

"How did you put this all together?" Albus asked him, unable to completely hide the awe in his voice.

"With magic, of course."

"No I- I mean *this*. This group you have. How did this...?"

"Ah," Eckley said, and then he actually slowed down a bit, as though trying to figure it all out himself. "Well I suppose it began right when the U.M fell. Hogwarts closed right after, and Larson made it known that that he was going to branch off from WAR."

"I know that, but what exactly-"

"Well, I didn't want that to happen. Larson was trying to take a lot of students with him from that...club," he said, struggling a bit on the word. "And really, it didn't happen. Larson took a few with him, but his little Protectors group is made mostly of those who splintered off from WAR. Waddlesworth is done for, by the way, if you hadn't heard..."

Albus nodded, saying nothing. He allowed Eckley to continue unimpeded.

"Anyway, we-me and my brothers that is-we knew what was going on at once. With the Hand at large-"

"*Darvy!*" Albus spat at him. "His name is Darvy, and you know it-"

"I know what his name is!" Eckley spat. "But it just feels weird...he did used to be our professor, if you remember."

"I remember," Albus admitted sullenly; indeed, that he had once admired the tyrant for his eccentricities still stung.

"Well anyway, even with everyone focused on *Darvy*, we knew that there was going to be different approaches. Larson's lot, for instance, isn't getting anything done. He's not protecting anyone *or* being proactive in trying to find him. Mostly he's got his gang just torturing Dark Defectors."

"Dark *what?*"

"Blimey, you really haven't been keeping up with much, have you?" Eckley asked, a little too smugly for his liking.

"I've been busy."

"Well Dark Defectors are basically just members of the Dark Alliance that splintered off; sort of like what Larson did with WAR, now that I think on it..."

"But why would they have done that?"

"Because of bad blood between them and Darvy's *new* friends. With Azkaban in ruin, practically all of those prisoners joined up with him; they have nowhere else to go, anyway."

"And I suppose that makes the new Dark Alliance even worse then, huh?" Albus confirmed aloud for himself. "The old members were the people that had weaseled out of Azkaban...the new members are the ones who hadn't even been given that opportunity..."

"That's right. So the Dark Defectors really have nowhere to go. There's no Ministry to protect them, the Dark Alliance doesn't value them, and there's Renegades all over the place eager to extract information from them. That's really what Larson's been up to anyway, and it's made them a desperate group."

"I can imagine," Albus said, "but that still doesn't explain how-"

"I'm getting to it," Eckley said, just as they'd started to near the door. "Come on, I'll show you some of the facilities...always good to know where the lavatories are..."

He led them out of the Hospital Wing and into the hall, where he began opening doors at random. As Albus had expected, the layout was rather derivative of the school that they'd attended, though he paid it little mind as Eckley continued to elaborate.

"Anyway, I saw that this was going and talked with my older brothers and well...I suppose we all just decided that there were better ways of going about it. With Hogwarts closed down, we wanted to put something together that felt both safe *and* active. To really make a difference. We're not about that torture stuff, like Larson is. We actually want to find Darvy, and put an end to him."

"And how many do you guys have?"

"A couple hundred," Eckley revealed nonchalantly, and Albus' jaw dropped, just as he was being shown a utility closet.

"A *couple hundred!*?" he repeated, unable to hide how impressed he was. "It's only been a few weeks..."

"We have a generational advantage," Eckley told him. "My oldest brother, Christopher, left

Hogwarts just when I was real young. Then Clyde not too long after him. And Carl left the year before I even started. We have a pretty spread out age group, and that means that we have a lot of pull and a lot of contacts. Everyone that you see here in this building-be it someone our age or a full adult-at one point went to school with an Eckley."

"I gotta admit mate, that's pretty special."

"Don't kiss up to me, Potter; you'll get your wand back when I'm good and ready to give it to you," he smirked, an expression that Albus returned.

"Anyone here that I know?" he asked.

"A couple, though not a lot from your house," Eckley admitted. "Though to be fair, I didn't know many..."

"I get it," Albus responded with a shrug.

"But definitely some in our year. Remember Winona Soreeno?"

"From Ravenclaw?"

"That's her. She was joined up until just a few days ago."

"Why'd she leave?"

Eckley gave a large frown. "She lost her mother...bit of a confrontation with the Protectors."

Albus gave a frown of his own. "That's awful."

"No one's saying it's easy," Eckley said. "Or that it's completely safe. But everyone's joining up with something, and I really do feel like the Lions are the way to go."

"And what about your parents?" Albus asked. "How do they feel about their sons putting all of this together?"

"My mum's really proud, even though she worries. And my dad- well my dad's an older guy, getting on in years. He erm- he doesn't really understand much, to be honest."

"Oh," was all that Albus could muster. "I- I didn't know," he said, which was the truth; he really never had bothered to find much out about the Eckley family.

But Eckley gave a shrug. "It's fine," he said. "I know that he'd be real proud. And sometimes I feel like he is. Anyway, up for something to eat?"

They'd arrived at the dining hall that Albus had burst into the previous day. It was again bustling, though thankfully he was given no attention this time. Either they'd all been briefed as to what

was going on, or had decided that things were fine with Charles Eckley on the scene. The latter made him roll his eyes.

Nevertheless, they took seats across from one another at the edge of one of the more vacant tables, Eckley disappearing for a moment to bring back platters of food.

"Not quite as good as at Hogwarts," he admitted, serving them both a plate of shepard's pie. "But we do our best to manage. Can't magick food, but we all help out."

Albus drooled as the odors of the plate were processed. Forgoing all semblances of good manners, he began digging in at once.

"Been a bit starved, have we?" Eckley said, taking his own time with his plate.

"I've managed," Albus managed to choke out, thinking back to the lukewarm kippers. He'd appreciated them, certainly, but not quite to the magnitude that he appreciated this meal here.

"So I've given you what you wanted to know," Eckley said, between his own, smaller bites. "Mind telling me a story of your own? Last I'd heard, you'd ran away from home."

"Apparated," Albus corrected him.

"Same core concept," Eckley said with a shrug. "But there's more to that; I'd also heard that you've got a search party out for you. *Again.*"

At this, Albus actually paced himself, biding time for the answer that he wanted to give. "Me and my dad both want the same thing," he admitted. "We just- we want it differently, that's all. And he doesn't like me being off on my own."

He chose not to go further on this; the truth was, he knew that Eckley wasn't going to understand any better than his father, or anyone else for that matter. There was simply no escaping this was one of those few times where he really *did* know better. No one else had seen the army that Darvy had created on that island, there was no one who had *felt* the things that he'd felt. The mere fact that Eckley was content with sitting here and explaining the origins of his faction was sufficient in delineating just how little the rest of the world knew; aside from himself, no one else had any expedience or urgency on the matter. If the Lions-or the Protectors, for that matter-had an understanding of just how easily Darvy could rebuild his army, they wouldn't be trifling away in their personal conflict. And if his father knew just what Darvy was capable of, then he wouldn't be wasting time looking for his son.

But that's because they don't feel that power, he knew. Only he and Darvy had had a taste of it-and perhaps Ares too, though he was long gone. And moreover, this power was very much the reason why Albus was content with simply allying himself with any of these groups. Whatever Fairhart's letter dictated, he simply could not risk losing control in front of his loved ones the same way that he had on the island. If he got too close to Darvy's army-or even just the Dragonfang Wand-how would he be able to guarantee that someone like his father wouldn't get

hurt? He couldn't even remember what had happened before...

"I'm not going to lie, Albus," Eckley started up, jogging him from his thoughts, "you're putting me in a really touchy position."

Albus gave him a wry smile. "You're thinking of handing me over to my dad, aren't you?"

"Well not necessarily your dad, but giving you up, yeah. Other people want you found too, you know."

Albus bit at his lip. "So you've uh...you've been in contact with Morrison and Scor-"

"Don't get stupid with me," Eckley shot out. "I don't know anything about what your shadows are up to. You know *exactly* who I'm talking about."

Albus said nothing at first, though of course, he had in fact caught the implication. He'd just offhandedly mentioned her earlier, hadn't he?

"So how has she been, then?" he managed to muster.

Eckley leaned back, apparently now dissatisfied with his meal. His expression went to a much more complicated one, and Albus, unwilling to read it, tried to instead ogle the people a few seats down, who were having some sort of soup. He didn't recognize either of them.

"She's been about as you'd expect, given that her boyfriend got up and left *again*, after just getting back-"

"I didn't leave the first time, I got taken-"

"No!" Eckley responded hotly, and then a few people did actually spare them a glance. He lowered his voice accordingly. "No, no, don't give me that-you can tell others that, but not me. I know. I remember. *I'm waiting for someone*, you'd said. You've been involved in this much longer than that-"

"It's different," Albus protested. "Just- look. Just tell me how she is? What's been going on?"

"Me and Mirra don't talk much," Eckley told him, his tone still sour. "But she's frustrated. *Very* frustrated. You keep this up, and-"

"I know," Albus admitted. "But believe me it- it has to be this way."

But Eckley then leaned forward across the table. "And which way do think that is? Her going out on her own and risking her neck for yours?"

"What are you talking about?" Albus demanded. "What's happened? She hasn't went looking for me, has she-"

"Oh no, worse than that," Eckley said. "She's given up on finding you, because she reckons you'd just leave again anyway. No, she thinks that to get you safe, this war needs to end, and she's not afraid to take part in it. When she found out about the Lions, she asked to join."

"No!" Albus barked, now attracting even more attention, and he actually looked around frantically, as though expecting to see her. "It's too dangerous-"

But Eckley had already held up a hand. "I'm way ahead of you. Denied it, flat out, a few times. Rose tried talking her out of it, but she insisted; didn't give up until I'd straight told her that it was never going to happen."

Albus heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, the irony not lost on him. Here he was doing this, all on his own, to keep others-others like Mirra in particular-out of it. His danger in exchange for her safety. And yet she was trying to do the same thing...

"You can't let her," Albus said, shaking his head. "She's a capable witch, don't get me wrong, but- you can't- no matter what-"

"I told you already, it's not going to happen," Eckley assured him. "But I can't control her. I can stop her from joining with my lot, but I can't stop her from doing anything on her own."

"She wouldn't do that," Albus insisted, more to himself than to Eckley. "She's bold, but she's smart."

"Not when it comes to you," Eckley argued. "You mean something to her-you mean a lot. We've talked, she's told me. She feels connected with you. She even feels safe with you...somehow," he added bitterly.

Albus mulled over this momentarily, his appetite somehow lost. Of course Mirra felt that way...he'd been her first friend at Hogwarts, he'd saved her in that first year, and how many times had she been there for him, with all of the perils of his life?

Feeling queasy, he met Eckley's gaze and started saying things that he'd never even considered before. "You need to look after her," he said. "Especially- I mean, if something happens to me-"

"Mirra can look after herself," Eckley interjected, but Albus was quick to do the same.

"No, I don't mean like that. It's just...she doesn't have a lot. She lives with her grandparents. She had it rough growing up. I can't bear the thought of her having nobody to put that on," he admitted. "If something happens to me, if she doesn't have me to go to, to talk to, about anything, to be with even-"

"I get it," Eckley said, and suddenly, his face was red. "But we don't need to talk about that, because like I've said, you might be seeing her real soon anyway."

"So you've made up your mind on handing me over then?" Albus asked, pleased that his moment of weakness was done with.

"Just about," Eckley told him. "Gotta see it from my point of view-"

"Maybe you should take a look at mine," Albus interrupted. "We can help each other."

"And how's that?" Eckley asked, though he didn't seem very curious at all.

Albus hesitated, but then went for it. "Because we both want the same thing, don't we? Right now anyway-Fango Wilde."

Eckley raised his blonde eyebrows. "Keep going."

"Well why do you want Wilde?" Albus asked, trying to steer it into something that he could manipulate. With any luck, this excursion into the "Lion's Den" could prove quite advantageous to him.

"Same reason you do," Eckley said, holding up his hands. "Same reason you're here in Mottley. He's a source of information. Guy was at Azkaban with Darvy, may know something about where he headed after."

"But there are tons of people you could go to for that-"

"Not like Wilde there isn't," Eckley said, giving a slight grin. "Wilde's been *everywhere*. We have some resources at our disposal, we know just where he's been. He was a leak in the Ministry for Ares years ago, one of his first supporters even. Then he jumped ship to Darvy. We even have reason to believe that he was negotiating with Warren Waddlesworth for bit. Wilde may very well know more about what's going on than anyone else in this war right now."

"Well stated," Albus said, though he was pleased to know that the Foulest Book had been omitted. For these Renegade groups, Wilde was simply a link to Darvy, and Albus too could see the benefits of this. But he had an additional pit stop that others didn't. If Fairhart's letter was even remotely accurate, then the Book was the key to understanding how to dispose of the Wand and the Veil-the true sources of Darvy's power.

"And I suppose you're after him for the same reasons, then?" Eckley asked.

"Basically."

"Then why not join up with your dad? If he didn't have you to worry about, he could be doing the same thing we are."

He's more clever than I remember, Albus realized. "It is a little different," he admitted. "I have a few...other things I need to discuss with Wilde."

"And what would those things be?"

"They're about what happened on that island," Albus said darkly, hoping that this truth, however ambiguous, would be sufficient in curtailing this curiosity.

"Okay," Eckley said, making a gentle gesture with his hand. "But if you wanting him is so important to just you on your own, why should I care? If you're not willing to share-"

"You need an extra body," Albus said. "I'm offering myself up to help you; you turn me down now, and you're turning down someone who could potentially save a life out there, when you're waging your little war with Larson's nutcases. Or would you rather hand me over and have that weighing on you?"

"True, but of course, you could end up dead too, and then I've got that weighing on me-"

"I'm sure you'd manage," Albus insisted sarcastically, but Eckley didn't seem to catch on to it.

"I think you're an idiot," he said, "but I definitely don't want to see you dead."

This effectively shut Albus up, and when he started again, he was careful to make his voice more moderate. "Look, I just want to help. That's what this is all about, right? Let me help you get Wilde. If I can just do that-if I can know that I helped make a difference, you won't need to hand me over," he lied. "I'll go back on my own."

Eckley sat still for a moment, and then together, they both returned to their meals. For a few moments they sat in silence, until eventually the Gryffindor started up again, "You know, it's not as simple as you might think. Getting Wilde."

"I know it isn't," Albus said. "The Protectors have him."

"And how do you know that?"

"Honestly? A stranger told me."

Eckley rolled his eyes, but continued nonetheless. "Well that's right, they do. Sadly, whatever resources we have, Larson somehow has more. They've been a step ahead of us from the beginning."

"How did they find him?"

"How else? Torturing Dark Defectors. They gave up his name real quick, given his seniority in their group, and they must have shown up here knowing he'd head to somewhere where he had a home. I don't know if they caught him in the act of fleeing or what, but all the same, they got a hold of him only a few days after he got here."

"Well he couldn't have left with both of you putting the place on lockdown-"

"Hey," Eckley cut him off, pointing, "we're trying to keep these people safe. I already told you, we're not like Larson's group, and we're not like WAR. There are muggles here, and wizards and witches who really aren't sure what's going on, and giving them curfews and the like keeps them safe."

"I'm not arguing," Albus said innocently. "But still, if the Protectors already have a hold of him, why not just try and get information from them?"

"Because we don't think he's given them anything," Eckley told him. "If Wilde's track record is legitimate, then he's the biggest weasel there is. He's not going to give up information to people torturing him, because he'll know that they're the type to kill him once he's expendable anyway. No, he's going to want someone he can bargain with. That's more our area of expertise."

"Still though, there's a time limit-"

"Of course there is, but we're working on it. My brother Carl went out today, we think we have a lead on where the Protectors are held up. When he and his group come back, we're going to put something together. Should be able to go and retrieve Wilde in three days or so."

"*Three days!?*" Albus moaned. "That's way too long!"

He really meant it. This was just further evidence of how little they understood of what Darvy was capable of...

Eckley scoffed. "That's the way it works. Carl won't get back until tomorrow at the earliest, and then we have a day of planning, and then a day of organization. If I'm going to let you in on this," he continued, "then you have to be on board with how we work."

Albus gave a frown, but then a reluctant nod. "I understand," he said. "So you're not going to turn me over, then?"

They stared at one another again, the background noise of the dining area seemingly evaporating from the intensity. Albus needed this...

"Finish up," Eckley said, nudging his plate. "I'll show you around."

Albus did so with glee, as though the quicker he ate, the quicker the opportunity to seize Wilde would come. He was pleased that he had managed to work something out, even if it was with Eckley; he was now somehow even closer to Wilde, though of course, he could do without the supervision...

Once they'd finished eating, Eckley made it a point to direct him around the remaining interior of the building, which despite its visual similarities, simply had less going on it than when inside Hogwarts. It was still fairly comfortable though, and in truth, Albus enjoyed the tour, as it provided him with the time needed to evaluate his situation.

It was an unlikely partnership, he reflected, as Eckley had been showing him the designated area where they could tend to their laundry, but it could prove to be very beneficial-for him at least. He derived some sort of pride in knowing that yet again his morning had started with him knowing nothing, and yet ended up with steps, albeit small ones, in the right direction. The shock that it had been Charles Eckley whom he had stumbled across and needed to depend on had worn off now, replaced instead with thoughts of how he was going to manage his next endeavors.

He of course had no intention of leaving after Wilde-leaving *with Wilde*, perhaps-but certainly not abandoning his quest there. Though of course, it all depended on where the Foulest Book was as well...

With the day drawing to a close, however, Albus found his thoughts returning to the more sensitive discussions that had been had over lunch. He knew that his disappearance was weighing on his loved ones-and whatever Eckley might think of him, it truly hurt to know what kind of turmoil they were going through. His father and a few others were actively searching for him, but what of his mother? Albus knew if not for James, and especially Lily, she would be among them, but how long had it been since he'd seen her? Two weeks, perhaps, since the day that he'd left home? And before that stretch of being home, there had been weeks with Fairhart too...

As Eckley led him to where he'd be sleeping, he wondered just what his friends were up to. Morrison and Sorpius had assured him that they'd be following after him, though thankfully, they hadn't been present with his father at the cabin, and thus it was reasonable to suppose that they'd been assuaged. And Mirra...surely Eckley had been exaggerating? Whatever she felt for him, she must know that it was pointless to do anything on her own...

You don't, he argued with himself, and for a moment he grew frightened, before realizing that this was the usual voice of contemplation in his head, rather than the more menacing one of his dreams. Though in truth, it *was* becoming rather difficult to tell them apart lately. And indeed, he now found himself reflecting on the puzzling nightmare that he'd woken from this morning...

"Here we are," Eckley said, pushing a door open. It was a room nearly identical to what Albus had seen yesterday, with the beds bunked one atop another and only a writing desk to indicate it was for anything other than sleeping.

"Not too shabby," Albus said, simply pleased that he wasn't going to be back in that hospital cot.

"I don't think so either," Eckley agreed. "Anyway-I call top bunk."

Albus turned to him. "*What?*"

"Didn't think I'd leave you out of my sight, did you?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm the one that has to explain to my brothers why the crazy kid that knocked out two of our members the other day is going to be eating with us for a while. Least I can do is make sure you don't get up to any trouble."

"You don't trust me?"

Eckley laughed. "No, I don't. Now to be fair I'm not going to chaperone you tonight because I have to go check up on things first, but after tonight, you'll be doing that with me."

"I'll go do that right now, actually, if it means I won't have to-"

"Do I need to tuck you in?" Eckley cut him off. "Because I will, if I have to."

Albus sneered. "Only thing you have to do is give me my own room-"

"Not going to happen," Eckley said, shaking his head. "If you don't like the sleeping arrangements, maybe I can send word along and have them changed? Which would be easier to get into contact with your dad? By mail, or just Apparating somewhere, or-"

"Okay, fine," Albus conceded with a grimace. "Fine, I get it."

"Only for three days or so," Eckley reiterated. "Now get some sleep," he added icily, and he actually started to leave.

Albus had already climbed up to the top bunk, annoyed, when the door was closed. Then, a sudden thought of such great importance came to him that he actually hollered it through the door.

"Hey, when am I getting my wand back?"

"Didn't you hear me?" came a muffled voice from outside of the room, and one moving away, at that. "Three days."

Chapter 7: The Wilde Recovery

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Albus found the time that he spent in the Lion's Den to be among the most polarizing moments that he'd encountered since leaving his home. On one end, it was the solace that he had longed for when out and about on his own; the location that provided him regular food and shelter, while still not endangering those closest to him. On the other, however, he realized that it was in these moments that he was doing the absolute least for his cause.

Though he had not expected Eckley to nominate him as their new leader by any means, he certainly hadn't thought that their shaky alliance would result in grunt work, either. Like the other members of the Lions (though Albus refused to refer to himself in this way, inwardly, as no one ever addressed him as such) he was tasked with the tedious; with the minutia of organized living that allow a paramilitarist force to function to its greatest capabilities. He cooked-which he actually didn't mind-but he also washed dishes. He swept and mopped floors, cleaned toilets, patrolled the more desolate areas of the establishment, and did whatever else the Lions considered to be a necessary form of upkeep. The only thing that separated him from his temporary compatriots, however, was the distinct lack of magic being used.

"Seriously?" Albus asked, on the third day of what he now regarded as a form of imprisonment.

"People get messy when they eat," Eckley said simply, as both pairs of eyes scanned the dining hall, where the crumbs and discarded food of the last week or so had accumulated. "I suggest you get on this quickly, though; otherwise you'll have the dinner mess to deal with too."

"You could do this in two minutes," Albus insisted, and then, upon looking around and finding that the hall was completely empty aside from themselves, he added, "*anyone* could do this in two minutes! No one's busy-"

"That's not for you to decide," Eckley said shortly. "And for me in particular, it's most definitely wrong; I have to meet with my brothers in five minutes, actually."

"Well you'd might as well-"

"No," he was cut off. "You'll get your wand back just before we go. You brought that on yourself," he added darkly, and Albus scoffed. Moments later however, he was left alone to his work.

And work he did. Albus managed, despite being forced to use the crude, almost primitive tools of muggles. However, his ability to distract himself served him greatly as he worked. Every time he crouched to use the dustpan or to wet the mop again, he found himself wondering just what it was that was being discussed by the leaders of the Lions.

Albus had finally met all of the Eckley brothers, and in truth, he wasn't quite sure how he felt about them. As a collective, he viewed them largely as he did Eckley; they meant well, but they were annoying all the same. Individually, however, things were a bit more complicated.

The oldest, Christopher-who had stunned Albus days ago-was by far the most serious of the group. In terms of appearance he was virtually Eckley in twelve years or so; they had the same boyish features, the same hair, they even *walked* similar. The only distinguishing difference was that Christopher had something of a longer nose, and stood maybe an inch taller, but all the same, it was not uncommon to confuse the two of them from a distance. His character was much more dignified, however; he seldom laughed, seemed extraordinarily concerned with the well-being of his advocates, and was, interestingly enough, the one who Albus preferred of the four, as he seemed the only one to share in his extreme desire for time to pass and for Wilde to be captured.

Clyde, a few years younger, was the one who looked least like an Eckley. He was more stout, and pudgier, and his thick cheeks and flat face gave Albus the impression that he might have once looked like Charlie, before running into a wall several times. Nevertheless, he was certainly the most soft spoken, almost kind, and was the only one thus far-including Charlie-who had given him any encouragement.

And then there was Carl. Second youngest after Charlie, Carl was, in as simplest terms as possible, a huge prat. Looking like the one plant of the four that simply hadn't been watered enough, he had made callous remarks in each of the few instances in which Albus had come across him since his return from whatever reconnaissance mission he'd been on. In particular, he'd launched into a full tirade against his younger brother when he and Albus had been introduced, deeming him "a duplicitous snake" with magical abilities apparently tantamount to "a loaf of bread". Albus had yet to engage him in an actual conversation, and as far as he was concerned, things could stay that way until the end of time and he'd be just fine.

Though of course, it was difficult to be upset with these accusations, as Albus considered the former somewhat valid. He was planning on betraying them all, at least when it came to his intentions with Wilde, and it was this that he thought of most as he dutifully cleaned that night, struggling in vain to imagine just how this situation could play out in his favor. These days that he was spending as a maid would be for nothing if the end result was Wilde simply being transferred from one facility to another, all without Albus having the chance to learn anything from him. The more that he thought about it, his quest had become more precarious over time, rather than less. He was now forced to wait and hope that Wilde had not yet been killed by his current captors, and beyond this, he needed to hope that an opportunity would present itself for him to get the information that he needed...

Thankfully, the next day proved to be his first taste of what it was like to do something meaningful during his time with the Eckley brothers' coalition. The actual plan to retrieve Wilde was to be placed in motion the following day, and thus, it was near the front of the building that Albus sat on the morning prior, in one of the very first rooms that he had seen upon initially breaking in. With chairs set up in orderly rows and an area in front for a speaker, Albus was one of maybe thirty to have been invited to the revelation of the plan, though unfortunately, it was

being headed by Carl.

The other three Eckley brothers stood along the wall as Carl introduced the idea to them all. Albus was situated in the middle row, between two people whose names he did not know-this wasn't a particularly troublesome thing, though, as he hadn't bothered to learn much about the members of the Lions ever since pledging himself to their cause. Indeed, the only other person at the meeting that he recognized was his former Head Boy (and victim) Carter Montgomery, who seemed to have made a swift recovery, as he was looking rather healthy in the front row.

Carl clapped his clammy hands together just before beginning, his sour face-like a distorted version of his younger brother's-scanning over them all as he spoke.

"You all know why you're here," he told them. "We've been short on leads to the Hand for some time now, and the only fish we've had our eyes out for got hooked by the Protectors. Tomorrow, we go and get him.

"Based on the intelligence we've managed to gather, the Protectors aren't just held up in one place in Mottley-they comprise an entire block. We've estimated before that their numbers were around ours, but Larson seems to prefer to have his clan spread out. From what we've seen, their territory extends just about from Ablington Road, to the corner of Smythe Street."

Just as he was saying these things, Christopher Eckley flicked his wand, and a moderate sized chalkboard materialized just behind his brother. Albus was forcibly reminded of when Fairhart had done the same thing back in his cabin, but didn't allow himself to reminisce for long; pictures were now forming on the board, rather expertly drawn, actually, showing a shadowy, but accurate layout of the destination.

"There are eight individual buildings within this area," Carl continued, "six of which are homes that we believe to be occupied by specific subgroups within the Protectors. If the testimonies of Gerald are true," he went on, nodding his head towards someone that Albus couldn't see, "then Larson himself might actually be residing in this one," he finished, pointing at one of the homes on the corner.

"Not we're now actually worried about Larson, or really, any of the Protectors individually-they're just Renegades who couldn't cut it under Waddlesworth. But the last thing that we want is a full battle escalating, and as Larson is their leader and the one most likely to organize such a thing, we're going to assume that this is the place that we want to go to least. Instead, we'll be focusing on these two buildings here," he told them, indicating two establishments that were side by side in the middle of the street.

"This one here is a closed down butcher' shop, the other one an apparently lively discount store. Both of them, however, are actually core locations for the Protectors. Much like the magic concealing us here, a series of Illusionary Charms are being used to hide these locations from the sights of both us and muggles alike. Our guess is that both are being used for keeping prisoners, specifically Dark Defectors that they've caught and are still squeezing information out of. As for Wilde's location...there is increased security around the butcher's place, and that is

where we are assuming Wilde to be."

Carl stepped aside at this, and to Albus' surprise, it was Charlie that moved from the wall to replace him. He strode to the front of the room with a look of such forced maturity on his face that it would have been quite comical if not for the context of the meeting. When he spoke, however, Albus conceded inwardly that he did emanate leadership in some small way.

"As you can all see," he picked up from where his brother left off, "the easiest way into these buildings is through the back. Can you expand it a bit?" he added quickly, to Christopher, and the images behind him did shrink somewhat to reveal more. "Thanks. Anyway," he went on, pointing with his fingers, "there's no point in looking for a breach on the actual street; we'll be noticed too quickly, and indeed, that's part of the plan. One of the most important components of this whole thing is having a capable distraction; ideally, we want about fifteen or so of you stationed at these corners, so that need be, the confrontation will erupt here. We don't mind Larson finding out what we're up to so long as he gets his group together *after* we've extracted Wilde.

"Meanwhile, a smaller group is going in through the back alleys behind these buildings to infiltrate quietly. Carl and his team already identified the enchantments and where they'll need to be addressed; shattering these protection spells should be the only difficult thing. We'll split that small group up into two other groups, with maybe a few more for the butcher's shop, and then we search the interiors of the buildings for Wilde."

Albus nearly raised his hand, but stopped himself half way in favor of simply speaking up. "What if they've went out of their way to keep Wilde concealed? They know that he's their most important prisoner, they could have had somebody switch with him from Polyjuice Potion or something-

"And why would they have done that?" Carl snarled.

"They might be expecting us-

"How?"

"I don't know!" Albus spat angrily. "But we have to account for it, don't we? Anything could have happened, they might have noticed that they were being scouted out, or-

"Neither me nor any of my lot got seen!" Carl barked icily. "But if you want to panic this early, then you go back to your daddy-

"That's enough," interjected Christopher Eckley, who had actually taken a step forward and raised his hand, his expression solemn. "You're right, Potter, that could all very well be the case. But we don't have time to account for these variables. Organizing anything further is going to take too much time, and I don't know about you, but I'm not counting on Fango Wilde being the most steadfast. He'll have given up a few things by now, but once he lets it *all* spill, he'd dead, and then it's the Protectors trying to launch a war with the Hand, and in a way no better than

Waddlesworth's too."

Albus stared back at him for a moment, before nodding. While he still thought that things were more complicated than the plan was dictating, *that* was the answer he'd been looking for since he got here.

It was Charles Eckley who took over again after this, not seeming perturbed in the slightest. "Right, so with the groups split up..."

Albus didn't exactly tune Eckley out here, as he knew that this meeting was important, but he did find himself studying the constantly shifting map on the board more than the words being spoken. The route getting in did seem simple enough, but escape could very well prove to be difficult, especially, as he wasn't exactly keen on staying with the group and following the same routes...

"-Now there's going to be a lot of Anti-Apparition spells throughout the area, but we do have an extraction point of sorts-"

It was just beginning to dawn on him now that more than simply evading both the Lions and the Protectors, he might end up finding himself in a confrontation with both as well. And all of this while keeping an eye on Wilde, though admittedly, he probably wouldn't be in any position to run...

"-the remainder of you that haven't been selected for the diversion or for the infiltration will need to reach this point and get Wilde back here, and that's with quite a time limit too-"

The increasing complexity of the situation was daunting, but at the same time, he had expected this. He'd imagined such scenarios, even if they'd been vague and fleeting, and now he was finding himself at least marginally prepared for them. Though it hurt to think of his father, he couldn't help but feel a sort of appreciation for all of the things that he had done as an Auror. How different was this here, from his father's work? Planning an operation, chalkboard and all. Determining who was going to do what, measuring the outcomes. And then there was the execution of the painstaking effort...

These thoughts left him when Eckley asked what seemed to be the conclusive question of the meeting. "Now, we need six volunteers for retrieving Wilde. Two to join each of us," he added, waving his hand towards his brothers, though Christopher and Clyde in particular. "Carl is going to lead the recovery," he added.

Several hands shot up at once, including Albus' own. With the amount exceeding the requirement, Eckley continued in a swift manner.

"Keep in mind that this particular task isn't necessarily a measure of magical skill; we're looking for stealth and quick thinking here. There's no shame in spreading your talents to the other part of the mission. If you're even slightly unsure that you can manage this, put your hand down."

Albus watched as a few hands dropped, and in his head he starting counting. He felt foolish, really, bobbing up and down like how Rose would to answer a question in class, but he needed to be selected to retrieve Wilde, and this was the surest bet he had-

"Right," Eckley said after a moment, though he seemed slightly jarred. "Bailey, Oxwood, you're with Christopher. Potter, Montgomery, you're with me-"

Albus nodded, blocking the rest out at once. So that was it, then. He'd have to march in there with Eckley and Carter Montgomery, and then, somehow, he'd have to leave with Wilde...

The meeting ended shortly after, and then Albus was only a meal and a few chores away from turning in for the night. And so, after scarfing down what he realized might well be his last meal, and hastily checking to make sure that the lavatories were clean, he returned to his shared room with hopefully enough time to plan on his own.

He would need to prepare for tomorrow, and that meant sorting out his possessions accordingly. Thankfully Eckley had not confiscated his bag, and it was this that Albus focused on for the better part of the hour, sitting idly on his bed and mulling over what could truly be classified as necessities.

He knew that he couldn't take the bag with him. It would be impeding, first off, and secondly it would be too much of a sign that he didn't plan on returning. And so he unpacked his black wizarding robes as his attire for the next day, and potentially the days to come, knowing that when his wand was returned to him and he could use it freely, those would be the clothes that he would be most comfortable in. The tiny vials of *Mortem Necavero* took priority next, and he carefully removed them and stowed them away in a stable pocket within his robes along with Fairhart's letter, at a junction where they wouldn't be terribly susceptible to movement. He withdrew the picture of Fairhart and Wilde next, then slid it next to the letter; in the event that something went awry and Wilde got away, he might still need it later. And then...

And then...that was it, he realized. He was nearly out of gold anyway, from his first week alone, and he wouldn't be able to take any additional clothing with him. The gadgets of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes also bore the risk of interfering with his hypothetical absconding along with Fango Wilde. And really, the only personally significant item to him was the photograph of he and his father. With a specialized frame made by Mirra, it was one of the few possessions that he had that was truly irreplaceable. And however good it had felt to have it with him these past few days, he knew that there was no place for it in battling against vicious vigilantes. No, it would have to stay here. For now.

He slid his bag up against the wall, wondering how long it would sit there until it was moved again, and by whom. In the worst case scenario, he realized, it would be by himself; having returned to the Lion's Den empty-handed. Well, perhaps that scenario wasn't the *worst*...

He was going to be in danger tomorrow, and a different kind than what he'd encountered before. No, this peril was expected, planned for even, but unpredictable all the same. It was like before he'd gone to Azkaban to free his father. Yes, he'd been terrified then too, but things had been

different then. Fairhart had still been alive, and somehow, that mere fact had made everything slightly less frightening.

Albus wasn't sure how long he lay on the top bunk in the dark, lost in his thoughts and completely oblivious to the fact that soon Eckley would enter to scold him for his poor work at managing the facilities. Truly, being roommates with his rival had not been terrible these past few nights, though Eckley *did* have a habit of picking mild fights just before they went to sleep. He didn't think it would happen this night though, not with what tomorrow brought...

And with these thoughts on his mind, he started to dream. Not the dreams of his last few nights, which had just been regular, random dreams, but the nightmares from before, the almost *real* ones, the ones that had been coming to him slowly after what had been a blissful hiatus. The one tonight had him wrestling with himself once more, only this time, it was even more violent, and again, it was his eyes that were glowing...

Albus lunged upwards; someone was shaking him. "Whassagoionon?" he murmured through a dry mouth, into the darkness. For a moment, it was as though he were back at Hogwarts, in his old dormitory, where Morrison or Scorpius would wake him from his terrible apparitions and console him...

"Shut up."

"Huh?"

"You're talking in your sleep to someone," Eckley said, in what sounded like a very annoyed voice, though Albus couldn't see his expression at all. "Shut up."

And with that, he seemed to crawl back into his bed. Albus lie still though, unsure of what time it was, and just how soon they would be waking. He was just wondering if Eckley was nervous as well, when his voice came through the dark again, from below him.

"We'll be fine," he assured him. "Just get some sleep."

Albus didn't know if he ever returned to his slumber that night, but all the same, he felt energized when dressing that morning. He wasn't quite sure how he could feel so alert and nourished, given all that had transpired as of late, but there was an air of excitement that he carried with him as he prepared for the day's events; not at the idea of it, but of the potential benefits that might arise from it. Months ago, Fairhart had impressed upon him the importance of finding the Foulest Book. Just how close might he get to it, within the next few hours?

A more serious sense overtook him as he met with his designated group at the crack of dawn however; Charles Eckley had somehow managed to fully prepare himself an hour earlier, though he did not look as well rested. They gathered themselves in the same place where the meeting had been held the day before, but now, it was a much more modest collection.

It was just Albus and the Eckley brothers waiting, minus Carl. They stood there at different

corners of the room, none of them speaking, the uncomfortable silence that encapsulated them hanging over them like a dour cloud, sapping whatever ebullience Albus had risen with. And then, slowly, the others filtered in.

Carter Montgomery joined with him and the youngest Eckley brother, looking very dignified and making no mention of the confrontation that had occurred days ago. Christopher was joined by a young girl who Albus vaguely recognized from the halls of Hogwarts, and a rather older looking man with a hard face that seemed to be from his generation. Clyde was bobbing up and down on his feet along his two partners-both of them women who looked closer to his age-a sort of mollified expression playing on his rounded face. All of them, Albus noticed, had elected to wear wizarding robes for the day's work.

Once the three groups had all quietly divided themselves, it was Charles Eckley who stepped into the center of the room to speak to them.

"We won't be navigating the town together," he said. "It will look too suspicious; all nine of us...so Chris and his team are going to go first. Then Clyde's, then mine. There will be about five minute breaks in-between leaving. However, nothing begins until you've reached the area. We have a distraction waiting already, to go off at Chris' signal," he added, nodding towards his eldest brother, who gave the tiniest of nods at the recognition. "At that point, we begin breaking down the charms and we enter. Remember, we're trying to be furtive here; ideally, no one knows what's really going on until we *at least* have Wilde in our possession. From there, whichever group found him takes him to the extraction point, where Carl will meet up to provide extra protection."

All of them nodded in unison, and then the youngest Eckley brother added, in a small voice, "Last chance; any questions?"

Where's my wand, Albus wanted to shout, though thankfully, this came next. Once there'd been a murmur of assent throughout the small group, Eckley reached into his pocket and produced a second wand, then handed it over.

"Don't make me regret this," he said icily, so low that only Albus could hear him. Albus gave no response, but still accepted his wand almost hungrily. He inspected it at once, and then, satisfied, stashed it away.

"Moving out now," came Christopher Eckley's voice, and at the next moment, his trio had left the room, leaving the rest of them to count down the minutes. What felt like an hour later Clyde departed, giving his younger brother a warm smile as he did so, and then, five agonizing minutes later-

"Let's go," Charles Eckley said, leading he and Carter Montgomery out of the room. They approached the main entrance of the building, and Albus watched as they both removed Hogwarts ties from the rack, Eckley taking a scarlet and gold, Montgomery the last blue and bronze.

Thinking that it would be suspicious to not take the item that allowed for their return, Albus hastily scanned for something other than Gryffindor or Hufflepuff, but found nothing. His hand had actually reached for the scarlet when he'd changed his mind half-way, snatching up the colors of the badger instead. He knew that it didn't matter, but part of him-the sliver of him that remembered what it was like to be a normal child, eager to earn house points and win Quidditch games-refused to betray Slytherin house and wear the colors of their rival.

And then they left, into the morning light and whistling wind of winter's end. Albus realized that he hadn't been outside in days, and as true to the always capricious weather, things had improved markedly since he'd met up with the Eckley brothers. Spring was definitely on its way, the breeze more comfortable now than biting, and there seemed to simply be more color to the world now too. As they walked Albus saw two children on a lawn, running in circles and holding up toys gleefully. He wondered what would happen once the conflict started, hoping that the muggles would bring their children inside whether they understood what was happening or not...

"Keep your eyes peeled for Protectors," Eckley said, ahead of Albus and Carter both. "Muggles may not think anything of three blokes walking around in black robes, but others will. If we get noticed, aim to stun."

"How would we even recognize them?" Albus asked. "They don't dress like wizards."

"Their expressions say it all," Carter said from next to him. "Their eyes light up when they see wizards, and generally, you can see them inch towards their pockets. And besides that, some of them we're familiar with already."

"Right..."

They continued walking; the frequent turns making Albus realize that he still didn't know the exact route to the alleged locations of the Protectors. Another thought struck his mind as they ambled along, however.

"So who *are* we familiar with already?"

"What do you mean?" Eckley responded.

"Larson took some people from Hogwarts right? Some of the students from the Protector's Club? Anyone I know?"

Eckley tilted his head slightly as he walked, apparently forgoing his own advice of staying vigilant to those around them. "Elton Connor? From Hufflepuff?"

"Oh yeah, I did remember him-"

"Sandra Koop?"

"Nope, never heard of her-"

"How about-"

"What about Donny?" Albus interjected swiftly, though in what he hoped was a sensitive tone. Eckley stopped speaking at once, suddenly looking rather unnerved. Carter said nothing.

"No," Eckley said finally. "Not Donny."

Albus nodded, regretting his question almost at once. Donovan Hornsbrook had been Eckley's best friend at Hogwarts, much as how Morrison and Scorpius were to himself. He was also, however, a fanatical WAR enthusiast. Albus knew that this devotion to the organization had been leading towards a rift between he and his Gryffindor pal, but Albus wasn't sure how much further it had went. Hornsbrook had been a member of the Protector's Club as well, and had undoubtedly been invited to join Larson's group.

"He did get asked," Eckley confirmed for him, a moment later. "But...well his dad is really loyal to Waddlesworth. They're still in his corner, from what I've gathered. But I haven't heard from him. WAR is in shambles, it's hard to keep track of what they're out doing right now."

"Do you think he's okay?" Albus asked, feeling slightly concerned.

Eckley gave a stoic shrug, but Albus knew that he was much more disturbed than he was letting on. "I really have no idea. I know his family, you know? I've been speaking to his mother, now and again...she's a wreck. She worries. 'Bring Donny home', she begs me. I don't know what to tell her..."

Albus said nothing at this, instead staring firmly ahead. He felt a rush of sympathy for a woman that he'd never met, but then, the thought of his own mother made his stomach churn. Was she saying the same about her son, at this very moment?

This image burned itself into his skull as he tread along in-between Eckley and Carter, his body moving accordingly but not really understanding its actions. Desperately, he tried to stay focused; he needed to learn this place better, every inch of it.

An old blue car passed by them slowly as they sauntered along the sidewalk, the driver casting them an odd glance as they went by. They were now nearing what looked like a children's playground, complete with a dilapidated swing set and rusty yellow jungle gym, and just a bit further on they had ducked into an alley, emerging on a road that seemed rather familiar to him; in fact, if Albus didn't know any better, he'd walked this pathway when he'd first been escorted by the Protectors.

And as he'd determined at that time, they really weren't far at all from their destination. For only a few more minutes they walked, until eventually Eckley held out a hand for them to slow, then had them cut across a muggle yard and onto a street that looked surprisingly similar to what had been crudely drawn up the previous day. Albus threw a hasty glance up at the street sign and saw that it read **Ablington Rd.**

Looking both ways, the three of them crossed over the pavement and into a long, stretched back alley, where sure enough, the remaining two squads were waiting eagerly. Albus looked skyward to survey the buildings that they'd been breaking into. Even just from the back view, they looked formidable in size, though not particularly protected. And yet...he could almost feel the enchantments concealing them.

"Wands out," Christopher Eckley said, not even bothering to greet them, and at once, the alley was flooded with active wizardry.

"Get rid of the alarms first," Clyde said, brandishing his own wand. "*Finite Sonus!*"

Led by Clyde Eckley, the group chorused this incantation, and though Albus wasn't quite sure as to how they were gauging its effectiveness, only a few moments later did he gesture for them to stop. "Alright, need to get rid of those freezing jinxes next," he went on, and again, he led them all in their spellwork.

Three different times Albus followed joined in with his companions, hoping that his shoddy spellwork wasn't proving to be a liability. He recalled on the island, when Fairhart had been slashing away at protective charms with relative ease, and he himself had been left with little to do other than stand back and watch. Sadly, he realized that he was rather ill-equipped for the task at hand here. Though he was confident in his dueling abilities, the more meticulous forms of magic, like healing and enchantment removal, were areas in which he was not well learned, and thus struggled.

Five minutes later, though, there was apparently only one blockage remaining, and one that was causing them quite a bit of trouble.

"Revulsion Jinxes are strong," Christopher Eckley said, walking back and forth in front of the iron door lodged in the wall.

"Is that the only way in?" Albus asked.

"Seems to be. This is the freezer area of the butcher's place, or at least, that's what we think. Any volunteers to give it a go?"

There was quiet at first, but then, one of the girls from Clyde's group stepped forward. She was a dainty thing, with dark red hair held back in a ponytail, and Albus couldn't help but feel bad for her as she went to grab the handle of the door-

She was blown back ten feet, smacking into the parallel wall of the alley.

"Abby!" Clyde gasped, hurrying towards her.

"She okay?" Charlie asked, as the others swarmed around her.

"I'm okay," the girl named Abby answered, though she sounded rather disoriented.

"Right, that option's out," Christopher confirmed.

"What about the door to the other place?" Albus asked. "The thrift shop or whatever?"

"That one's fine," he was answered, and Christopher indicated the much less menacing door a few yards away. "But we need to get into both areas. We can't afford to just search one and alert the Protectors, when Wilde might be in the other."

"Maybe the buildings are adjoined though?" Carter suggested. "If they're both in use for the same reason..."

"Perhaps," Christopher answered him, "but again, we can't bet on that. We need to stick to the original plan, and that's getting into both simultaneously."

"Maybe we could have someone open it from the inside?" his youngest brother suggested, still looking over at where Abby was being tended to by Clyde. "Make a disturbance, and have someone come out here to investigate? Then we just stun him and go in?"

"Too risky," Christopher rebutted at once. "If not executed properly, we end up battling just to get in, rather than to get out. Stud idea, though," he added gently, clapping his brother on the back, and Albus nearly buried his face in his hands.

"What about going above?" Clyde asked, still from his crouched position. "This is a muggle building, without the enchantments anyway, there may be a way in from the roof. And we're no more likely to be caught if it fails..."

"That might just be it," his elder responded, and Albus, feeling slightly left out, conjured what he was thought was an adequate ladder at once; the rungs were a bit uneven, but he was proud of it all the same.

"I'll go first-" he started, but Charles Eckley had already started to climb.

The group of them all watched as Charlie climbed, Albus taking the time to duck his head out of the alley and make sure that the coast was clear. He couldn't help but feel a little absurd, standing there waiting for someone to climb atop the roof of a building that they were all trying to penetrate, and he was sure that any muggles watching were deeming it a bizarre scene as well; who broke into a butcher's shop in the middle of the day?

He reminded himself, however, that there probably weren't many muggles on this particular stretch of the town. No, according to the information that had been gathered, this block was dominated by the Protectors, and it was for that reason that Albus found himself scanning every nook and cranny, from the dark blue post box at the corner to the towering trees breaking through from the middle of the sidewalk, casting its gloomy shadows along the pavement. There was no one in sight, but for how long that would be in their favor, he wasn't sure.

"There's a way in!" came Eckley's hoarse call, and Albus looked up just in time to see his face

recoil overhead, unable to hide its glee.

"Right," Christopher Eckley said sternly, surveying the group. "Clyde, stay with her," he said, indicating their injured companion. "You, with me," he added to the other girl from that group. "And you three-can you handle this on your own?"

It was the youngest Eckley who answered, from fifteen feet above. "We got this, Chris."

"Okay, then the plan remains the same; we cover both areas. You lot take this place here, we'll take the other one. Our distraction should be starting about five minutes from now; let's make sure we time this correctly."

And without so much as another word, he strode off with his own subgroup, through the door just a few feet away and out of sight. Carter Montgomery practically leapt up the ladder at the same moment, leaving Albus as the last to climb it. Before he did so, though, he turned just in time to catch a reassuring smile from Clyde.

The ladder was wobbly, but he managed it without much trouble, and once on top of the dingy building he took a moment to survey the area from a higher perspective. The surrounding neighborhood was quite peaceful; a delicate scene to behold. Off in the distance though, at the corners of the long street in which the two shops sat, he thought that he could see limited movement; shifty groups of individuals that he knew were destined to meet in the center and create the appropriate ruckus. And indeed, in one of these houses, Larson probably sat as well...

"So what's the way in?" Carter asked, and Albus turned, surprised that his mind had wandered so far in such a critical moment.

"Window over here," Eckley revealed, indicating it. Albus walked over to it, stooping a bit to conceal himself, though he knew that it hardly mattered; if anyone looked up, they would surely see him on the roof.

There was indeed a dusty window, slightly triangular and pointed upwards, sitting in the center of the roof, the dry red shingles slanting off on either side of it. Albus briefly thought that it was probably there to serve as some sort of ventilation area, but without being able to look in, he couldn't know for sure.

"Remember," Eckley said, as though reading his mind, "we don't know anything about the interior layout. It's probably much larger, and looks nothing like a place where meat is stored. So we take things one room at a time."

"Do you think there are additional enchantments on this window here?" Carter asked.

"Unlikely," Eckley said, and for some reason, he now sounded a bit more like his oldest brother, his voice having somehow altered itself in the last five minutes or so. "We're breaking in like muggles, we are. And we already got rid of the alarm defenses. Now we just get in and out, like

we're supposed to."

"Then let's do it," Albus said, and he flicked his wand, unlatching the clasps of the dirty window at once. Eckley lifted, and without so much as peering inside, he slid himself through it.

Albus followed suit, landing and nearly losing his balance as he did so; though his ankle was no longer bothering him, there was a rather striking shift in the texture of the floor below him, enough that it disoriented him slightly. It wasn't until Carter had landed next to him that he realized that he was standing on carpet.

"Huh," he said aloud, soaking in the room. As they'd all predicted, they were most definitely not in a place typical of a butcher's shop. Instead they were in a cramped, though still fancy, office of sorts. A dark brown, polished desk was at the other side of the room, the carpet was blood red and bore swirling designs, there was a small table with a potted plant on it, and there was even a comfortable looking couch stowed away in the corner.

Albus had the strange feeling that he'd been in the room before, but couldn't quite pinpoint when, or how this would even be possible. He had little time to think about it, however; Eckley was already striding toward the mahogany door at the end of the room.

"Behind me," he murmured, and Albus, caught up in the moment, joined Carter in lining up behind him. He watched as Eckley pushed the door open slowly, his wand drawn and stretched out ahead of him, though they found themselves in a cream colored corridor next, and one void of people.

"Looks like there's only one way," Carter said at once, sizing up both sides of the narrow hall. The one corner seemed to be a dead end of sorts; the wall was cracked and gouged, with the fractured drywall and peeled paint having accumulated into rubble at its base. On the other end of the corridor was a much more aesthetic option; a shiny red door with a brass handle. The three of them all headed towards it, their footsteps as light as they could make them, but before anything else could occur Eckley had stopped them with a raised hand, his finger to his lips.

At first Albus didn't understand the gesture, but then he heard it as well; thunderous footsteps on the other side of the door. He braced himself, wand drawn-

The door opened, and Albus barely had time to register the look of shock on the man's face. What happened next happened very fast, and nearly all at once. Eckley had grabbed at the man's collar, pulling at him and completing his entrance through the door, and Albus, recognizing the likelihood of him yelling, had managed to produce a nonverbal silencing charm to great effect. The man flailed about, opened his mouth to no avail, and then Carter sent him to the ground with a brief flash of red light.

Albus flicked his wand instinctively, now levitating the unconscious body. All three of them stared it as he slowly backed down the beige hall; he was an older man, with a brutal face and a stubbly brown beard. Once back inside the room with the red carpeting, Albus lowered him gently behind the desk, and then thought no more of him.

The three of them then nodded, as though to acknowledge their success together, and then wordlessly pressed on. It was Carter that gently pushed open the same door through which they'd just ambushed the man, revealing a long set of stairs that looked sleek and well-tended to. The three of them treaded lightly in a line, Albus last, each of their steps a mimicry of one another's. At some point, though, Carter stopped, and Albus knew that he had seen something. He raised his hand to Eckley, then began counting with his fingers-

At three, both of them fired stunners. Albus couldn't see who they were aimed at, not until Eckley and Carter had fully worked their way down the stairs, but it soon became clear; there, sprawled out on the floor next to a table that showed signs of an unfinished game of Gobstones, were two men, both of them as unmoving as the man that they'd dispatched of upstairs.

"Clear the area," Eckley said, and at once, the three of them split through the room.

Again, Albus felt an inkling of nostalgia. This room too had a classical look to it; more carpet, dark red and with the same elaborate swirls as could be seen upstairs, the furniture all organized luxuriously around a lit fireplace. He even thought that he could hear light music coming from somewhere...

He stepped over the bodies of the two men, noticing that one had cropped blonde hair and a young face, the other looking like he might have been an older brother. He passed into the next room and scanned it fleetingly; it was a kitchen of sorts, though it had no equipment for preparing food; only containers stored on shelves.

"Anything?" came Eckley's voice from his side.

"Nothing. You?"

"Only found a bathroom-"

"I've got a cellar over here!"

"Shh!" Eckley hushed Carter, though at the same time, he hurried over to the sound of his voice. Albus followed, and the trio now found themselves in a small nook, a descending set of stairs leading down into darkness.

Eckley flicked his wand, and it emitted light at once. Albus and Carter did the same, all three of them shining their lights down into the area, revealing a cascade of steep steps into a grimy dwelling that looked to be made of concrete.

Again they travelled down it in a straight line, though they'd not even finished the descent when a flash of purple light had come their way. Albus saw Eckley leap downwards and out of the way, but Carter was not so lucky; the hex hit him square in the face, sending him tumbling down the steps violently.

"*Crescendum!*" Albus blurted, firing a clear spell into the darkness, right where Eckley had

aimed the light of his wand. It hit only a blank stretch of wall though, and at the next moment, another violet hex had streaked towards him-

Albus swirled his wand in a circular motion, deflecting the curse upwards and into the ceiling. He leapt the last four steps at once, finding himself next to Eckley, and the beam of light issuing from his wand was sufficient in locating the source of the attack. The man had a large, oval shaped head and a frustrated sneer on his tan face, but before he could fire something else, Albus and Eckley both had issued their own spells.

Albus had placed the Body-Binding curse on him, but Eckley's had sent him to the ground in an unconscious heap of clothing. Albus approached the figure, though Eckley left his side, crouching over Carter, who was now moaning in agony.

"Are you okay!?" he asked.

Albus turned just in time to see Carter look up, then immediately turned his head away; his face had been a bloody mess.

"Help...me..." he was saying, but Albus, guilty though he felt, was not going to let this opportunity pass.

"*Ennervate*," he whispered, and the man opened his eyes at once; they were mustard yellow in color, and bulging with rage.

"What are you doing?" Eckley asked him, still kneeling at Carter's side. There was an inkling of panic in his voice that had manifested now for the first time in their endeavor.

"We searched the building, we need answers now," Albus said. "He'll do. Where is Fango Wilde?" he added, now kneeling himself, though to the paralyzed man on the cold, hard floor.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" he spat, looking as though he were struggling mightily against the magic that bound him. Albus saw his eyes shift over to where his wand was on the floor, but Albus then kicked it away forcefully.

"You're not moving until you tell us," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"No? *Fracturus!*"

There was a loud banging noise, and then the man gave a howl of anguish; Albus had fractured his knee.

"Just because you can't move doesn't mean you can't feel-"

He felt a tug at his neck, and then rose to face Eckley.

"*What are you doing!?*" he shot out, looking horrified.

"What we came here to do," Albus said, and he meant it.

"This is not the right way to do this-"

"Do you want this done right, or do you want it done fast? Think of him," he added, jerking his head towards Carter, who was still clutching at his face, though he was now considerably more quiet. "He needs help. We don't have time to mess around."

Even as he said this, noises above them confirmed his words. He could now hear the vaguest of sounds, indiscernible through the hard walls of the underground area, though Albus knew that they were indicative of a skirmish. Their distraction had seemed to work.

Eckley merely stared at him, at a loss for words. And then, without another word, he returned to Carter, murmuring what sounded like healing spells as he did so.

"I'm not going to ask you again," Albus said, returning to the wailing man on the floor. He saw now, from the light bouncing off of the walls, that the cellar was a cramped space; full of what looked like crates that may have contained firewhiskey, or some other alcoholic beverage. This man had undoubtedly just missed the confrontation upstairs, and was certainly regretting it now.

"I...don't...know-"

Albus brandished his wand, this time at the man's face-

"Okay!" he bemoaned. "He's here, he's here, he's in this building-"

"Liar!" Albus threw at him.

"No!" the man begged, but at the next moment he had fainted, and Albus realized that this was probably a direct result of his pain.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Good going," Eckley said sarcastically, now helping Carter to his feet. He was looking dazed, but the blood had been wiped from his face, revealing it to be extremely swollen. His right eye in particular looked as though it had been crashed into its socket by a Bludger.

"We have to go to the other building, then," Albus said, rising and staring angrily at the victim on the floor.

"No, we did what we had to do, we cleared the area, and Wilde wasn't here. Chris probably has him, then-"

"We can't know that-"

"We have to get him help!" Eckley screeched, still holding on to a limping Carter. "We're done here, let's move out."

He said it with that characteristic tone of finality that he'd recently adopted, and Albus, unable to look away from the mess that was Carter's face, took his other arm and threw it around his shoulder. Together the two of them walked their companion up the stairs and out of the dismal chamber, though all the while, Albus found himself calculating his next move.

I'm not going to get another chance at this, he knew. He had to find Wilde, and it had to be now.

Entering the ground floor area revealed to him that his assumptions had been correct. One glance at the window nearest him told him that a battle had erupted outside of the building. Albus and Eckley both lowered Carter onto one of the comfortable couches, inching themselves closer to the window for a better look.

The battle was of a much higher scale than he could have imagined. The Lions had kept their word in providing an adequate distraction; chaos had overtaken the city block. Streaks of light were flying from every inch of the place, with people taking cover behind trees and parked cars, from the bushes of front yards and from the corners of houses. He could identify the Lions easily by their wizarding robes and ties, but the Protectors were identifiable more by the nature of their magic. They were the only ones firing killing curses.

There looked to be about fifty combatants or so, and unfortunately, Albus realized, the building that they now occupied was surrounded largely by the enemy. He watched as a member of the Lions charged forward, wearing a scarlet and gold tie, only to be hit by a jet of green light from seemingly nowhere. Albus' gaze snapped towards the area, where sure enough, a thin witch had momentarily popped out from behind a fire hydrant to assail him. Albus recognized her as one of the ones who he'd met on his first night in Mottley.

"We can't drag this out," Eckley said, turning away from the window. "Come on, let's get him out of here, and then we call everyone back-"

But Albus was transfixed by the scene. Whether those fighting could see him or not due to whatever enchantments had been placed around the residency, he didn't know, but he could see the carnage clearly; someone had fired a dark blue spell at someone else, sending them to the ground convulsing; a Lion had just ripped a parking meter from the sidewalk magically, and hurled it ahead like a spear. And there, in the center of it all, he could see Christopher Eckley dueling with two Protectors, two at once, it seemed, barely able to hold his own.

"Your brother didn't get Wilde," Albus said. "He's out there fighting now."

Eckley gave a groan. "I have to go help-"

"No, take Carter back first-"

"And what about you-"

"I'm still going to look for Wilde-"

"Absolutely not, I'm not letting you-"

"Leave me."

Albus and Eckley both turned, looking at Carter. He was still looking disjointed, his speech slightly slurred, but he was managing to look up at them from his position all the same.

"I'll be okay," he was saying. "Really. Find Wilde."

"Don't worry about that," Eckley responded a moment later. "We don't even know where-"

"Wait," Albus interrupted, holding up his hand. Eckley fell silent at once, though the commotion outside was still marginally interfering with his thinking. Nevertheless, it couldn't mask the light, operatic music that was still in the room. That familiar music...

"It's *WAR*," Albus mumbled to himself.

"What?" Eckley asked, sounding bewildered.

"This place!" Albus announced, angry that he hadn't made the connection before. "It's just like the headquarters to Wands and Redemption! In Hogsmeade! Only a little bit different..."

Now that the memories were floating back into his head he could see that there were minor differences. But the core concept was the same; the chamber music, the pleasant furniture, what was undoubtedly wine in the cellar below them. It was ripped straight from what Waddlesworth had put together.

Of course, he realized. Larson had started as a member of WAR, hadn't he? It was what he knew, and he'd designed his place of operation after it just as the Eckley brothers had with Hogwarts. But something else was coming back to him now too...

"I know where Wilde is," he said, and he immediately tore away.

"What!?" Eckley shouted, looking as though he was torn between staying with the injured Carter or following after Albus.

"Go!" Carter rattled, and Albus could hear Eckley walking behind him now, keeping with his pace.

"What are you-"

But Albus had already started to leap up the stairs, back to where they'd first entered the building. The man that he'd interrogated had not been lying at all...

"Where are you going!?" Eckley barked after him, though Albus ignored him, now making his way back through the cream colored passage and to the ruined wall that they'd written off as a dead end.

"This is a door," Albus said, crouching down and tearing away at the rubble at once.

"What are you on about?" said Eckley from next to him.

"WAR has a room where they torture people. The door to it is all battered and worn out, just like this one here-"

"How do you...?"

"I saw it," Albus said shortly, still scooping at the pieces of drywall and now ripped off chunks of wood with his aching fingers. "In a memory," he added, his body going cold at the mere idea of it.

"Move out of the way!" Eckley growled, sounding annoyed, and he then aimed his wand at the clutter. "*Reducto!*"

The curse delivered on the intended effect; the wreckage that had blended in to form the wall had been reduced to dust, revealing, as Albus had expected, an old and withered looking door, containing no handle or doorknob. Albus rammed his shoulder into it, but it was jammed. Taking a cue from Eckley, he then used his own Reductor Curse-

The door flew from its hinges, soaring back ten feet and breaking in two when it landed. Albus stepped through the doorway, Eckley so close behind him that he could feel his breathing on the back of his neck. And together, they looked around.

The chamber heavily mirrored the one that Albus had seen in Fairhart's memory; there was dirt and debris on the floor, the walls were square and angled sharply, and there was even what looked like blood on the walls. The only light in the room was coming from overhead; a single, shimmery flame, hung precariously above them by magic.

"This is...awful," Eckley said from next to him, and Albus knew that they had both just seen the same thing. The walls had shackles attached to them, eerily cold and coiled about like silver, rusted snakes, as though waiting to bind themselves to flesh once more.

They were all empty though-except for one. Far in the corner, there was but one body, and one that wasn't moving in the slightest. Chained to the wall by the wrists, curled up in the fetal position, a man lay, silently and shrunken, stripped shirtless and left to rest against the cold, grimy floor. Albus approached the figure gingerly, turning his head to get a better look at the man's face. Even with his eyes closed, and dirt and dry blood covering his features, Albus could still make out his plain face, his unusually typical brown hair, matted though it was; a face that even deep in slumber, or possibly even death, looked bored and uninterested.

"Well?" Eckley asked from next to him. "Is that him?"

Albus swallowed, still staring. "Yeah," he answered. "That's him."

Chapter 8: The War Within

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Albus stared down at the lug of cold flesh, his heartbeat quickening with every passing moment. He'd planned for this, yes; he'd expected it, had hoped for it above all else, and yet, he still found himself thoroughly unprepared.

"Is he alive?" came Eckley's voice, from miles away.

Albus took a second to gather himself, and then knelt down at Wilde's side. He was answered immediately, the rattled breaths emanating from the ragged body telling him that Wilde had indeed survived his time with the Protectors, if only barely. Albus watched as each exhalation blew particles of dirt and dust centimeters away from his broken face; dimly, he wondered if the man was dreaming.

"Yeah," Albus responded. "He's alive."

"Well then wake him up, and let's get out of here," Eckley said, striding forward from behind. "*Relashio!*" he uttered, and the chains that bound Wilde released at once. Wilde remained sleeping, however.

"Come on-" Eckley started, but at that moment noises penetrated from outside the room. Albus and Eckley exchanged a glance.

"Think the building's been entered?" Albus asked quickly.

"Carter's downstairs-"

"Go check on him-"

"Why me?"

"Is there really any time for this?" Albus growled, and Eckley conceded, taking off at once to examine the source of the noise. Though satisfied, Albus returned to Wilde, unwilling to dwell on this very minor victory. He was still asleep.

Albus examined his brutalized face, and the emaciated look of his torso. Every bone was visible. He recalled that this was the second time in only a few months that he'd stumbled upon Fango Wilde as a prisoner of sorts; this time however, he would not be so piteous. He reminded himself that last time he had seen Wilde, Fairhart had been alive...

"Wake up," Albus muttered through gritted teeth, giving Wilde's body a rough shake. "Wake up."

Wake up!" he roared, frustrated, and he gave Wilde's face a slap of average strength.

He jolted, his eyes bulging from their sockets and an infantile whimper slipping from his mouth. Wilde squirmed on the cold floor, looking as though he wasn't quite sure if he was still sleeping or not. When his bland eyes met Albus', however, a look of confusion overtook his face.

"A- Albus?" he asked, and his voice, though scratchy and brisk, was lower than a whisper. "Albus...Potter...?"

"That's right," Albus replied, looking back over his shoulder; Eckley still hadn't returned.

"What- what are- wh-"

"The Foulest Book," Albus stated at once, now gripping Wilde on the shoulders. "Do they have it?"

Wilde stared back at him, apparently at a loss for words. Albus couldn't tell if he was feigning ignorance or not, but at the same, this was where his information had led him-

"I- I don't-"

"Did they take it!?" Albus roared.

"N- no-"

"Where is it!?"

"I- I- I- I- I- I don't- I don't-"

"Where is the Book!?" Albus repeated, now shaking Wilde frantically; he stopped, however, when droplets of blood materialized around his mouth.

He sighed. "I'm here to get you out of here," he said, and he could feel his own body shaking. "But only if you can tell me-"

"I hid it!" Wilde blurted. "I-"

"We've got company," came a voice from behind him, and Albus spun fluidly, coming face-to-face with what looked like a very panicked Eckley.

He nodded, then stood-dragging Wilde with him.

"I- I don't know if I can move-" Wilde started.

"You'll find a way," Albus answered callously, before directing his attention back to Eckley. "Downstairs?" he asked, and Eckley nodded.

"Carter's gone. Don't know what happened. But the fighting has gotten worse..."

Albus gave another tug at Wilde, and this time, he managed to stand, though he was wobbling slightly. "Stay behind us," he said crisply. "*Right* behind us."

Wilde nodded, looking very much as though he still couldn't quite believe what was happening. He'd seemed to have managed to adjust though, as a more determined, focused expression played on his craggy face as he shifted himself behind his escorts.

Albus and Eckley both extended their wands as they led Wilde out of his prison, the gloom of which was so overpowering that Albus was actually looking forward to leaving it in favor of the hectic scrum that was undoubtedly about to commence. He and Eckley pushed their way through the cream corridor and then through the door leading to the downstairs area, and immediately, they were drawn into combat.

"The stairs!" someone yelled, and Albus instinctively flung his wand upwards, his shield charm deflecting whatever had been fired just inches above his head.

Someone appeared at the foot of the stairs, but Eckley had nonverbally fired a blue hex, which collided with the man and sent him backwards into another.

"Stay on the stairs!" Albus said to Wilde, and he and Eckley both charged downward, into the lounging area, and now Albus could see that the building had indeed been fully invaded; there were no less than five opponents spread throughout the room, and Albus registered quickly that they were all Protectors, having come to check on Wilde-

Albus deflected an orange hex sent his way, then leapt over the couch in the room to dodge another. He caught sight of the window from earlier, which had been shattered, and in a flash processed that chaos was still very much spiraling throughout Mottley. He could see more than a handful of unmoving bodies littering the street...

"*Stupefy!*" Eckley bellowed, at a woman with a violent sneer and red hair; she deflected it away with a wave of her wand, then sent a deadly looking purple curse in return. Albus popped up from behind the couch and fired his own stunner into it; the jets collided, though the momentum of his own beam sent it into an unsuspecting figure to the right. He next aimed his wand at the woman who'd fired the case-

"*Occuscura!*" he cried, and though she tried to block it, the curse shattered her shield charm, hitting her square in the face. The resulting blindness made her shriek, stampeding about and flinging curses every which way she could, one of which connected with one of her compatriots, sending him to the ground.

Albus' work had left him impaired defensively, however; a blue hex had streaked its way over to him from an angle, and his body had jammed as he tried to maneuver his wand to deflect it. Eckley emerged from his side, however, successfully repelling the beam of light.

Albus gave him a thankful look, then returned his attention to the enemies left; one of them he recognized as the large, boisterous man from a week or so ago. By his side was a wispy looking witch with a thin mouth and piercing yellow eyes. Both of them charged forward, the witch brandishing her wand and flinging one of the cozy chairs at them from the opposite side of the room, as a means of separating them-

Eckley blasted it out of the way, giving Albus the time to aim his wand. He pointed it at the burly man's trainers, thinking of something heavy-maybe even the man himself--and at once he fell over, his footwear significantly heavier. The woman tripped over him, and he and Eckley both fired their stunners at the defenseless pair on the floor. Only the visually impaired witch was still active, flailing about and screaming, but stunners from the both of them merged to send her to the floor with a deafening *thunk*.

"You can come down now!" Eckley called up to Wilde, who wobbled down the stairs a moment later, still looking frail. Albus ripped a black sweater from off of the large one, then threw it over to him.

"Here, put this on," he said, and Wilde pulled it over himself at once.

"And take a wand too-" Eckley started, but Albus interjected.

"No," he declared firmly. "He doesn't get a wand."

Eckley gave him a curious look, but didn't argue the point; it seemed as though, given that the first part of their task was complete, he had opted out of his leadership role and into one of equal status. Albus couldn't care less about this shift though; they still had work to do, and if the flashing lights and yells from outside were any indication, that work was going to be much more difficult than what they'd done here.

"We've got to get him to Carl," Eckley said, also peering through the shattered window frame; a house across the street had caught fire. "We'll sneak through, keep to alleys-"

"Where are you taking me-" Wilde started, but again, Albus interrupted.

"Are you sure he'll be there? I don't think any of this went down right-"

"Some of it did," Eckley said shrewdly. "We got him."

They both offered a glance at Wilde, who was still shaking, despite his upper body now being covered. In better light, Albus could see that the red of his face was dried blood, rather than active injuries; it was instead his posture that was most disoriented. There was a slump to him now, he stood with a deformed shape of sorts; Albus could tell just from looking at him that his captors had been quite liberal with the Cruciatus Curse.

"W- where are you taking me?" Wilde repeated, and he now seemed suspicious, albeit in a pathetic way.

"Somewhere safe," Eckley assured him. "We've got no interest in hurting you; we just want to hear whatever you told them," he added, indicating the bodies on the ground.

Albus said nothing, but for a second, he and Wilde caught one another's eyes. Albus knew what he was thinking; that it was not that simple. Albus had already asked him about the Foulest Book, and what's more, they had history together, the most recent of which was at Azkaban. The question, for Wilde, was if he feared staying here more than going with Fairhart's companion...

"I- I don't know-" he stammered out, but Albus was hearing nothing of it.

"You don't have a choice," he said roughly, and he strode over to the door. "How far away is the extraction point?" he asked Eckley.

"A few blocks up, we can get him there-"

"Then let's go," Albus said, and he pushed the door open. The scene outside scorched his eyes at once.

Seeing the destruction out in the open was entirely different than seeing it through a small opening. The town of Mottley had been laid to waste. A house had been reduced to an inferno, but beyond that there were cracks in the pavement, street lights torn down, and a damaged fire hydrant issuing water at sporadic intervals. Albus even caught sight of a car turned on its side, looking as though it'd been used for cover.

The only thing that the scene was lacking was combatants; but Albus knew that this was because the area of focus had shifted. He could see bodies all about-most on the ground, but one slung midway through the broken window of a clothing shop-though knew that the damage was not done. Off in the distance, both ways, he could see hexes and curses flying, and hear the noises of the conflict, however muffled. The battle, he realized, had extended well past the original area of interest, out into the streets and neighborhoods that the muggles had inhabited in blissful ignorance only a day ago. He couldn't help but wonder what they were thinking in respect to what they were seeing, and with a jolt, he remembered the Brennan family; remembered that the mother already had a fear of magic...

He felt Eckley encroaching from behind, then stepped aside to allow him to lead. In truth, he wasn't quite sure what this would accomplish; his ultimate goal was to have Wilde separate from Eckley, from all of this really, but he couldn't just attack Eckley and leave him here, in the middle of a battle...

"Yes, you could."

"What?" Eckley said from next him.

"Huh?" Albus replied.

"I could what?"

Albus stared back, bewildered. "What- what are you...?"

"You said that I could," Eckley told him, looking equally confused. "You just said-"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Albus responded dismissively, though he couldn't help but feel flustered. Had he just said those things out loud? He couldn't even remember what had happened seconds ago. Was the voice so often reserved for his internal struggles now manifesting itself in his actual speech production as well? And could he really not tell the difference between them now?

Eckley continued to stare for a moment, his straw hair plastered to his forehead and barely concealing the curiosity radiating from his eyes. He made no further comment however, and without so much as another indication of the plan, took charge and began leading them down the street.

"Next to me, at all times," Albus said to Wilde, who, despite not answering, huddled closer accordingly.

They took to corners, Albus and Wilde inseparable at only half a pace behind Eckley. He was steering them to the left of where they'd first infiltrated, and as the chaos in the distance grew closer, they clung tighter to the shadows, taking cover here and there behind walls and cars and even at one point a dumpster that either had been forced or rolled on its own into the street. It was only a minute into this trek that the sounds and sights of battle returned in full.

There were at least fifty of them still at it, hexing and cursing and dodging, the street turned into a warzone. He could see members of the Protectors huddled in an area near a telephone booth, their backs to one another as they fired curses almost arbitrarily. The Lions were likewise staying to a specific region, having barricaded themselves on some poor muggle's front lawn, using the thorny bushes as cover. Albus saw Eckley remove his wand to help in abating the fray, but he forced it down.

"We get Wilde out of here first," he said darkly.

"That's my brother in those bushes!" he whispered hoarsely, but Albus maintained his glare.

"Do you want me to take him on my own?" he asked, and behind him, he heard Wilde whimper.

"No," Eckley said at once, and he pressed forward, leading them around and through an alley, a shortcut that momentarily separated them from the carnage. Albus saw him look back over his shoulder as he did so, and couldn't help but do so himself; a killing curse had just been fired into those same bushes, but there was no way of knowing if it had connected or not.

"How much further?" Albus asked.

"Just another block or so," Eckley insisted, preparing to turn back into the street, their shortcut expended. Albus followed along after him-

"It's Potter!"

He immediately took cover again, as did Eckley, both of them pressing their backs to the wall of the alley, wands brandished. Albus couldn't believe that they had been seen-they'd been doing so well-but then he heard the shouts continue.

"Kill him!"

Albus poked his head back out, and felt his stomach drop. He had not been the Potter that they had all seen.

His father was standing there, a look of indifference on his face. He looked just as he had when Albus had last seen him, outside of Fairhart's cabin; even his robes were the same, albeit cleaner. And he was not alone. At his sides were Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, both of them looking very confident in the way they were sizing up the calamity.

Albus pressed himself back to the wall, seeing that Eckley had turned white as well.

"Damn. Why the hell is my dad here!?" Albus spat callously, though he was careful to keep his voice low; his father was less than half a block away. "How did he-"

"Carl," Eckley answered, looking abashed. "With everything happening- he- he must have-"

"Thought that I was up to something," Albus finished, and he cursed under his breath. So Carl Eckley had reached out and ratted to his father about his location. That's what his family members were doing here-looking for him. But those fighting in the street, Albus realized, probably thought that he was here for Wilde...

"It's not so bad," Eckley said to him. "You were going to join up with him anyway, you said-"

"After Wilde was brought back to the Den," Albus said.

"The Den?" Wilde inquired. "What are-"

"It doesn't matter, we already have him-" Eckley started, but Albus shook his head.

"My dad wants Wilde too," he lied; he knew for a fact that his father considered the man that they'd just recused to be of the least importance. But he still needed to convince Eckley otherwise. "Are you really going to give him up? After all this? What happened to your lot being the only ones going about this the right way?"

Eckley pursed his lips. "Okay, then let's get him to the extraction point. Whatever Carl did, he should still be waiting at least..."

Albus nodded, but not before taking the time to poke out his head and survey the scene once more. The trio of his father, aunt, and uncle had hardly moved an inch, though at that moment Albus thought that he saw his father give a slight nod to his aunt. She responded by raising her wand up high, pointing it directly at the sky.

"*Moenia!*", she uttered, and at once, streaks of yellow light issued from the tip of her wand, soaring through the sky and curving into a cage-like design. The bright jets reached an acme high above the three of them, before falling back to the ground like dregs of fireworks, the colors vanishing as though having never existed. And then, the three of them began walking forward, Aunt Hermione still pointing her wand vertically.

"Get them!" barked what was almost certainly a Protector, peeking out from behind a steaming car and firing a red hex. It came inches from his father's face before deflecting away, as though met with an invisible barrier. More spells issued following this one, but they all repeated in effect; his Aunt Hermione's enchantment was static so long as she held her position.

"*Stupefy!*" Uncle Ron cried, blasting a sizeable stream of red at the man who'd declared the attack. It met him square in the face, knocking him back into an accomplice. Albus understood the strategy at once; his aunt was keeping spells away from them, while the other two were more than capable of firing their own through the barrier.

They walked slowly, a mobile army of only three, his aunt's invisible barrier keeping them safe while her husband attacked relentlessly. Without needing to communicate it, his father had taken the position of deflecting killing curses away by flinging random objects into the emerald streaks; Albus watched as he lazily flicked a mailbox from one of the nearby yards in the way of a curse, the result being a flare of fiery paper throughout the air. A moment later, one of his uncle's hexes had sent the man who'd fired it to the ground.

This isn't going to take long, Albus realized, as his father and in-laws powered their way through the warzone effortlessly; he could see that the Lions were divided in what to do, some of them taking advantage of the distraction to attack the Protectors, others more concerned with stopping his father.

"What are you waiting for?" came Eckley's voice in his ear. "We've got to go!"

"Right!" Albus agreed, annoyed at himself for having gotten distracted. He invested himself into the situation once more, but realized that for the first time today, they had a time limit. It was not going to take long for his father to work his way through the battle and realize that his son was not there.

Eckley continued to maneuver through the alleyway, actually blasting a hole in a brick wall blocking their path as a means of accelerating things; apparently he too had realized just how little time they had.

Albus cast a sideways glance at Wilde as they pressed on through the shattered structure; he was wearing a shifty, nervous grin that Albus didn't like one bit. The expression screamed that

he was weighing his options, and Albus wanted to make sure that he knew that he had none.

"Keep moving!" he roared unnecessarily, jabbing his wand at him, and the sparks made him jump.

"Take it easy," Eckley said from ahead of them, though he was too preoccupied with forming a route to even bother looking over his shoulder. Albus paid this no mind, however, still staring daggers at a squirming Fango Wilde; he knew all too well what the man looked like when he was about to betray his rescuers, and that previous look had been too close for his liking.

They continued quietly for the next few minutes, the sounds of the battle behind them and nearly extinguished. Albus couldn't help but wonder what Eckley was feeling as they distanced themselves from it; two of his brothers, as well several friends, were caught up in something very dangerous indeed. Albus himself was worried for his family, but he knew that, realistically, they were not going to have much difficulty in managing themselves. Dimly, he became aware of just how convoluted the situation may have become, now that his father had entered the fray. What was stopping him from engaging Eckley's brothers? From causing them serious harm?

"Nearly there," Eckley said, jolting him away from his thoughts. "Should be at the corner of 5th and Trodden..."

Albus gripped his wand, unsure as to how what happened next was going to pan out. He absolutely couldn't allow Wilde to slip through his fingers, to be recovered by Carl Eckley and snatched away, all of the secrets of the Foulest Book's location undisclosed. No, he'd done too much to get those answers, and something was going to give, in some way or form...

"Damn," Eckley said, stopping in the middle of a much cleaner street than the one they'd last seen. Not only was this area untouched by the conflict a ways off, but it was empty as well.

Albus looked up at the street sign, his heart pounding. It read **Trodden PI**.

"Where are they?" Albus asked, staring around the undisturbed homes of the muggles, all of which, though peaceful, had their windows shut and the blinds drawn. Perhaps they were aware of the commotion after all. "Where's your brother?"

"He'll be here," Eckley said, also revolving on the spot. "Just stay put!" He added to Wilde, who hadn't even moved, and Albus wasn't sure if his companion was more annoyed or nervous.

Albus sized up the street, a newspaper fluttering past him, as if to signal just how alone they were. "Could we Apparate from here?" he asked.

"No," Eckley shook his head, though he sounded as though he wasn't listening. "There's still Anti-Apparition Charms, I'm sure of it. There's supposed to be a group coming, then we'll be fine-"

"But we're safe, right?" Albus interjected, a thought coming to him. "If we just stay here, people will be along?"

"Yes," Eckley said, peering off into the distance. "We just stay here, that's all. This is the place."

"You're sure?" Albus asked, slightly raising his wand. "You're sure that this is the recovery point?"

"Yes," Eckley stressed, turning. "We just have to wait for C- what are you doing?"

Albus had pointed his wand at Eckley's face, a frown materializing on his own. "Sorry, Charlie," he said, and his stunner knocked Eckley out cold, just a second after the look of dawning had appeared on his face.

Wilde gave a scream of terror, then twisted his body as though to run.

"Don't you move!" Albus barked, now turning his attention to the only other conscious person in the area.

"You- you- why did you-"

"He'll be fine," Albus said, not even looking down at Eckley's coiled body. "His brother will be along in a bit."

"But- but- why-"

"Because I'm a bit pressed for time," Albus said callously, his wand now pointed square at Wilde, "and his lot are going to waste all of it asking the wrong questions."

Wilde recoiled, falling over as he did so. He shuffled himself away on his palms, eyeing Albus' wand with trembling lips.

"Wh- where are you taking me-"

"I'm not taking you anywhere," Albus told him, not moving a muscle. "You're taking *me*."

"Wh-"

"The Foulest Book!" he yelled. "Where is it?"

Wilde winced, then started to stammer. "I- I- I-"

"Answer me!" Albus roared, advancing on him, and Wilde gave another cowardly jump.

He did not speak, however, instead staying in his contracted position, looking positively petrified. Albus glanced down on him with as much dislike as he could muster, waiting for him to

budge, though the surrounding silence gave his mind the freedom to wander, to wander to a world ago.

He could hardly believe that this man here was Fango Wilde. Only a few years ago, Albus had chased him through Hogsmeade, only to find himself ensnared in a trap, chained within the Department of Mysteries and at the mercy of Darvy. This man had once been a clever and valuable member of the Dark Alliance, or at least, a valuable associate to Reginald Ares.

And now he lay here as a shattered semblance of a human, imprisoned and tortured twice in the last year alone, his body inches from death and his mind perhaps even beyond that. And here Albus stood, once the frightened, clueless boy, and now the source of Wilde's fear. It made him feel powerful, and yet, he could not bring himself to be pleased with the reversal.

"Why can't you just tell me where it is?" Albus asked, and it was his most sincere question thus far.

Wilde looked up, his hair concealing his shifty eyes. "Because you'll kill me," he said.

"Keeping your mouth shut won't do you any favors there," Albus told him, and Wilde grimaced.

"I don't have it," he eventually moaned.

"Who does?" Albus asked, though his body had gone cold. All of this, just to suffer a setback of such an extent?

"No one," Wilde revealed. "I hid it."

"Where?" Albus asked, turning frantically and searching the sunny suburb, as though hoping to find a fresh patch of dirt where it might be buried.

"It's not here," Wilde admitted.

"Well I figured, but your home-"

"No," Wilde cut him off, shaking his head. "It's not *here*. It's not in Mottley. I hid it before I came back."

Albus could feel his nostrils flare. "I hope for your sake that you're lying-"

"I'm not," Wilde said flatly, as though he was accepting death. "The Foulest Book is not in Mottley."

"Well is it close?" Albus asked, again looking around.

"Relatively," Wilde told him, though when Albus made to speak, he continued, "it's in Britain, anyway."

Albus kept his wand firmly outstretched, disappointed, but somehow simultaneously relieved. The Book was out of his immediate reach, but did not seem to be in anyone else's hands...

"But you can take me there, right?" Albus all but demanded. "You know where it is, you could Apparate-"

"There's no way out of here," Wilde said, sounding despondent. "I tried, I tried ages ago. When I first returned here, it was supposed to be temporary, to collect things from my home, to stay out of sight...but then *they* showed up," he said, gesturing at the nothingness behind him, and Albus knew that he was referencing the Protectors and Lions both. "There's Anti-Apparition charms around every inch of this place, and the exits will be sealed as well."

Albus scratched at his chin, trying to process this all. His first thought was flooing-there was, after all, the very grate that he'd come through. But he no longer had the powder, and had no idea where that had even been. But then another thought had occurred to him-the thought that Wilde was simply wrong.

"No," he said. "Not every inch. My dad got in. There's somewhere in this town where the charms were either broken or removed. And it wouldn't be too far off, either," he added, more to himself than to Wilde.

He stared off back the way they had come, in the direction of the scrum that they had so surreptitiously maneuvered away from. Did the chance of leaving outweigh the chances of being seen-or worse, caught-by his father?

Albus glanced down at Eckley, realizing that he didn't have long to calculate the risks. Soon enough, Carl Eckley and his brigade of merry Gryffindors would be here...

"If I can get us to a place where we can Apparate, you'll take me to the book?" Albus half-asked, half-declared.

"Yes!" Wilde said at once, breathless. "Yes- yes of course-"

"Then start moving," Albus snarled.

Wilde did so at once, Albus taking the time to examine Eckley one more time before he started walking as well. The Foulest Book was not so far out of his grasp, he realized. This was a setback, yes, but a temporary one, a manageable one...

He felt around inside his cloak for the tiny vials of *Mortem Necavero*, pleased to see that they were all intact. Assuming that Wilde could lead him to it, Albus knew he would have to destroy the Foulest Book once he'd used it to learn whatever he could about the objects in Darvy's possession. He couldn't know for sure that the droplets of ancient liquid in his cloak were sufficient to do this, but he did know that now was not the time to doubt his potion-making abilities. He needed to worry about Wilde right now...

Albus practically walked alongside him, realizing that, in truth, it was Wilde leading him. Eckley had managed to navigate the neighborhoods of Mottley efficiently, but Wilde had lived here for a period of his life, and thus was able to retrace their steps much easier. Albus kept his wand out ahead of him, however, acknowledging to himself that there was quite the chance that he was going to need it. Beyond this, he knew that he would need to be perceptive and vigilant. He knew that wizards like his father, or Fairhart, were capable of detecting magical barriers, or where they'd been breached. If Wilde couldn't do it, that task would fall to him.

They walked in silence together for several minutes, keeping to the alleys and corners that they'd used previously. Albus constantly looked about, feeling around uselessly as they went, trying to find a point where he could feel something-anything-unique or aberrant enough for him to consider giving Apparition a go. His experiments were cut short, however, when the sounds of combat permeated his ears, more full and vibrant than even before.

Albus sloppily dragged Wilde around the side of a nearby house, glancing back and seeing that the fighting had moved closer to their location. Two wizards that he recognized as being Lions were dueling furiously with someone who seemed much too advanced for them magically-

It was his Aunt Hermione. It appeared as though his family had ultimately splintered off from their triumvirate, as his aunt was whipping her wand about over her head with a ferocity that he had never seen, deflecting the jinxes of her adversaries with ease. One of her opponents had a spell rebound upon himself, bringing him crumbling to the ground, while the other slashed his wand defensively only for Albus' aunt to duck swiftly, fling her own upwards, and send him to the ground clutching his face in pain.

But more battles were now becoming visible to him. He watched as his aunt turned and ran off to interfere with another contest, this one involving her husband, who was holding his own against a formidable looking man who was probably a Protector. And a small ways off from that, two men that he did not recognize-though one was wearing a crimson and gold tie-were dueling with a massive tree in between them, using the thick trunk as a barrier as they flashed their wands about like swords. It ended when the tie-wearing one smartly blasted a hanging branch over his enemy.

Albus scanned the scene, looking for and finding his father only a moment later. He was dueling the same cruel-looking witch that Albus had seen and recognized earlier. She was jabbing and sending a flurry of hexes at him, though he practically danced about them, eventually swirling his way behind her and making a complicated gesture with his own wand. A streak of bright gold flames stretched from its tip, the fiery tendrils arranging themselves into a formidable, bestial shape that chased her off and away from him.

"What are we going to do?" Wilde asked; it seemed as though he was in no hurry to be taken in by Harry Potter either.

"We work our way around it," Albus said, and he grabbed Wilde roughly and moved him further beyond the house, towards the next block over. Just as he was turning into the next street his head collided with something however, and in his daze he discerned that it had been another

person.

He brandished his wand at once, his stunner just missing what turned out to be a member of the Lions; it was a young man with freckles and choppy red hair. He too fired a spell, though it appeared as though he also was disoriented, for it whizzed by Albus' ear.

Albus lunged sideways, out from between his opponent and Wilde, rolling across the grass of a backyard and flinging his wand upwards, just in time to deflect another hex. He then whipped his wand sideways, sweeping the feet of his aggressor from under him, then followed it with a stunner aimed from the ground.

It connected, and the freckly boy fell over, no longer a threat. Albus saw Wilde reach down for the fallen wand, but he then blasted it away.

"If I see you holding a wand, you lose the hand that's holding it," Albus declared, rising to his feet.

"You need my help!" Wilde argued.

"I need you to stick close to me and not get killed," Albus retorted, though already, he could see more people coming at him, running from down the block and holding their wands high.

All thoughts of finding an Apparition point were wiped from his head; he'd been sucked into the battle, and now, survival came first and foremost. He sized up his next challengers-it was a man and a woman, neither of them wearing ties, and thus probably Protectors-and they were both aiming to kill. Identical bolts of green had issued from their wands, but Albus dived off of the lawn and onto the street, taking notice of a circular sewage grate as he did so. He magicked it with his wand, ripping it from its position and doing his best to keep it hovering. Just as his new foes were in range to attack again he banished it away; the disk spun through the air with tremendous force, knocking the woman in the face and sending her to the ground in a heap, what looked like a tooth flying behind her.

Albus leapt up to face the remaining wizard, but was forced to dodge a series of deadly orange curses fired in rapid succession. He cut across to another yard, nearly tripping over a child's toy as he did so, firing stunners as indiscriminately as the violent man before him. He had long dark hair and a weedy expression, and his next curse was so powerful that Albus' shield charm was unable to fully block it-

He was blown back, soaring through the air, and felt an intense pain in his stomach that he knew would have been much worse had it not been for his timely shield. He felt his shoulder blades smack into glass, and then heard a scream of terror; looking behind him, he saw that was caught halfway between the window of the house; what looked like a mother and her children were panicking on the floor of the sitting room, the two young daughters pressing their hands over their ears.

"Just stay here!" Albus yelled to them uselessly, understanding that they were muggles with no

idea of what was going on. At the next moment, however, he was forced to twist himself out of the way of yet another blazing curse, which collided with the exterior of the house and left a sizzling scorch mark.

"Nevermind, go, go, go!" he yelled to them, and he saw the mother stand and grab for her children.

Albus dove away from another blast, gazing up and seeing that his contender was as relentless as ever. He was advancing quickly, and Albus knew that he would have to be more offensive; he raised his wand and concentrated vaguely on the man's face-

There was a bang, just as the man had started to bear over him, and the Fracture Curse proved successful; a shriek of agony followed, and then a spurt of red, and then the man was clutching at his face and reduced to his knees.

Albus took the time to rise up slowly, contemplating stunning his foe and sparing them the agony, then eventually proceeded to do so. This momentary pause in action allowed him glance across the road to Wilde too, who had barely moved an inch from where the freckled boy had fallen. Albus went to walk over to him, but felt his chest clench in pain, undoubtedly a result of the softened curse. He wondered dimly, for only a second, if it had been wise to deny Wilde a wand; nevertheless, he did not change his mind on the matter.

"Come on," Albus said, beckoning gingerly, and Wilde came to him like a dog, even in that he was unspeaking as he did so.

Albus took the lead from here, though where he was going, he wasn't quite sure; the impromptu attack that had just occurred had made it quite apparent to him that the fighting was going to need to end before he could search for a means of escaping the protective enchantments around the town. And as to that matter, he could now hear strange noises coming from the heat of the battle on the next block over, where he'd just left...

He stepped over the woman who he'd hit with the grate, who was lying flat on her stomach, as unconscious as her companion, and brought Wilde back around through another alleyway, pressing himself against the wall as he did so and peeking his head out only slightly.

The noise, as it turned out, was the revving of a bright blue car. One of the muggle's means of transportation was swerving sporadically, fully automated, racing down the destroyed block and ramming itself into flailing victims with tremendous force, tossing them about like a bull in an arena.

And yet, Albus could see no driver. He understood at once that the vehicle had been bewitched, and sure enough, he could see its orchestrator standing calmly in the center of the destruction; his father.

His father had somehow magicked the machine to do his bidding, and was steering it from a distance with his wand, chasing down Lions and Protectors alike, screeching it to halts as it

bumped into them and sent them flying about. Albus cringed as it chased down one man in particular, catching him in the side just as he was turning to leap out of the way, forcing him to smash into the dashboard and roll over the car's hood, only to fall flat on the concrete a moment later. Others were not running, however, but were firing spells at it, though to little effect; apparently, none of them had had to deal with such a thing before.

Albus searched the scene for his aunt and uncle, finding the latter almost at once; he was just inches from Albus' father, though wrestling heatedly with someone on the floor, their wands abandoned. Albus squinted, trying to make out the figure, and with a jolt, realized that it was one of the most familiar faces of the day; with a long ponytail and an icy face, Larson, the leader of the Protectors, was being manhandled by his uncle, now situated underneath him, with a flurry of fists meeting his face every other second.

He turned away from the scene, certain that his uncle could handle himself, and despite the chaos of his father's vehicular offense, managed to locate his aunt as well. She was quite a ways off, but unlike her husband, she had remained in control of her wand, and was engaged with only one wizard, and one who looked rather familiar. With a jolt, Albus realized that it was Christopher Eckley.

Though Albus considered it impressive that the eldest Eckley brother was still standing this long into the battle, there was no denying that he'd met his match. He and his combatant were dancing about, wands flashing like swords and streaks of different colors emerging in both beams and more geometric shapes, though seldom making contact. Albus watched as his Aunt Hermione twirled about gracefully, her body synchronized with her wand such a way that upon a particular leap a shower of silver knocked the eldest Eckley backwards, disorienting him. He managed to recover, shuffling his feet and conjuring a circular shield to block the follow-up spell, but the shield was shattered by a rather large stunner, and a moment later, Albus' aunt stood victorious, though looking rather displeased. And then, she moved her head about, as though looking for something.

Albus pressed himself back up against the wall of the alley, understanding that his family, whatever they'd gotten themselves caught up in, had not abandoned their original task. They knew that he was here, and regardless of what they'd gotten themselves involved in now, they had no intention of leaving anytime soon.

"Are we still trying to find a way out?" Wilde's voice came from behind him.

At first Albus didn't answer, unsure of if there even was one. That was the ultimate goal, yes, but the more immediate one was staying out of the clutches of his father. "Eventually," he settled on. "Now stay close, we're crossing over-"

It felt strange to say it, but crossing the road to the other side did not have the look of a simple task. The ruin that Mottley had been transformed into resulted in what was once clear pathways becoming obstacle courses. Albus kept one eye on his father's back, and the speeding car likewise, but the rest of his attention was very much dedicated to his individual steps. Fallen street signs were hindering his movement, but no more so than the craters that had materialized

in the pavement. Albus sleuthed his way around these obstructions like a cat, Wilde a single step behind him each time. They momentarily paused behind a car that looked like it had been transfigured halfway before being abandoned, but then a tremendous noise made them stop in their tracks.

Albus and Wilde both took cover behind the car, though Albus peeked his head over the hood and saw the source of the clatter; the mobilized machine that had been wreaking havoc at his father's bequest had been blown on its side, its wheels still turning in frustration, though unable to leave its spot.

For a moment, it seemed as though this was cause for a respite; the level of noise in the brawl dropped considerably, and given his position at the tail end of the fray, Albus was able to watch as the groups reorganized themselves, the few tie-wearing individuals remaining banded together and taking cover by the wreckage of a shop that looked as though all of its contents had been destroyed several times over. Not particularly far off, what Albus knew were the remaining Protectors huddled together and began slashing their wands as though to create magical barriers. And his father-

His father was doing no such thing. He had went nowhere, and was instead standing calmly, his head slowly moving, as though absorbing the scene at intervals, gauging what was to come next. Oblivious that his son was yards behind him, hiding behind a car with Fango Wilde, he raised his wand slowly, a moment later being joined by Albus' aunt and uncle.

The three of them stood together loosely, just as when they had first entered the fray, and Albus knew that once again they aimed to combine their efforts to make a considerable impact. He watched as his father continued to raise his wand higher and higher, and then Albus saw it-the same car that he'd directed magically was being levitated slowly.

His aunt followed with what appeared to be instinct, rotating her wand in a meticulous pattern, and the floating hunk of machinery began to spin rapidly, accelerating on the spot-

And then his uncle whipped his wand forwards, and the vehicle sped through the air, amidst an array of gasps from the opposition, crashing and sliding across the road and part of the sidewalk, scattering whatever groups had just formed. Albus felt himself shake from the destruction, but it did not end here. His father was raising his wand once more, and already, he could see another automobile starting to levitate.

They're clearing the area, Albus realized, as his uncle sent yet another device through the air, this one with less accuracy, so that the immense contraption bounced off of the side of a building, caving it in slightly before landing with a frightening crash and sending more people flying. This entire process then repeated itself a third time, though this time, spells and curses met the apparatus in the air, resulting in a loud explosion and a ball of flames, followed by the pungent smell of smoke.

Albus felt sick, but it had nothing to do with the scent that had entered his nostrils. It wasn't even the sight of the exploding car. It was the idea behind it all; the idea that the world had come to

this. For a moment he felt his hatred for Darvy surge, for this was all, truly, Darvy's doing-this was his war. But then reason shot through him, and he realized that for all of the horrors that Darvy had inflicted upon the world, this was not one of them. This was not his war. This was a war within a war, a conflict brought about by a fragile population that didn't know any better; who thought that what they were doing was making a difference. Lions, Protectors, even his father-they were all on the same side, but their inability to see the big picture, to construe how devastating their behavior was to their desired outcomes-resulted in nothing but ruin.

"We need to get *out of here!*" Wilde hissed in his ear, tapping his hand against the side of the car as he did so. Albus realized the connotation at once; what was their source of cover now seemed as though it was soon going to become a weapon for his father. He rose, taking one more look at the destruction-another car was soaring through the sky-and crossed over to the alley opposite where he'd been, Wilde just behind him.

What it had accomplished, he had no idea, but he once more felt like he was moving away from the fighting, and that in itself felt like an accomplishment. He kept his eyes peeled for more signs of aggressors, but knew that the danger was for the most part concentrated on that single street. He was just turning to duck into another alley, however, when he felt something grab at him from behind.

He yelped-or tried too, anyway. A hand had covered his mouth, and Albus struggled viciously, trying to turn on the spot with his wand brandished. His immediate thought was Wilde, making a cowardly attempt at overpowering him, but Wilde had made a noise as well, and seemed to have been blasted to the ground.

"Don't move," someone whispered in his ear, and Albus, still struggling, raised his wand over his head, feeling that his attacker was ensnaring him from behind.

"I said *don't move!*" the voice repeated, and Albus felt his arm get pushed down. He didn't try lifting it again though, his mind racing. That voice...

Slowly the hand that was around his mouth uncurled each of the individual fingers, and at the next moment, Albus was permitted to turn around, the sounds of the battle in the street now filtered from his mind, for something very unexpected had just occurred.

It was Scorpius' father. Mr. Malfoy looked just as he had last time that he'd seen him, back at Fairhart's cabin, only his expression was a surly, almost hasty one-he looked as nervous as Albus felt.

"I need you...to trust me..."

Albus raised his wand; he couldn't help it, it was a reflex. For a moment he wondered just what his Potions professor was doing here, but then again, he supposed that it made sense; he'd served as an accompaniment weeks ago, and was almost certainly doing the same thing now. But why was he not allied with Albus' family?

"What do you want?" Albus said quickly, and from next to him, Wilde was struggling to get up.

"I want to help you," Mr. Malfoy said, his voice crisp and cold. "Where are you going?"

"*What!?*"

"I need you to tell me where you're going."

"Why would I-"

"I'm going to send you help-"

There was a crash behind them, and Albus turned just in time to see the same car that he'd just been hiding behind slide backwards-the Protectors and Lions, it seemed, had joined together to repel the dominance that was his father and company.

"Where is the Apparition point?" Albus asked at once, the thought suddenly occurring to him as he turned back to Scorpius' father, his outstretched arm shaking uncontrollably.

"I can't tell you unless you tell me where it is you're going," Mr. Malfoy replied curtly, somehow keeping his composure despite the surrounding bedlam. He then gave Albus a dark, almost commanding stare, but Albus was still unwilling to negotiate such information, regardless of the fact that even he himself didn't know the details-

"Struckford!" Wilde shouted, looking back as well. Albus threw him a hateful glare, but he went on anyway, panic in his voice. "Struckford, it's a small suburb, ruined now-"

"You can Apparate on the corner of 3rd and Garrick," Mr. Malfoy then revealed, much to Albus' surprise.

"Why are-"

"Just go!" Scorpius' father demanded, his pale cheeks turning pink, and he actually stepped aside. Albus could hear the noise moving closer, soon to be right at their rear. He made a jerking motion with his head for Wilde to follow after him, and together the two of them stormed by, desperate to leave the carnage behind. Albus looked back over his shoulder as they did so, though, expecting to see Mr. Malfoy meet his eye, but he'd already left, thrusting himself into the disarray without another word.

Now it was Wilde leading him. Albus had no idea where 3rd or Garrick was, but Wilde did, and he seemed to be in a considerable hurry to leave the town that he'd once called home. Albus was actually forced to jog along after him to keep up, though he was careful to keep a look out for street signs as well; he did not want to be in a place where Wilde could Apparate and he couldn't.

"Is it far?" Albus called a few feet ahead, as Wilde hobbled about, his dirty hair swaying with

each painful step.

"Not at all," Wilde insisted. "Just up ahead..."

Albus said nothing, though inwardly, he wondered whether or not this statement was fallacious. On one end, Wilde undoubtedly did not consider himself to be in a good position, and was probably working out an escape plan by the second. But on the other, Albus was not torturing him, which was more than could be said of the Protectors, and Wilde certainly knew that a botched escape would have very negative consequences...

The noise from the battle subsided only a few minutes later, Albus eventually finding himself again in a portion of Mottley that seemed barren. He knew that all of the homes that he was seeing now had muggles held up in them, their doors locked and windows barred, and with a fleeting feeling of joy, he realized that their troubles would soon be over with. Once his father realized that he was no longer in the Mottley, he would leave as well, and once the Renegade factions that sought Wilde realized that *he* was gone, there was a strong chance that they would depart too.

The only variable in this scenario seemed to be Mr. Malfoy; what had he been up to? Was he trying to spare these people, by sending Albus away, only to inform Albus' father of his next destination, so that the chase could continue? Or was there a chance-and this made his insides squirm, though why he wasn't sure-that Mr. Malfoy truly was trying to help Albus in a quest that he didn't even understand?

"We're here," Wilde announced, coming to a halt, and Albus at once grabbed him roughly by the shoulders.

"Ouch!" Wilde said, cringing, though Albus ignored it; he knew that Wilde was sore, knew that the slightest touch was probably unbearable to him, but that knowledge was not enough to make him relent in his suspicious. He needed to have physical contact with the man; wherever Wilde ended up Apparating to, Albus needed to be there as well.

"We're here, then?" Albus tried to confirm, though as he looked around at the motionless block of uniformed homes, he registered one of the street signs. It read **Garrick Ave.**

Wilde nodded, a pained expression forming on his wrecked face. "Are you ready?" he asked, fidgeting slightly, though whether this was due to nerves or the pressure of Albus' fingers on his shoulder, he wasn't sure.

Albus stood still for a moment, continuing to gaze about at the hovels of the town. He thought of his father, and his aunt and uncle, hoping that they were okay; the last he had seen, it seemed as though the tides had been shifting slightly in the ordeal. He remembered Eckley, crumpled up on some sidewalk, and found himself guiltily wishing that he'd at least sent up sparks, or given some indication as to the location-he could only hope that Carl had arrived shortly thereafter.

And then he remembered why he had come here, why he had flooded himself to Mottley that night, and he then became aware again of the vials stuffed in his robes.

"I'm ready," Albus said, relaxing slightly, but not relinquishing his hold.

Wilde nodded from next to him, then closed his eyes in concentration. Albus registered his movements as his body turned, and Albus turned with it, and then, he was being compressed into an empty space, Mottley already feeling miles away.

Chapter 9: Red Tidings

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The feeling of compression seemed to last unusually long. It occurred in what seemed to be a long instant-if such a thing was possible-and by the time that his feet had hit solid ground, Albus found himself gasping for air. Still, he'd managed to keep hold of Wilde's shoulder, and had yet to let go.

"Are you going to let go of me now?" Wilde asked, and Albus could tell from his tone that it was not a rhetorical question.

"In a second," he answered, first wanting to absorb his surroundings.

There wasn't much to see. For a moment, it was as though he had travelled through time; as though he'd simply stayed in Mottley, but had stayed long enough for the inner war to continue perpetually. The houses that adorned either side of him looked charred and dilapidated; they were wooden, suggesting this to be an older place, but even then, it was difficult to discern much else, as they'd mostly been reduced to ash. Entire chunks of dwellings were missing, some of them with their roofs clearly blown over, others caved in at the side; there was a bleak, almost orange hue to the location, probably due to something in the dirt that now personified the area.

"What is this place?" Albus asked, slowly relaxing his fingers from Wilde's shoulders.

"Struckton," he replied, simply, peering around himself. "The Hand-"

"Call him Darvy," Albus insisted through gritted teeth.

"Right-Darvy-he brought us here years ago, when he was still getting a handle on those- those things. When he first found a way to make those vile horses."

Albus nodded, revolving around slowly to see what else he could spot. Again, there wasn't much. The ruined homes went on endlessly, a lone dirt road their one marker of direction. The place was void of life or activity of any kind-even when the fierce wind howled, it sounded lonely.

"I'm guessing there were people here when you first arrived?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Wilde nodded, running his dirty hands through the tangled mess of hair that he'd accumulated over his months of imprisonment. "It was a pleasant place. A small, mostly wizarding community. Many fled when we arrived...but most..."

He ended there, and Albus noted that the sadness in his voice seemed to indicate regret. He

didn't buy it.

"Whatever," he said, trying to push the matter from his head. Darkness was starting to fall, and given that he'd managed to fall into a diurnal schedule again due to his time with the Lions, he was eager to accomplish something before he would need the light of his wand for navigation. "Where's the Book?" he added coldly.

Wilde swallowed. "A little far off," he revealed. "But I know where!" he added, a hurried result due to the look that Albus had given him. "Just- just follow after me."

Albus stepped aside, allowing him to lead. Though he didn't strive for physical contact, he made sure to always be within a pace of his escort; he wasn't sure, but he felt as though there were no places in this town where Apparition was limited or made more difficult. He was still not ruling out the idea of Wilde making a frantic escape.

And yet, as they walked, Wilde didn't make even the slightest indication of such. He never went ahead too far, never casted a shifty glance to the side or behind him, and seemed to have a general destination, given the ease at which he made his turns. The only oddity to his gait was his low stooping, lower than usual, and the precision of his movements added a surreptitious component as well.

"Why are you creeping around like that?" Albus demanded.

"Shh!" Wilde hushed him, looking back, and Albus actually raised his eyebrows at this. Wilde gave an explanation at once. "Just in case we're not alone," he said, his tone a fraction lower than usual.

"What do you mean, 'not alone'?"

Wilde inhaled. "The last that I'd heard of it-the last time I was here-Struckton was occupied by a handful of Defectors."

He said these words with a level of uncertainty to him, though there was no denying that this seemed a legitimate reason. Albus recalled what Eckley had told him about the Dark Defectors; about how they were the most desperate group left in the civil war that had gripped the Wizarding World.

"Why would there be Dark Defectors here?" Albus asked.

"Same reason I came back here, for a time," Wilde said. "It's a place that they know is empty; somewhere no one is after them. This place is hardly of interest for Renegades, and Darvy's not likely to come back here either."

"So they're hiding here?"

"To an extent, but they're dangerous nonetheless..."

"But how are they getting food?" Albus asked, sincerely curious. "How are they-"

"There are other towns nearby that weren't quite as destroyed, places they can make due. But Struckton...they know that it's empty here, they ensured that themselves."

He looked to his right as he said it, and Albus looked too-and smelled it. In the rubble of a burnt down cottage, he could see the remnants of a charred human being.

Albus said nothing at this, but he removed his wand from his robes nevertheless, which, he realized, he should have done in the first place. He could not get too lenient with Wilde, however cooperative he was being...

They continued to walk for a few more minutes, though aside from Wilde developing some sort of dry cough, it was relatively silent. Albus did not aim his wand particularly at him, but he always made sure to keep it in sight when his detainee fancied a look behind him.

The ruin of the town became even more apparent as they worked their way through the rubble; Wilde seemed to have a better sense of direction when maneuvering through the remnants of wooden hovels, as opposed to whatever dirt path was laid out for them. Focused though Albus was on analyzing his movements, he couldn't help but grow distracted by some of what he saw. So many of the homes looked unstable; they seemed to quake as the two of them strode by, their charred portions prepared to give out at the slightest touch. More disconcerting, though, were the regions of the town where these decaying structures were missing-there were entire stretches of emptiness between certain rows of the large decrepit squares, and Albus couldn't help but think that the foundations that had once stood there had been reduced completely to ash.

He recalled Lambshire; the small town near Fairhart's cabin where their perilous journey to Azkaban had begun. That place was at least lively, but no less dreary than this one here. Fairhart had told him then that the town had simply never been rebuilt after the war with Voldemort. Twenty years from now, would the same be said of this one, only with Darvy? *That's only if Darvy's stopped*, he reminded himself forcefully, and at once he dedicated his attention exclusively to Wilde once more.

And it was with good reason, too. Wilde had started to slow in his gait, even more so than usual, and Albus had the sense that they had neared their destination. They'd entered a circle of semi-destroyed buildings, though these, at least, looked too large to have once been houses. They were in the center of a promenade, it seemed, and Wilde was now pacing slightly, as though determining which of the large chunks of debris he was looking for from his memories.

"Hurry up," Albus urged, though Wilde actually threw him a scandalous look. Nevertheless, he made his decision, steering Albus towards the pile of wood and metal in the center, which was also the biggest and least damaged of the set. There seemed to be a roof on it, at least.

Wilde approached what would have been the entrance, through the doorway was caved in due to the ligneous obstructions within. Albus watched as the frail man tinkered with it, prying at the

jagged blocks of yellow with his weak fingers, but after a moment of this pitiful display Albus pushed him aside roughly, his wand aimed.

Without speaking, he blasted the obstacles away with the Reductor Curse, only to receive a harsh condemnation from Wilde a moment later.

"*Shh!* I've already told-"

"Get inside," Albus interjected, his lips barely moving. He was not going to allow Fango Wilde even one more moment of postponement, he decided.

Wilde exhaled sharply, then entered the building. Albus followed him in, feeling cold and clammy at once. The interior of the fragmented establishment was unusually vacant; Albus had expected some level of furniture or decor, however damaged, but the space was empty and hollow, showing only the grimy wooden floor and the splintering walls, thick with dust. Small beads of light were flittering in through the areas where the building was damaged, but given that it was nearly night time, Albus found it insufficient to properly explore the room further, which was a shame, as he was starting to feel somewhat nervous. Where was the Book?

No sooner did he think this did he notice that Fango Wilde had wandered away from him, towards the corner of the dim rim. He sank to his knees, and Albus instinctively tore after him, his wand raised.

"What are you doing!?" he barked, practically jamming the instrument up Wilde's nose.

"I'm getting it, I'm getting it!" he cried pathetically, hunching himself over and beginning to shake. Albus didn't relent however, keeping his wand sturdy in his tightened fingers.

Wilde seemed to come to the realization that no degree of stagnancy was going to have the threat removed from him, and so he began moving a moment later. Albus watched as he slid his shaking hands across the floor, searching for something. He then gave the tiniest of knocks, then looked back up, his face red. "Loose floorboard," he admitted. "They can be useful..."

Albus said nothing, observing as Wilde gently lifted a long rectangle from its position in the floor. He slid it over, revealing a dense patch of darkness that may have been anywhere from a meter to a mile in depth.

It proved to be closer to the former, however, as he saw Wilde reach both of his arms into the small crevice-it was not long, but it was wide-and pull out something with a tremendous heave. Clinging to it by its spine, he had removed the Foulest Book.

Albus felt his body turn to ice at the mere sight of it. He had not seen the Book in a long time-not since all those years ago, in the Department of Mysteries. He had a loose recollection of it, remembered it as being big and black, but only now, with it so close, did it resonate to him just how ancient the text appeared. It was massive-twice the size of the longest books that he'd seen at Hogwarts-and bound completely in leather, dark but not so dark that it hid the archaic

symbols that graced its cover.

It was apparently heavy too, as Wilde had placed it down at his side a moment later, panting slightly. He then delved back into the hole, and Albus maneuvered his way around for a better look, interested at what Wilde had kept hidden here. When he saw it, he felt anger bubble inside him.

"Drop it!" he barked, and then he did something that he didn't even tell his body to do; he struck Wilde across the face with the back of his hand, and ferociously at that.

Wilde gave a whimper as the wand that he'd procured flew from what was surely aching fingertips; he then rolled over to the side, glancing up with his reddened face mustering a look of utter contempt.

"Why are you doing this to me!?" he exclaimed, sounding close to tears.

"I told you, you don't get a wand-"

"What would I do to you!?" Wilde cried from the floor, his breathing heavy; Albus didn't think he'd ever heard someone sound so desperate in his entire life. "I gave you the Book, it's there! You've no reason to strike me, no right-"

"*No right!*" Albus breathed, his wand raised once more. Wilde, much to his surprise, did not recoil.

"I've done everything you've asked!" he argued. "You put your trust in me and I-"

"My *trust!*?" Albus spat. "You think I trust you? You think that *I* should trust *you!*? After everything you've done!?"

Wilde took a moment to register these words, then began to argue once more. "What I did in Hogsmeade that day was wrong, yes, but that was a different time, when Reginald was alive-"

"*Hogsmeade!?*" Albus blurted out, in disbelief at what he was hearing. "Hogs- you think- Hog- I- I'm talking about *Azkaban!*" he exclaimed. "You betrayed us! At the prison! You sent me and San to our deaths!"

"I did no such thing-"

"You sent us to Darvy to *die!*" Albus roared. "But it only worked for one of us," he added, threateningly.

This seemed to stop Fango Wilde in his tracks. A most peculiar look had overtaken his face; perhaps he had only had his suspicions of Fairhart dying that day, and this had been his confirmation. Whatever the case, he continued a moment later, his voice turning into a softer, almost apologetic one.

"I had my reasons," he declared, and Albus made a noise of seething rage, which was ignored. "It was not from hatred! It was not meant to be-"

"Liar!"

"I'm not lying!" Wilde insisted, and tears were actually visible on his face now. "I'm not! And what should I have done!?" he added, his mouth screwing itself into an agonizing shape. "Sancticus was going to kill me, don't you pretend otherwise!"

Albus said nothing at first, instead mulling over this sentence. Yes...this was true. Fairhart *had* meant to kill Wilde, and would have undoubtedly gotten around to it too, but he had justified it very well, hadn't he?

"You're right," he admitted. "San *wanted* to kill you, but I stopped him. You shouldn't have left us. You left us to die."

Wilde made a strangled, almost amused noise. "You mean like what you just did with that boy, an hour ago?"

Albus gave him a hateful glare, though for a moment, his mind wandered back to Eckley. When he didn't answer, however, Wilde continued in his protests.

"And there was nothing you could have said or done to prevent San from killing me, and in a painful way at that," he added. "You accuse me of lying, yet-"

"You know what, you're right!" Albus interjected, not even sure why he was negotiating with the talking puddle of bile before him. "He was going to kill you, and you deserve it too! After everything you've done!"

"What *I've* done!?" Wilde asked hotly, now rising to a more stable position, kneeling somewhat. "And what then, did Sancticus Fairhart deserve? He's killed more people than you *know* probably, what makes him any less deserving of death than me?"

Albus had his response ready. "Because he tried to help people too! Because he believed in things, because he wanted to make things better, and you've done *nothing* good, for anyone! And it's not what you deserve, it's what *he* does. He deserved to kill you, after what you did to him!"

"What I *did* to *him*!?" Wilde was standing now. "What do you even know-"

"I know enough!" Albus retorted. "I *saw* what you did-"

"Then you'll know I was defending myself!" Wilde lashed out.

"I don't mean what you did to his face," Albus said, detecting a chill in his own voice. "I mean what you did to *him*."

Wilde stared, a look of dawning coming over his face. "If- if you mean- if you mean with *her*, then- then I should have you know-"

"I don't want to know," Albus said, and it was the truth, but Wilde then lashed out.

"But you have to understand!" he exclaimed, and his eyes, always so bored, so lifeless, were now bulging from their sockets. "That was *not* as it seemed, whatever he told you, you haven't heard my side-"

Albus laughed. He couldn't help it; this declaration was so absurd to him, so meaningless in value that the idea that Wilde could put any stock in it was among the most humorous things that he could imagine.

"Do you think I care?" he asked, and he partially expected a real response. "You think I care about- about- about 'your side'? Is that- is that why you think I brought you here?" he added, actually looking around and gesturing at the dingy walls that enclosed them. "Do you think that I brought you *here*, to this place-in the middle of nowhere-do you think that I just went through *everything* that I went through, to get you, to hear- to hear *your* side? About Fairhart and some woman? Is that what you think?"

Wilde said nothing; he looked almost embarrassed. Albus delved right into the next part of his attack.

"I don't care what happened between you and Fairhart," he told him. "I really don't; I don't care about something that happened years and years ago. Right now I care about stopping Darvy, and that's it. So forgive me if I don't want to hear some twisted version of events from some bloke who I never even wanted to look at again, let alone speak to."

He watched as Wilde's lip quivered slightly. He made to say something, then apparently thought better of it. And then he spoke.

"If you choose to not hear my story of what happened, then that is your choice. But then don't judge me," he said. "Don't judge me on something that you don't know anything about; and don't think for a moment that you can justify your thoughts because you knew Sancticus. You did *not* know Sancticus, not as I did. No one did."

Albus continued to glare at him, though in truth, he could hardly refute these statements. Standing here, though, he realized for the first time that he would have to do *something* with Wilde. He had the Book now, or at least he could see it with his own two eyes, but all of his planning had stopped there.

Not knowing what else to do, he strode across the dusty floor, his footsteps each leaving their own cloud of decay. He picked up the wand that he'd knocked from Wilde's hand, and now holding it alongside his own, he compared them. The wand that Wilde had withdrawn was nearly of the same length, though a bit thinner, more slanted. It had a sharper handle too, and was darker in color, and yet, it looked to be in rather good shape.

"Whose wand is this?" he asked, finding it unlikely that it would be Wilde's.

"It belonged to Reginald Ares," he was answered, plainly. Wilde's voice was now as close to its characteristic boredom as Albus could remember; it appeared as though he was satisfied with not revealing his past, so long it wasn't being used against him.

Albus continued to examine Ares' wand, pocketing his own. "Why do you have it?" he asked.

"He gave it to me," Wilde replied flatly.

Albus said nothing at first, though he recalled that he actually already had this tidbit of information in his head. Hadn't Wilde revealed such a thing back at the prison? Had made the claim to his father that it was for safe-keeping?

"But *why*?" Albus asked, curious now. "Why to you-what do you have to do with Ares?"

Wilde gave him a stubborn look. "If you don't want know what happened, then I won't-"

"Oh go on then!" Albus snapped. "But spare me the details..."

Wilde nodded, now pressing himself against one of the rotting walls. "I will not tell you what happened between me and Sancticus," he started. "I don't think you'd understand anyway...I don't even think I do. But whatever the case, you recall, I assume, that I at one time worked for the Ministry of Magic?"

"Transportation Department," Albus confirmed, nodding, though he wasn't sure where this going.

"Yes. I worked at the Ministry for years-years before Sancticus joined. We had- had a- a falling out at one time," he went on slowly, as though eager to not delve into specifics here, "and for years I only heard rumors of him, that he was working for Waddlesworth. That he'd joined Wands and Redemption. When I first learned that he had become an Auror-had taken the tests, completed the training, everything-I realized that he was getting his life together again. That he was coming to terms with things in life, and was going to soon be seeking closure.

"This frightened me. Sancticus...is a violent person. Even before WAR," he added, when Albus raised his eyebrows. "A good heart but- but like so many of us who grew up in that time, the war influenced us. We'd both lost our parents, but he had even less than me. He was always aggressive, always dangerous, and truly, it was for that reason- if you only knew-"

He stopped here however, as though again, to be careful not to elaborate too thoroughly. "It is unimportant," he continued, "what matters is that I had reason to fear him. For years I waited for him to approach me, for a sign of some cordiality, perhaps, but it never occurred. I realized, eventually, that it would not be long before he tried to contact her. Samantha," he added, and the name actually sounded weird coming from his lips.

Albus did not respond though; he was still waiting to see how Ares fit into the story. And yet, he knew, from only a few months ago, that Darvy would be coming into it soon...

"I panicked," Wilde stated. "I had not spoken to her in years-and this was a loss for me like no other, I had known her for so long-I even introduced them, actually," he added, more to himself. "But as I was unable to contact her, I had no way of knowing what she would say. I...I then made a rash decision.

"As a member of the Department of Magical Transportation, I was also a regulator of locations. The Ministry of Magic has many programs where it keeps people of notoriety in hiding, often if they have previous criminal activity on their record. While their locations are not revealed to my department specifically, it is we who first receive their requests for changes in location. I had recalled, from but a year or so prior, receiving a request from one Vladamir Chekov; the Wandmaker who had inherited the Dragonfang Wand. In his request he had insisted that individuals had met with him in regards to his work; he requested a change of location, which I put through.

"The actual requests themselves are typically destroyed after the appropriate changes are made. But I was always methodical with my work. I kept every record. I recalled that in his correspondence, Chekov had mentioned the name of a suspicious man who'd met with him- Sebastian Darvy. The way that he was described, he was a fearful figure, an intimidating one. I took a chance. I contacted him, needing his help. I managed to pull some strings-quietly-to obtain the residency. I offered it in...in exchange for having Samantha silenced."

He stopped here, as though he still hadn't quite come to terms with what he'd done. Albus, who had already known this to some extent, but had not yet had the intricacies expounded upon, gave Wilde the most vile look he could master. His recipient saw it and nearly burst in to tears.

"I tried to call it off!" he insisted, crying. "I did everything I could, tried everything, but it was too late! Darvy was- was devoted to the task, even with me having given him what he wanted. There was nothing I could do! I didn't know who I was *dealing with!*" he practically pleaded.

Albus shook his head coldly. "Well," he told him, "now you know."

Wilde rubbed at his eyes, looking as though he was close to fainting. "Now I know," he agreed. "But at the time...at the time everything was so confusing. I had done something so wrong, and I couldn't go to anyone in the Ministry about it-especially not with Sancticus in the Auror Department. With nowhere to go I turned to the only man who knew what I'd done, to the killer himself, and then he...he introduced me to Reginald."

At this, something changed in his expression. It was not a look of reverence, or of awe, but something that suggested respect; it was as though he was reliving the moment, trying to find comfort in it again.

"Reginald accepted my deeds, but he condemned them as well. He did not try to manipulate me, as others would; he was very clear about how he felt of my actions, and he loathed them

regardless that they had been his means of acquiring the Wand. But he offered something more than condemnation. He offered a second chance. He insisted that he had a new world planned, and that if I sincerely meant to atone for what I'd done, I could find peace in it. It was- it was- it was almost religious, it was this feeling of comfort, yes, but he also instilled this sense of responsibility, of commitment. I joined him."

Wilde looked up at this; he had been staring down at the dirt. When he spoke next, it was though he was in a dream-like state; as though he couldn't believe how fast things had changed. "Reginald Ares offered redemption, but it wasn't the same as WAR-it was not what I'd heard Waddlesworth espouse for so many years. For him, it was more of a revitalization. He was fanatical in his hatred for injustice; of all of his followers, I think that I am the only one who actually grew to share his views. He reviled the dark wizards that he'd been forced to utilize; he endlessly spoke to me of his hatred for them, and he quickly realized that I was not one of them. Moreover, I became a confidant; someone willing to discuss his plans when he could not do so with his brother. He sensed in me, I think, that the world that he sought was one that I truly wanted, and one that I was willing to fight for. He grew to trust me, and when he started to use the Dragonfang Wand-to actually use it, to try and unlock its secrets-he gave his old wand to me. He insisted it was to be stowed away, and not used, but all the same, he always implored me to keep it safe. He said that there would be a time when it would need to be used again. That was the last conversation I ever had with him."

Albus said nothing at this; he was satisfied with Wilde's explanation. He did not voice this, however, and perhaps accordingly, Wilde aimed to conclude his tale.

"When Reginald died I didn't know what to do. I had nowhere to go. I didn't want to associate with his brother's Dark Alliance, but I couldn't return to the Ministry either. I tried to divert my efforts to WAR," he added, and an almost ironic smile formed on his face, "but Waddlesworth was hardly as inspiring as Reginald had been. In the end, Darvy learned of what I was doing, and I ended up in one of his cells, kept alive only because I had vague information to give him of the Ministry."

Again, Albus said nothing. He was done examining the wand now, and had instead turned his attention to the Foulest Book. It was just by Wilde's feet, thick and foreboding, still closed.

"Every choice that I've made," Wilde continued, snapping Albus from his gaze for only a moment, "has been the wrong one. Every decision had been an attempt to rectify the previous, and each time, I slipped a little further from where I was. Do you know what that's like?" he added, pitifully. "Do you know what it's like, to only want to make things better, and to have everything become worse?"

For the third straight time Albus failed to give an answer, but for the first time, his silence was the result of deep thought. He *did* know that feeling. He knew it well. And this moment of empathy, more than perhaps anything else that he'd seen today, sickened him. Because he'd spent so many years wondering just how close he was to his father, or to Fairhart, sometimes even to Waddlesworth, or Darvy, and yet the progression of his life was most in line with the travesty of a man that stood before him, and this thought frightened him beyond measurement.

"Well you still have decisions to make," Albus insisted, walking over to the book. He picked it up with a considerable deal of effort-it was as heavy as it looked-and gently ran his finger over the cover and spine, trying to derive some sort of feeling from the object that had been so central to making the world what it was now. "Do you know how to use this?" he asked.

Wilde gave him a look of intrigue. "I- no. Well, somewhat, I've seen it used. Though I've gotten no results myself..."

"You've tried to use it already?" Albus asked, and for the time since learning that Wilde had even taken it, he wondered just who it was he'd been so desperate to speak to. The answer shot clearly through him a moment later. "You wanted to speak to her, didn't you?" he followed up. "That woman..."

Wilde gave a sad frown. "I wanted to apologize," he admitted, and when Albus said nothing, he continued, "but you mean to use it too, don't you? You weren't looking for me at all, only the Book."

Albus nodded, though he also contemplated Wilde's question. Who *did* he want to speak to? If he was going to destroy the Book-and he had every intention of doing so-then this would be his only chance to use it, to utilize the knowledge that Fairhart had coveted so much. He thought of Fairhart's letter, which was still stowed away in his robes, albeit magically wiped. He only kept it for comfort now, truly, as he'd read over it so many times that he knew extended portions of it by heart.

It needs to be used Albus, because you need to learn everything that you can about the Dragonfang Wand.

This had been the bulk of Fairhart's message; that there was still work to be done, and that the Foulest Book was the catalyst for it. Fairhart had not pretended to have answers, had not, in the last thing that he'd ever written, tried to impress upon knowledge that he could not present evidence for. He wanted Albus to use the book for the same reasons others had been using it; to unravel the secrets of the Dragonfang Wand.

And yet, there was little that he could do. In theory this Book was knowledge, yes, but in practice things were not so simple. The person who knew the most about the Wand was undoubtedly Vesnovitch-he had created it, after all. But the Book required a spirit object to use, and as the Dragonfang Wand itself was the only thing he knew of that belonged to the ancient wandmaker, he had no chance of contacting him.

And then, he thought of Fairhart himself. Whatever knowledge Fairhart had lacked, it paled in comparison to what he'd known. The man had poured his final days into learning everything that he could about the issues that were plaguing Albus, and would no doubt be able to elucidate further on them, given enough time. This was an exciting thought to him; he also, after all, wanted to speak to his friend one more time. But all that he had of him was the letter that he left, and Albus knew, without even trying it, that the letter would not be sufficient for activating the Book. The letter had not belonged to Fairhart, he had no ties to it; the words yes, but those

words were not what was being offered, only the sleeve of parchment itself.

For a short, sad moment, he wished that he had Fairhart's ring. The silver ring that he'd kept from the mother of his unborn child, the one that bore such tremendous significance to him. But that ring was gone now; had gone the same way as Fairhart. He'd been wearing it the day that Darvy had kicked him through the Executioner's Veil.

"Well?" asked Wilde, and he actually sounded uncomfortable at the ongoing silence.

Albus didn't answer at first, still mulling over his options. He hadn't really considered who he would use the Book to speak with before, but in truth, Vesnovitch and Fairhart had always stirred in the back of his head. And yet, he was not ready to surrender such an opportunity over to laziness. He *did* have another option, or at least, there was a chance of it...

"You *do* mean to use it, don't-"

"You saw Ares use the Book, right?" Albus interjected swiftly.

"I did," Wilde responded, recovering from having been cut off.

"Often?"

"I wouldn't say often," Wilde admitted, "but more than once."

"And he spoke to Vesnovitch, right? The guy who-"

"Always to Vesnovitch," confirmed Wilde.

"Right," Albus said shortly. "Okay, well I need to talk to him, then."

"I must warn you, he was more cryptic than helpful usually-"

"No, not Vesnovitch," Albus said. "Ares."

Wilde's eyes lit up. "To- to Reginald?"

"That's right," Albus said, now pacing back and forth with the Book pressed against his chest. All things considered, he realized, Ares was far from the worst option. With any luck, he'd even be able to clarify some things of a more personal nature as well. Albus delved into this immediately.

"I need to know a few things," he started, "and the first, really, is about the Dragonfang Wand. How it functions; how it's destroyed. If Ares learned from Vesnovitch, then he can help me. And also," he added, tensing up slightly, "I need to find Darvy. I don't know if anyone knows how that monster thinks, but Ares was his brother, and that's as close as I'm going to get, I think."

"You're looking for Darvy?" Wilde asked, and he actually sounded impressed.

"That's right," Albus said. "And with any luck, I'll be a step closer to getting to him in a few minutes. But first I need your help," he added, and he extended the Book over. Wilde didn't accept it.

"Oh no," he said solemnly. "I can't, I've already told you, I wasn't able-"

"You weren't able to contact that woman-Sam or whatever-because you need a spirit object to use the Book. Something that represents the person you want to communicate with; you don't have anything like that, do you?"

Wilde hung his head, apparently thoroughly disheartened at the recondite tidbit that had thwarted his efforts. "No," he admitted.

"Well we have it for Ares," Albus revealed, handing the dead man's wand over with the book.

Wilde eyed it with interest; though whether this was at the idea of using Ares' wand to contact him, or the prospect of being handed a wizarding instrument, Albus wasn't sure. Albus was unconcerned with how he viewed the gesture, though; all that he could register now was the hope that Ares' old wand would prove viable in this scenario. Wands, obviously, could be spirit objects, as he knew from Vesnovtich and his creation. But just how important had Reginald Ares' wand been to him? He'd forfeited it in favor of another, more grandiose selection in the last years of his life, but had he ever abandoned his original in his heart? Had Ares given himself up to the Dragonfang Wand, as so many others before had before him, or had he left a larger part of his identity in the work of his days as an Auror, when he'd been Red War, Harry Potter's faithful companion?

"If you saw Ares use the Book, then you know how to use it," Albus said. "And this here is the means of triggering it," he added, again, stretching out both the Foulest Book and Ares' wand in his hands.

Wilde slowly removed the articles from Albus' grasp, holding on to them rather tenderly; it was as though he'd just become aware of how great their importance was. Albus looked around for a table of sorts-some kind of structure that the Book could be placed on-but ended up conjuring one out of necessity. It was a flimsy thing, mostly circular but for a lone corner, but it was balanced on four adequate legs, sturdy enough from a geometric standpoint to enable use.

Wilde carried the items over to the table, which was in the center of the decaying room, while Albus backed up, not knowing what to expect. He had no idea how this process worked; this would be his first time attempting to communicate with the dead. It was surreal to him, and yet, he found himself desensitized to the concept as a whole. He had seen and experienced so much today. He'd taken part in a battle between unruly citizens, had seen his father once more. He'd betrayed someone who had been a valuable, if not unexpected accomplice. He'd rescued a man who'd betrayed him, and had then all but enslaved him. Indeed, the idea of now speaking with a deceased Headmaster of Hogwarts was almost appropriate; should have been

anticipated, really.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Wilde asked, flipping through the thick pages gingerly, as though afraid to rip them.

"I've got nothing to lose," Albus said.

Wilde nodded, but said nothing, only continuing to search for what must have been a cue in his memory. Albus found a marginal sense of bemusement in the current predicament, unsure as to what was now racing through Wilde's head. He seemed much more lax than before, possibly because he was now being asked to do things, rather than commanded, but at the same time, Albus realized that there probably some doubt in the back of his head. Certainly, Wilde was curious as to just what was going to happen to him once he'd been exhausted of all of his uses, and Albus couldn't blame him; he still wasn't sure what would happen either.

Wilde cleared his throat slightly, and this low noise was enough to capture Albus' attention completely. He stayed plastered against one of the grubby walls, watching as Wilde began tracing his finger over certain passages. Albus realized that he simply could not ignore how vital Wilde was at this juncture; he at least had experience with the Book, however slight, and was thus far and away more competent at using it than Albus would have been on his own. More so than Fairhart too, probably, though he pushed this thought from his mind.

He watched as Wilde placed Ares' wand on top of the Book, right at the crease of whatever page he'd settled on. And then, in a voice far distinct from the rattle that he'd been using, he recited with clarity a language that Albus didn't understand a word of.

The passage was garbled; strange in its pauses but beautiful nonetheless, though Wilde seemed to be struggling with it. He stopped in the middle anyway, choking up on a word that sounded as though it was extremely difficult to pronounce, and then threw a frantic look over at the corner, as though expecting to be scolded. Albus did no such thing however, merely giving a mild gesture with his hand; an indication for him to start over.

Again and again he tried, slight alterations in the enunciation each time, and Albus, though restless, opted not to interfere. He had no intention of abandoning the plan, however crude and impromptu it was, but if the situation proved truly unmanageable, he still had an ending in mind for the Book. He felt inside his robes for the vials of *Mortem Necavero* as Wilde continued to struggle, each light touch of the tiny containers tempting him more to simply interfere and stop wasting time.

"I'm sorry," Wilde said, after what was apparently a rather bad attempt. "I've never spoken it, only heard-"

But he was cut off, not by Albus, but by a faint glow. Albus removed himself from the wall slowly, eyes widening, as a hint of blue started to emerge from the opened Foulest Book. It grew deeper and more prominent as the seconds passed by, and soon enough, the pages began to flutter about, though Albus was certain that it had nothing to do with the chill outside...

And then, a shape emerged. It tore upwards like a spire, protruding from the book in a ghastly manner, as ominously blue as the glow that had preceded it, yet more transparent. Albus watched as Reginald Ares materialized in front of them, the trunks of his legs rooted in the pages of the Foulest Book, extending upwards as an exact replica.

Albus exchanged a brief glance with Wilde, who wasn't looking nearly as surprised as he was nervous. Albus had expected him to be a little less startled, given that he'd seen the Book at work, but what he had not expected was the emotional response it elicited from himself. The manifestation of Ares that had formed in front of him had made him start to shake, though he wasn't quite sure why; he was not afraid of the phantom before him.

But it was familiar to him. It was Ares just as he'd seen him, only with alterations in color. The grizzled hair, grey from stress but now appearing in a more tinted fashion. The beady, grey eyes, changed likewise. He had the same curt mustache, the same scruffy beard. He was a little bit taller than Albus remembered him however, but he supposed that it may have been a complication of the figure standing in a dignified way. He had never registered it before, but there had been a mild, humble stoop to Ares when he was alive; this was the most that Albus had seen his body be relaxed, though of course, that was probably because there was no actual body there.

And yet, Ares had all of the motions of a living, breathing person. He blinked, and turned his head, and even looked down at them, something like confusion playing on his face. Albus went to speak first, but found himself unable to; he couldn't quite figure out how to engage the image before him, it was just too strange to him. Wilde made to say something as well, but faltered before anything discernible could come out.

True to his nature, it was Ares who spoke first, looking as though he wasn't intimidated in the slightest. Albus felt the hair on the back of his neck rise as the eidolon uttered its first words.

"Why have you called?" Ares asked, and though his voice was just as deep and strict as Albus remembered it, there was an icier edge to it; an emptiness that he couldn't quite explain.

Albus wiped at his face, realizing that he was sweating a great deal. "I- can you- do you know who I am?" he asked, suddenly curious as to just how such a thing was happening. It was one thing to understand Necromancy at a basic level, but now that he found himself delving into the mechanics of it, he couldn't help but be confused.

Ares peered at him for a moment, before making his statement. "You are Albus Potter," he said.

Albus nodded. "That's right. And you- you're- are you a- a- a ghost?" he inquired, though he knew even before Ares answered that this was incorrect.

"I am dead," he said, though even he sounded slightly unsure.

"Well ghosts-" Albus started, but he stopped himself here, considering for the first time something contrary to what he'd always just assumed. "I suppose that ghosts *aren't* dead, are

they? They're imprints. But they're living...but-

"I don't know," Ares said. "But I know that I am dead."

"Right," Albus confirmed, glad that this was established. He made to speak again, but Ares had already turned his attention to Fango Wilde.

"Fango," he addressed him, as simply as he had Albus.

Wilde's face went red. "R- Reginald," he said, and he nodded his head courteously, before Ares returned his gaze to Albus.

"Why have you called?" he repeated.

"I'm sorry," Albus said at once, though he wasn't quite sure why; he didn't know if what he was doing was wrong or not. All of the etiquette instilled in him by his parents was amounting to nothing in this situation here. "I'm sorry, I just- I just wanted to- do you know...what's going on?" he asked, not even sure how to begin in his questioning. "With- with the war-"

"I am aware," Ares rebutted. "To an extent."

"Right, well- do you care?" Albus interrupted himself, realizing that this question was possibly even more important than the previous.

Ares squinted his eyes and tilted his ghoulish face upwards, as though in heavy contemplation. After a moment, he answered him. "Yes," he said. "To an extent."

"Uh-huh. Okay...right..."

Albus scratched at the back of his head, wondering how in the world he was going to approach this situation. He had been wrong earlier, he realized. Nothing that had occurred today had prepared him for this.

To his relief-and surprise-it was Wilde who spared him any more overt awkwardness.

"Do you remember the things that you learned here?" he said. "Like portraits-"

"I am not a portrait," Ares responded, though he did not sound offended; merely as though he wished to educate. "I am not a ghost. Nor am I memory, or a photograph. I do not exist in this past; I exist in the present, but it is my present, not yours."

"Where are you?" Albus asked, and he knew that they were starting off spectacularly off-topic, but he truly felt as if there was no better time to ask these questions. "I mean, how far-"

"It is not a location," Ares revealed. "Not really..."

This cryptic comment left Albus' insides squirming, and suddenly, he realized just how very far they were from the discussions that needed to be had.

"I need your help," he blurted. "Can you- can you help me?"

Ares surveyed him, his cold eyes looking indifferent. "I don't know."

Albus wiped at his brow once more. Wilde made to say something, but Albus, unable to help himself, dove right in.

"I'm the owner of the Dragonfang Wand," he declared. "It's master. Those things it can summon...I can control them."

Ares continued to peer down at him, though after a moment, he gave a grisly nod. "I know," he said.

Albus saw Wilde staring at him, jaw slightly hanging, but he ignored it. He had more questions to ask. "But I don't *have* the Wand," he continued. "Your brother does. He took it when- when- if you remember-"

"I remember," Ares said, and for the first time, Albus detected something human in his voice. It was not anger, or sadness, but that chilling hint of bitterness, that marker of regret. Whatever this incarnation of Ares was, some semblance of personality-possibly even of ideology-was retained.

"Then you know just how bad things are," Albus said. "Darvy has the Wand. And he can summon those things, all sorts of them. But *I* can control them, only- only I don't know," he added flatly. "Someone told me that now that I know all of this, I won't have the Wand's power anymore. I don't even know if I'll be able to control those things. Does the Wand still belong to me?" he added, voicing a fear that he had yet to voice since reading Fairhart's letter.

But Ares only heaved a sigh, which Albus recognized as strange, all things considered. "The Dragonfang Wand does not belong to you, Albus Potter; you belong to it. You are master of those creatures because the remains of their minds are ensnared by the Wand. They obey you because the Wand has elected you as its vessel, its means of activity in this world. At one point, the Wand shared us in its bondage, though I was set free of it. Now only you are its prisoner."

"Prisoner?" Albus asked, feeling his skin go cold. "But you don't- that's not right. I can do *incredible* things with it, if I could just do them now, or when I meet Darvy-"

"Have the hallucinations started?" Ares asked, and he sounded sad.

Albus glanced up at him, confused. "I- what hallucinations-"

"They will," Ares answered. "Soon. What of the voice? How indistinct is it from your own?"

This made him freeze on the spot. Again he saw that Wilde was staring over at him, but he was too immersed in Ares' last question to pay it much mind. The voice *had* returned, and was most certainly more difficult to distinguish from his own now...

"What's happening to me?" he asked, his tone childish.

Ares frowned. "The Dragonfang Wand is consuming you. Not your body," he added, for Albus had stared down at his shaking hands, terrified, "but your mind. The Wand is overtaking you, one segment of yourself at a time. This is how it has reduced those others who have accepted it; those whose souls have been bound to this world by it, unable to move on, so desperate to reclaim their identities that they swear themselves to whoever serves as a living vessel, their minds so full of desire that they can even shape the dust into a form befitting this world.

"These creatures respect you because you exist as symbol for them; one who is enduring the struggle of the Wand's power. As to why the Wand itself respects you...as to that I cannot say. But this respect is not beneficial. Like all others who the Wand has elected, it ultimately seeks to overcome you. Not on its own, but through means of yourself. A war wages within you, an exhausting conflict with no true resolution. The Wand grants you incredible power, yes; the power of all of those whose souls it has collected before. But at the cost of your mind. The part of you that you disassociate from yourself is strengthened by this power, for the Wand must continually test you, to determine that you are worthy of its respect. Ultimately, it will take your sanity from you."

Albus was still looking at his hands, absorbing every word as though it were another powerful blow to the face. For so long he had counted on that power-he had even wept when he'd learned that it was stripped from him. Now he didn't know what to think of it.

"But why?" he finally asked, and though he wasn't quite sure what he was asking for, he was relieved to see that Ares had gotten the gist of it.

"Because it is evil," he said, simply. "The Dragonfang Wand is a nefarious invention, a Wand not with an inherent mind, but one that adapts accordingly. By itself it has no real form; no cognitive processes. But when linked to a vessel, it can become amused by its behavior. The Wand will offer great power, of course; the power of its previous owners combined, and it will offer a release for this power as well; it will tempt you to use it, that you might become addicted to it. But what it wants most of all is to collect you, and to do that, it must break you, must separate you from whatever identity you had before. Power in exchange for sanity; all of those offered it so far have taken it."

Albus looked up now, a thought suddenly occurring to him. "You were going to take it too," he said. "You knew these things! You knew what the Wand was, but you wanted it, all of it, wanted its respect-"

"I did," Ares said, and he said this in such a way that it seemed as though he was prepared to defend it.

"But why!?" Albus blurted out, astonished at such a claim. "How could you do that, make that trade- how could you make that-"

"Sacrifice?" Ares finished, and it was his voice rising now; somehow, his form looked flushed. "How could I not? I did not choose to embrace that burden, the task was assigned to me. It was my duty."

"From who?" Albus asked, not understanding. "Wh-"

"Fate," Ares insisted, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. "I was born with extraordinary magical ability," he went on, and this was not a boast; it was a statement. "This ability was not a *reward* for having been *born*," he stressed. "It was a responsibility. This world needed change; it still does. The onus of great change falls on the great. How could I eschew the task given to me from birth? Those born capable of doing great things *must* do them! They must not squander their gifts!"

Albus gaped at him. "I don't-"

"The Dragonfang Wand would have granted me the power to restore this world to its infancy, to erase the corruption that had festered and spread through it. It would have provided me an army of unparalleled strength, and the control over it needed to orchestrate such a movement. It would have allowed me to save a population suffering from the bane of satiety, a society so content with its state of discord that its own government came to share in its lack of values or principles. I had no other choice in the matter; those meant to promulgate justice had grown so lenient with their rule, that not only were they failing to excoriate those doing wrong, but they were *twisting* these actions conceptually as a means of benefitting from them! Of what great power is justice, Albus Potter, when it lies in the hands of the corrupt!?"

Ares had started to seethe slightly at this last utterance, a far cry from the peaceful, moderate state of behavior exhibited previously. He seemed to realize this from his own echoes however, and when he continued, he modified his tone accordingly, reverting back to its strict, but average volume.

"This power would have allowed me to crush that establishment, to reduce it to the lowest rubble. The Dragonfang Wand would have allowed me to usher in a new beginning; and all that need be offered in exchange was my mind. Just mine! What was my sanity, to the reformation of this world? What was my confusion and pain, to the safety of those who had never been able to defend themselves? At the cost of only my own mind, the hard worker could do their work and not fear the thief, the honest individual could speak and not fear the liar; the children could play, and not fear the murderer lurking in the shadows. How many innocent lives could be saved, only at the cost of my instability? What was my chaos, to their order?"

Albus didn't know how to answer this. When Ares spoke of it, there was a sense of commitment and resolve that seemed to transcend the words. But Albus was not prepared for such a burden; his was of a different kind.

"But I can't do those things," he said. "I'm just going to lose my mind, and it's going to be for nothing-"

"That was not my intention," Ares said, sounding sad. "I had hoped to spare you from such a fate. I did everything that I could to ensure that the burden of the Dragonfang Wand fell on me, and me only. I failed."

"But there has to be a way to get rid of it now," Albus insisted, desperately. "There *has* to."

"I'm sorry," Ares said, and he sounded genuine. "But I do not know. The only escape I know of, the only escape I had planned for, I was given."

"But you died," Albus said, confused, and Ares nodded.

"My death, though premature, was inevitable, and accounted for. Sebastian killed me only a little while before I had planned to die anyway."

"*What!?*"

"I had a timetable," Ares insisted. "I was going to overcome the Ministry of Magic, wage war on it, and, of course, defeat it. My mind would have started to falter just as the reconstruction process was beginning. I would have seen many of the tremendous strides made in this process, but not the conclusion. I knew that the Wand was poison-knew that eventually it would overtake me, and riddle my mind with nonsense. I planned to have my life taken, before such a thing could hinder the world that I'd started to build. The new world would be void of corruption, void of the evils that the Wand would have brought out of me. I could not be allowed to contaminate it. I was just beginning to make the proper arrangements when Sebastian killed me."

"The arrangements?" Albus asked, but then he froze; a thought suddenly occurring to him. Slowly, he turned to Fango Wilde, who was looking stymied. For the first time in quite a while, he spoke.

"You gave me your wand," he said. "You- you wanted me to kill you..."

"I had hoped that having the deed performed with my own wand would spare some of the emotional burden on you; would help you to understand that it was what I wanted. A rather unnecessary gesture," he added. "As it never came to fruition."

Albus took the time to analyze these words, to realize just how devoted to his dream Ares had actually been. But the way in which he described the consequences-the way in he talked of the Wand's dangers-was more poignant.

"But those things...they aren't happening to me," Albus said slowly, hoping that if he could just word things correctly, Ares could give him some fragment of hope to cling to. "I mean, the voice, yeah-but that's always been there! Really! I mean, you died years ago!" he added, not even

caring how insensitive it was to say. "Why haven't I went bonkers yet, why can I still talk, and think, and do things, can even fight it-"

"There are peculiarities to the current circumstances," Ares told him. "In particular, your proximity to the Wand has undoubtedly been beneficial to your ability to resist it. As your father once told me, time and space matter in magic. In this regard, your distance from the Wand-and your lack of using it-seems to have helped delay in the Wand's gradual acquisition of your mind. Additionally, my brother's obsession with using the Dragonfang Wand may also be a reason for the impediment; the more that the Dragonfang Wand's power is allocated to his army, the less it can focus on you.

"These are not the words of Vesnovitch however; only what I can assume, given what I know, and of wandlore I confess myself uneducated. But it seems clear to me that your separation from the Wand has proven spectacularly beneficial in your ability to resist its clutches. That you've managed to harness its power without yet conceding to it is impressive, but this effort will only serve as a hindrance to the Wand, not as a complete barrier. Especially if my brother now decides to abstain from using it; the deterioration of your mind should then, I am sorry to say, accelerate."

Albus could only stare blankly ahead as Ares said these words, again feeling as though his life had been flipped into a different direction entirely. Though Darvy almost certainly didn't know it, his eagerness to build his army had been resulting in precious time for Albus to stay sane. If Darvy was truly intent on staying in hiding now, then how long would it be before Albus was lost to the Wand completely?

"Of course it would be incorrect to insist that these variables have been the only ones at play in your ability to fight the Wand," Ares continued. "Most mysterious of all remains the fact that the Dragonfang Wand elected you as a vessel, when it already had me to serve that purpose. It appears as though it detected some degree of promise in you, even in youth; moreover, it is likely that it is that potential that has kept it interested in you until even now, and this curiosity may very well be an additional factor in your ability to postpone the Wand's actions. Make no mistake, however; *it will* happen. So long as it exists, nothing can prevent the Wand from fulfilling this endeavor."

"But what if I can make it not exist?" Albus asked at once, not yet ready to give up hope. "If I completely destroy it-"

"That would be extremely difficult," Ares revealed.

"Don't be so sure!" Albus lashed out, and he reached into his robes, preparing to reveal the potions that he'd produced, the same concoctions that he planned on using shortly anyway. But Ares only shook his head.

"It is not doubt of your skill," he said. "It is the very nature of the Wand's existence. The Executioner's Veil is of another world, truly. The Foulest Book is of this one. But the Dragonfang Wand lies on the cusp, in between the two. *Destroying* it physically would not necessarily serve

the purpose that you seek; it would still be part of this world, bound to you; *killing* it would be more appropriate, but that has different implications of difficulty, for the Wand is still, at its most basic form, inanimate. To be rid of the Wand, you would need to bring it ultimate death, to remove all faculties of its existence from this world, all at once, and no curse or potion can bring about this effect."

Albus could not believe what he was hearing. Everything that he was firing at Ares-every optimistic thought that he could conceive of-was being shot down in a storm of fiery rejection. And that it was Ares made it so much worse, for Albus knew that the dead man standing in front of him had no reason to lie, and was very unlikely to be mistaken...

"I am sorry," Ares repeated. "I truly had not meant for this. I understand your fear," he said, and his strict voice had softened only slightly at this admittance. "I remember the dreams, I once had them too. But I would be doing you a disservice to not prepare you for what must soon happen. Soon, the double you see in your nightmares will be indistinguishable from what you have learned to think of yourself. Soon...it will become impossible to separate your dreams from reality."

Albus said nothing at first, letting each of these statements burn into his flesh. The room had gone extremely quiet now, and Albus found himself wiping at his face with his sleeve once more-though this time it was not sweat he was wiping away.

Things were worse than he could have ever imagined. His life was over, had been since he was twelve years old. That decision to run into the Forbidden Forest after Ares-to pick up that Wand and hold it high, ready for use-was culminating now. That was the day that he'd condemned himself to this fate, the day that the Dragonfang Wand had tasted his mind and had realized that it wanted more. He again remembered Fairhart's letter. Ares had insisted that he didn't know why the Wand had selected him, but Fairhart did; he'd written it down clearly. *Compassion, Albus, is your greatest strength.*

But it had also been his doom. That empathy that he apparently possessed-that trait that he still wasn't quite sure he understood, not really-was what had drawn the Wand to him. And while it had been his protector thus far, had fueled the assistance of the Wand in some cases, it would, ultimately, prove to be his downfall. He was going to lose his mind, to fall victim to the nightmare iteration of himself, the golden eyed menace that reigned over him in his sleep for so long, that he'd fought valiantly against, and had won small battles against, but whom he would ultimately lose the war to.

He was still wiping at his eyes minutes later, these thoughts crashing down on him in the silence. He found himself thinking of Mirra. Of Morrison, and Scorpius. Of his father, his mother, his brother and sister, of everyone that had stood behind him for so long. He had done everything in his power to hide that Albus from them, but now, he knew, it was destined to overrun him. To take control. The most he could do now was keep himself away from them, just as he'd planned from the beginning, with his departure from them.

He looked over at Wilde, who was staring down sullenly, apparently unwilling to look at him.

Albus knew why; he sensed it. Wilde was perturbed. He had, after all, just heard a death sentence be passed upon the person next to him, or something like it-maybe even something worse.

But looking at Wilde did something else; it reminded him. Reminded him that he still had things to do-only now he had even less time to do it than he thought.

"I need to know where your brother is," Albus said to Ares, blinking back what he hoped was the end of his inaudible tears. "I need to stop him."

Ares surveyed him, but before he could say anything, Albus had continued.

"I know I haven't got much time left," he said. "Before- before I'm gone. But I'm still the only one that can stop him. Whatever it's doing to me, I still have the Wand's respect, don't I? If I can just stop him, before the Wand takes me- please, you have to help," he pleaded, and he thought that his plea had never been greater.

He was asking, after all, to set his affairs in order. What would happen to him after he'd lost his mind, he couldn't know, he didn't want to. But he knew that he would cease to exist, in all the ways that mattered to him, anyway. But if that could happen in a more peaceful world, if he could ensure the safety of his loved ones first, he knew, then that wouldn't be so bad. Again, Mirra's face flashed behind his eyes.

"I don't know how to help you," Ares said, his tone grim.

"But you know where he is, don't you?" Albus asked. "I mean, where you are-whenever that is-you know things-"

"I know of what occurs here, but I do not observe," Ares insisted. "I do not know where my brother is."

He said this in a rather dark manner, and Albus, for the first time since he'd engaged the dead man, felt slightly suspicious of him.

"You don't want me to find him, do you?" he asked. "Because you know what I aim to do. You know I'm going to kill him."

Ares peered at him, his narrow eyes shifting once before speaking. "That is neither here nor there," he said.

"He's bad for this world!" Albus objected. "Everything that you're against, that corruption, those-those innocent people, they're all in danger because of your brother! You have a responsibility!" he added furiously, now channeling his frustration at what he'd learned of his fate in the only practical way that he could.

"I don't know where he is!" Ares insisted, though he looked somewhat abashed; it appeared as

though Albus' words had cut him in death just as they could in life.

"But you must be able to offer something," Wilde spoke up, and Albus turned to him in surprise; he supposed that he shouldn't be so dumbfounded however, as Wilde was as opposed to Darvy as he himself.

"You know where he goes," Albus added. "You know what he wants, truly, better than anyone. Darvy is hiding somewhere, biding his time until the world is completely destroyed from fighting one another. He can't be on Azkaban, it's a mess. He has to be somewhere-somewhere he feels safe, or comfortable-"

"I know of only one place," Ares started slowly, "but I cannot guarantee that he will be there."

"Please," Albus said again. "Anything you can tell me."

Ares nodded, looking for a moment as though he was in severe distress; whatever his brother had done to him, whatever he was still capable of doing, it appeared as though he had his reservations of aiding in his demise. And yet, he seemed able to overcome this obstacle.

"The only place that Sebastian will ever truly feel comfortable is his home; where he was born. It is a small town located at the edge of England, near Liverpool. It is largely a wizarding community, though records will show it to have muggles mixed in. It is called Kakos."

"The Toxic Quarry!?" Wilde interrupted, sounding quite taken aback, and Ares nodded.

"I don't get it," Albus said, looking back and forth between them. "Why is it called-"

"Kakos, despite its small area and moderate population, is notorious for its illegal potion trade," Ares revealed. "Poisons and other illicit substances from all over the world have been traced back to there. Its reputation is well known, but it is difficult to improve upon the conditions. During Voldemort's time, Kakos was a popular dwelling area for Death Eaters to retreat to, sure to be lost in the ordinary crimes of the area. Even following his second defeat, some scrambled for it, though they were apprehended and paid for their crimes accordingly," he added, satisfaction etched into his voice.

"But how is the place so bad?" Albus asked. "The Ministry-"

"The Ministry of Magic could not focus all of its efforts on a criminal hub, especially not when the largest part of the illicit activity occurring there was being funneled into other locations. Kakos has long been an area that the Ministry was more ardent in containing, rather than cleaning. As a result, however, it has only gotten worse over the years. The illegal potion trade remains most prominent, as do all of the complications of such; murder is an ordinary thing in those parts."

"And that- that's where your brother was born?" Albus asked, feeling queasy.

"Yes. He was born there, and left in the middle of the road as an infant by our mother."

Albus stared at him, horrified. He could not find himself to feel anything resembling sympathy for Darvy, but at the same time, he could not get the image out of his head.

"But Sebastian survived," Ares said. "When I first learned of his existence, it occurred by chance; an errant comment sent me searching for the brother that I'd never known that I had. I searched for quite a while, though I hid my efforts even from your father-it was too personal a task. I had only a first name to go by, but I found him, eventually. When I learned that he lived there, my heart sank; I had expected a kindred spirit, traumatized by the world around him. I found something quite different.

"I can still remember when I first knocked at his door; he saw that I was dressed in my Auror robes, and nearly attacked me. He was a paranoid man, and with good reason. As I later learned, Sebastian had survived for so long only because of what he'd been forced to become. Whereas other children might have died in his circumstances, he managed to flourish. He came to trust me, when I revealed our relation, and he told me of how he'd risen to status in the Toxic Quarry. It began with his potionry. He'd been taken in as a child, not as I had been, to a stable family, but as all but a child slave. Tended to as an infant and later coerced into the demented deeds of the town, Sebastian grew in a criminal world, and he learned his trade well. From family to family he jumped, serving heathen here and there, but in the end, he capitalized on his opportunities. He established his own presence, having learned the art of poisoning well. He rose to prominence, and at the time I found him, as a young man, he was the most prolific proprietor of illegal potions in the entire Quarry, and yet, he was displeased with his position."

"But why?" Albus asked. "That's all he'd ever known right, if that entire place is full of murder and whatnot, then being the king of it all-"

"It required anonymity," Ares told him. "This was the point that he insisted upon most. Sebastian was secure, yes, lived well, yes, but he had to hide to do so. Those at the top of such a world are most at risk for being overthrown. Sebastian poisoned his way to the top, brewed and distributed all sorts of horrors to get there, but his work could not be revered, not without exposing himself. Sebastian craves a name, a real name. Like me, he's only ever had one. Just as I took the surname of my adopted parents, he too was forced to take one; 'Darvy' is the street on which he grew up. The street on which he was abandoned."

Albus could say nothing to this; all that he could register in his head was that this place-the Toxic Quarry, as it was apparently known colloquially-seemed dangerous, and likewise, advantageous for someone of Darvy's sort. Could this be where he was hiding?

Albus voiced this thought the first chance that he could. "Could Darvy have returned to there?" he asked. "Would he- would he want to go back to that place?"

"Sebastian was pleased to leave it," Ares admitted. "It took little convincing. I promised him that as his brother I would do everything in my power to give him the life that that he should have had. I told him of my plans, plans that were still developing at that time, but existed in the abstract sense, and I promised him more than anything else that in the new world that I would create, all would know his name, and he would not have to hide it."

"But didn't you see?" Albus asked, trying to piece the scene together in his head. "Didn't you see what he was, knew what he was capable of?"

"I did," Ares said. "But I ignored it. I was desperate for companionship; Sebastian was the only family that I had. I convinced myself that if I could only keep him away from the lifestyle that he'd become desensitized too, that he would change, begin to see things as I did; but alas, this was not the case. Too late I realized that his tendencies were not as malleable as I'd first assumed. For years I believed that it had been fate to find my younger brother, but I see now that it had been fate to avoid him; and my insistence to alter this course has proven to be my greatest error. As I soon learned, his years in the Toxic Quarry had damaged his priorities permanently. The only pleasures that Sebastian had ever had in his life had been in taking lives and crafting false identities. The former was difficult for me to manage, but I confess that the latter, at the time, had its advantages. It was how I managed to portray him as a Hogwarts professor, after all."

Albus cringed at this, though he said nothing. He still had the Toxic Quarry swimming in his head, though he had no idea what it looked like. But still, it was something of note...

"I implore you to think of more than just reaching my brother," Ares said, as though he knew what Albus was thinking- though he was certain that the remnant of Red War could not be using Legilimancy. "You must consider what he is."

"He's insane," Albus responded immediately. "He's what I'm going to end up being, I suppose," he added, surprised that he could even joke of such a thing; in a way though, it helped to comfort him from what had still not fully sunk in.

"Perhaps," Ares said. "But he is capable. Sebastian has seen and experienced a great deal, more than most realize. He lacks the raw, innate ability of more capable wizards and witches, yes, and he was never an intellectual, never concerned with arcane knowledge or understanding the complexities of magic. But he is cunning, as I learned too late. He is capable in many areas, and is very dangerous, whatever his state of mind."

"I know," Albus said, no longer trying to entertain himself. "I know, really, I do, I've seen him-"

"If you want to find him," Ares interjected, "then it may serve you more to know what he wants to achieve, rather than what he wants to be. Your father has undoubtedly told you that Sebastian has no goals other than pure destruction; if you've had discourse with that fool Warren Waddlesworth, he has most likely promoted this idea as well. But they are not aware of the tribulations of Sebastian's youth, they do not understand just what it is he truly wants, has always wanted. Sebastian wants his name to be known; he wants respect. He wants what I promised him, which is a world in which he would be admired. The only success he's ever had in his life has been as a criminal, as one who is respected, but feared. At the larger scale, he will want to merge these components together. Sebastian does not want to destroy the world-he needs it. He needs people to both fear and admire him, he wants a position of power that will allow him influence, but security. If you truly mean to stop him, you must consider these things."

Albus nodded. What Ares was telling him, he realized, was no different than what Fairhart had once told him, about tracking. He needed to learn how to follow footprints, and Darvy's past was the key to finding him, not just in his location, but in his identity. The already short timetable that he'd drawn for himself had shrunk astronomically upon learning of what the Dragonfang Wand was going to do to him, but at least now, he realized, the prospect of an end game was near. He could find Darvy; could end this, before he himself was ended.

Albus looked over at Wilde, who was rubbing at his arm, looking nervous. He seemed to sense that the conversation had drawn to a close, and was no doubt curious as to what was to become of him now. But Albus had something else to do first.

"Thank you," he said to the faint image of Ares. "For...for everything."

Ares looked down upon him, his face returned to the state in which it had first arrived, as one of indifference. He gave a curt nod, but Albus, realizing once more that he would not get to ask this question at any other point, added something else; added a question that had become much more important than ever before, given that he now needed to be more prepared than he'd ever been to experience such a thing for himself.

"What's it like?" he asked. "Where- where you are?"

Ares blinked his ghastly eyes, apparently unsure of how to describe it. After a moment, though, he stated in a slow tone, "It is...different. It is everything that I had expected...and yet nothing that I had imagined."

Albus nodded; this message gave him nothing, truly, and yet, he was comforted by it. "Well I'm sorry for disturbing you," he said, and he approached the Foulest Book. He removed Ares' wand from the crease, without thinking, and the image flickered for a moment. "I'll let you go now. This was the only time," he added. "I promise."

Ares gave another nod, and Albus, now standing directly beneath the light blue shadow, seized the book and prepared to close it. Before he did so, however, he looked up at what had become a towering figure, just in time to hear Ares say something of his own. And he said it, Albus noticed, with a hint of pleading in his voice-the same tone that he himself had used previously.

"I changed this world, Albus Potter. Now I need you to change it back."

It was Albus' turn to nod, the most firm one that he could muster, and when he saw that Ares had seen it, he took the time to gently close the Book over. Slowly, Ares started to fade...and then he was gone, leaving Albus only with Fango Wilde, and the strangest assortment of thoughts that he'd ever had.

Chapter 10: The Dark Defectors

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An odd stillness seemed to have washed over the room as the Foulest Book had been closed, and yet, Albus saw everything as though it were spinning. The ruined establishment in which he now stood suddenly seemed uncannily small, and cramped, and the silence thick, making it difficult for him to breathe. It was all that he could do to concentrate on the thickly bound text directly in front of him, words and images flowing freely within his head.

I'm going insane, he told himself, summarizing all of Ares' warnings into a single, complete statement. Another one followed. *But I need to stop Darvy first.*

How many times he said these things over again in his head he wasn't sure, but it was often enough that nearly everything else was pushed from his mind. Indeed, it was not until Fango Wilde turned to him that Albus even registered that he was still there.

Wilde was looking grim. His mouth was sagging somewhat, as though frozen on the first word that he meant to utter, but moreover, there was a glimmer of pity in his eyes that Albus wanted nothing to do with. Nevertheless, he listened when Wilde spoke.

"I- I knew," he admitted. "I knew that you were...I mean, I- I saw you. On the Island. I saw what you could do, saw what you did to the prison. Reginald had told me before about that kind of power...but I didn't- I didn't know- I didn't know that-"

"It doesn't matter," Albus said blandly, unwilling to hear Wilde further add to his misery, by repeating what Albus was already telling himself. "None of that matters."

It was true; there was so little that mattered now, truly. His world seemed to have shrunk a thousand times since his exchange with Ares, and though he knew that it still hadn't fully sunk in, knew that at some point he was going to need to scream out loud, or to cry, or to just stare off for a bit longer, he also knew that there were still things to be done here. He dug into his robes accordingly.

"What are you going to do now?" Wilde asked.

"Never you mind," Albus replied, and he saw Wilde recoil as he withdrew one of the three small vials from his robes.

"What is that!?" Wilde gasped. "Is that a potion-?"

"It's not for you," Albus said bluntly. "It's not for anyone. It's for this," he added, gesturing towards the Foulest Book. He made to uncork the vial, but strangely, Wilde had made a sudden

movement, as though to block the Book from sight.

"Wait!" he cried.

Albus stared at him.

"You- you can't," Wilde went on, sounding as desperate as he had previously.

Albus uncorked the vial, and then held it up, examining the clear, water-like solution closely.

"Yes, I can."

"I can't let you destroy it!" Wilde shouted, and Albus was actually mildly impressed at how quickly he'd caught on. Still, he didn't have time for this. He didn't have much time for *anything*, he realized.

"Get out of my way," he shot, teeth gritted.

"Please, I just want to use it- just once- and then-"

But he fell silent at the look on Albus' face. "I'm destroying the Book," he said, slowly. "I'm doing it *now*. You said you saw what I did to Azkaban? If you don't move in two seconds, I'm going to do that to *you*."

Wilde swallowed. He stepped aside, but a pleading look remained on his battered face.

"Please," he said. "You wanted to use the Book, you did. I helped you use it! All I'm asking for is-"

"I already told you," Albus said crisply, "and you've already seen-you need a spirit object to speak to someone. If you don't have that, I'm not going to wait around for you to find one. You need to let this go," he finished, and for some reason, he now felt as though he was speaking to someone that he was much more friendly with.

Wilde seemed to catch on to that last sentence, and yet still, a tortured expression played on his face. "I- I just wanted to apologize-"

"You just told me," Albus continued, "that all you've done is made bad decisions. Keeping this Book around is one of those. Let go of whatever happened," Albus told him. "Stop trying to fix things. Now is your chance to do the *right* thing. All you have to do is step aside."

He didn't know why he was negotiating; perhaps he was simply unwilling to use the energy required to eliminate Wilde's presence by force. And yet, he could not help but feel as though the words he was saying now were almost cathartic; it was a very strange thing, but he found himself comforted by his own words.

It seemed to comfort Wilde too. Slowly, he backed away, nodding. Albus stepped forward at once, gripping the vial of *Mortem Necavero* tightly and holding it over the Book. He still had no

way of knowing if this would work-if his concoction would have the efficacy that he needed it to have-but there was nothing that he could do now to bolster his chances. He spared a single glance at Fango Wilde, who was looking stoic, and tipped the vial over, spilling its clear contents directly on to the Book's cover.

The effect was instantaneous. There was a glow, but unlike the cool blue that signified the Book's activation, this light was a searing orange, a reddish shade that brought with it a spine-tingling sound of sizzling and snapping, as though the Book were being cooked. Albus half expected steam to rise from it, but instead, the Book began to twist itself violently, and he jumped back in surprise, as did Wilde, both of them watching as the Foulest Book danced in agony.

It flung itself off of the table, still glowing, apparently weightless as it bounced around on the dirt floor, convulsing irritably. Albus noticed that it was starting to get smaller though, and a moment later he realized why; it was disintegrating.

For another full minute he watched the Book reduce itself to ashes, crumbling and caving inward, manifesting itself into ghastly flakes, the intense reduction accelerating as it shrunk. The orange glow transitioned to one of blinding light, and yet, Albus felt no heat emanate from it. Then, the Foulest Book was gone, replaced by particles of dust, which drifted off throughout the darkened, musty room as though they'd belonged there all along.

The eerie spectacle finished, Albus permitted himself a grin of satisfaction. Whatever happened next, however much or little was accomplished, he'd destroyed the Foulest Book; had done as Fairhart had instructed.

The mere thought of his friend and mentor made him glance up at Wilde once more, who was standing aback, considerably further away from where the smoldering Book had been than Albus was. His face bore a strange mixture of emotions; Albus saw dismay etched into his dull eyes, and yet, his lips had curled themselves into the soft shape of relief. When he noticed that he was being observed, he hardened his appearance.

"Well," he said, "that- that's done, then."

Albus nodded, though he fidgeted around inside of his robes as he did so, needlessly ensuring that the other vials were all intact. He made to speak-he wasn't quite what he was going to say-but Wilde had already spoken again.

"So what happens next?"

Albus heaved a sigh. "Well," he said, "I stop Darvy, same plan really-"

"What happens with *me*?" Wilde stressed, looking fearful. It appeared as though he'd realized, upon witnessing the Book's destruction, just how truly obsolete he was.

And yet, Albus didn't quite know how to answer him. His plans, always loose and subject to

change, had never settled themselves on a resolution for this particular matter. All day, since recovering Fango Wilde, the thought of what to do with him after his venture with the Foulest Book was slinking around the corners of his deteriorating mind. And even the deed now done, he was finding it hard to consider. He was just contemplating what his father would do in such a situation, when the thought struck him; it wasn't even his choice.

"Whatever you want," Albus told him. "Just go."

Wilde raised his eyebrows, suddenly wary. "Just like that?" he asked. "Just- just go-"

Albus tossed his arms up into a quizzical shape. "What else?" he said. "You took me to the Book, you helped me use it, now it's gone. I've got other things to do," he added lamely, though his heart sank slightly at the thought of completing these tasks.

Wilde stared off into one of the shadowy corners of the room, his face barely visible; it was completely dark outside now; they were well into the night. "I could go with you," he suggested. "Help you, in stopping-"

"Could you take me to this 'Toxic Quarry' place?" Albus asked, weighing his options; he'd already determined the town of Kakos to be his next destination, as it was the only lead on Darvy he'd managed to procure.

But Wilde shook his head. "I've never been there," he said. "But still, I could stay with you for a while-"

"You really have nowhere else to go, do you?" Albus interrupted, the thought occurring to him in an instant, and Wilde frowned.

"Nowhere that wants me," he admitted.

Albus scratched at the back of his neck, not willing to spend any more time on making this decision than he needed to. On one end, there was no denying that Wilde had been invaluable today. In many ways, he'd directly made up for many of the occurrences in the last few years...but not all of them.

"No," Albus said firmly. "No...I'm fine on my own."

"But-"

"Go," Albus told him. "I'm not trying to be rude; really. But I don't want you. Too much...there's too much associated with you. Just go somewhere, anywhere but here. Leave the country. Don't come back. Start a new life," he went on, not even sure why he felt obligated to add such encouragement, "leave here with a blank slate. I'm giving you an opportunity here," he added darkly.

"Why?" asked Wilde, sounding suspicious.

"Why not?" Albus answered him. "What else is there to do? I don't want you around."

Wilde said nothing, instead tilting his head to the side, as though weighing his next words carefully. "I thought you would just kill me," he finally revealed.

Albus looked away from him, unwilling to provide an immediate response. He had toyed with the thought, truly, but then again, he wasn't even sure if it had actually been *him* thinking it. The voices in his head were becoming increasingly similar...

"Why would you think that?" he asked, trying to side-step the conflict that had been brewing within him.

"Because that's what San would have done," Wilde answered him simply.

Albus exhaled. "Well I'm not San," he admitted, though whether this was to Wilde or to himself, even he wasn't sure. Whatever the case, Wilde nodded as though this in itself was an adequate answer.

"Very well, then," he said. "I- I will go."

The words spilled out of his mouth with a strange amusement to them, as though he'd forgotten what it was like to leave of his own accord. Albus did not let him leave just yet though; instead he strode over to him, extending Ares' wand as he did so.

"Here," he said. "Ares wanted you to have this; take it."

Wilde looked down at it, a look of contemplation on his face. "No," he said after a moment. "You keep it. With what you aim to do, a second wand never goes amiss-"

"It doesn't matter," Albus insisted, "it was given to you, and you need to Apparate out of here-"

"I can Apparate without a wand; I got us here without one, didn't I?" Wilde said. "Apparition is one of the few things I excel at. And I know that it was given to me," he continued, "and now I am giving it to you."

Albus stared at him for a moment, his green eyes meeting the dull brown circles that were Fango Wilde's, and the look of assuredness in them made him pocket Ares' wand with confidence. And then, a thought came to him.

"Wait- here," he said quickly, rifling through his own pockets. Wilde made a face of amusement, though it quickly turned to one of utter surprise.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, taking the old photograph that Albus had offered him.

"Fairhart's old place," Albus told him bluntly. "Recognize it?"

Wilde continued to peer at it up close, a shadowy grin of nostalgia curling on his face, and yet, he still shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't even remember when this was taken-where this was..."

"Well I figured you might want it," Albus told him, knowing that he wouldn't be needing it, as he'd once thought. "Maybe as a reminder or something. Of a time when no one wanted you dead."

"Don't be so sure," Wilde retorted, grinning, and Albus-somehow-managed a harsh laugh.

"Thank you," Wilde then said, tucking it away and out of sight. Albus said nothing, only nodding, and only a moment later, Wilde went for the empty doorway, though he stopped briefly before crossing through it.

"I'm rooting for you," he said, and Albus gave another nod, this one in gratitude. And then, he exited through the open frame, out of sight completely a second later.

Albus did not watch him go, instead standing motionless as Wilde's soft footsteps lessened in volume every moment. When they were gone completely, he flung himself up against the wall, allowing the day's events to crash down on him privately.

How he managed to contain himself in Wilde's presence he wasn't sure, but with only charred wood around him, he now allowed himself a soft whimper. Thoughts and memories were colliding in his head, creating residual rifts of loose and illogical ideas. His life, he now knew, was coming to an end.

But it was not the end that he'd anticipated; he was not staring a wand in the face, as he had so many times before. He was not amidst a sea of Killing Curses, as he'd been just earlier in the day, was not inches from slipping off of a broom in mid-air. This was an end somehow even *more* frightening, because he knew that it was not *truly* the end, not for all of him. Soon he would be gone, but what's more, he would be replaced.

Soon...it will become impossible to separate your dreams from reality.

Of all that Ares had said, these words here were the most profound, the most horrifying. It was his worst fear being realized, a fear that had even briefly materialized itself months ago, on the Island of Azkaban, when he'd faced down a stray Boggart. The golden-eyed fiend of his nightmares was slowly obliterating his sense of self, destroying him from the inside, only to crawl into the shell that was his body and assume his identity, to wear the mask of what Albus had been.

Tears were falling freely again, and though he knew that they served no purpose-knew that crying couldn't help him, wouldn't accomplish anything, and was actually postponing what had to be done next-he couldn't help it. The only satisfaction that he clung to, aside from his recent success at destroying the Book, was the knowledge that his instincts had proven correct. He'd left his friends and family behind, all of them, fearful that there would be a time when he couldn't control himself around them. He had no memories of what he'd done to the massive structure

that had once been Azkaban, knew nothing of how he'd done it, and yet, he could remember the *feeling* of it, the sense of incredible power, of disregard for life, the complete and utter lack of control that had accompanied it. He had wanted to pry that possibility away from his family, from his father and sister and brother, from Morrison and Scorpius, from Mirra, from so many people...and he had done it. With little time to spare it seemed, too.

How long would it be now before the Albus that sat here, in this ruin of a room, was gone? Ares had said that hallucinations would start next. What was he to do, when that happened?

The thoughts of the inevitable plagued him, but the second portion of Ares' words were now etched into his memory. There was a lead on Darvy. Nothing definite, but something-something that no one else had, not even his father most likely. He needed to get to this 'Toxic Quarry' place, to the apparent capital of corruption in the wizarding world, to the place where Darvy might be waiting for him. If he could only find that maniac, he could kill him, stop him dead in his tracks, and prevent the reconstruction of his army and the second wave of discord that he meant to spread over the world.

He could do more than that, too. He ran his fingers across the remaining two vials in his cloak; the dollops of potion that he now knew were effective. Fairhart had wanted all three of Darvy's items destroyed. Darvy definitely had the Wand, and the Veil was likely near him as well. Albus wasn't sure if the mixture in these vials would be as effective against such objects, but he could not forego trying. Frantically, he found himself clinging to the idea that destroying the Wand in particular could somehow improve his condition. Ares had said that merely eliminating the Wand physically would be insufficient for negating the effect that it had on him, but there was always the chance, however slim, that in this single regard his former headmaster was ignorant...

Whatever the case, he knew that he could not give up here. He could not-would not-spend the little amount of sanity he had left groveling at his misfortune. Perhaps if he was an earlier Albus, one who, much like the man he'd just spared, was too obsessed with correcting mistakes to seek practical solutions. But that was not as he was here, his resilience and skill sharpened by his time with Fairhart. Perhaps it turned out that his mind had next to no time left; perhaps by this time tomorrow, he would be a sadistic monster, eyes glowing gold and a savage grin glued to his face. But what he did between now and then was his choice, and he'd be damned if he was not going to capitalize on the fact that he could still, at present, make choices in what he did.

This mere thought ushered in a different memory, a different voice, one much different from Ares' cold tone, and further away in time as well. *The choices that we make Albus, during these moments, which tell us who we are, and who we want to be.*

It was his father's words. He'd said them years ago, during that time when they'd all thought Fairhart to be dead. Albus had batted them away then, but now, they were the only crutch that he had left. He smiled at the thought of his father, who somehow, from miles away-from years away, truly-was still managing to inspire him. He permitted himself a lone, errant thought of Mirra, whom he realized he would most certainly never get to see again, and then rose to his feet, tears dried and hands no longer shaking.

He could not revel in his victory over the Foulest Book, not when such a victory now seemed so meager in comparison to what was still left to be done. He had places to go, and things to do, and first and foremost among them was leaving this despoiled heap of wood and metal, the ransacked, lifeless area once known as Struckton. Wilde had Apparated him in here, but he was gone now; Albus would thus have to retrace those steps, find the Apparition point on his own, and then make his way to a place that would ease his search for Kakos.

No sooner had he stood up to saunter his way through the doorless entrance did he press himself against the same wall he'd just sat slumped, an eerily loud noise having sent him into a frenzy. Albus perked his ears up, pocketing Ares' wand and gripping his own, trying to register what he'd heard. Something was moving, and it seemed to be moving just outside of the abandoned building in which he stood.

"-telling you, two of them," came a lewd, crispy voice, muffled slightly.

"Not doubting that you saw something move," came another, more calm voice. "Just saying it likely wasn't people. Tons of rats around here-"

"It wasn't rats!"

"Keep it down then!"

Albus swallowed, beads of sweat now trickling down from his eyebrows, his hands already shaking once more. This was not from fear, however, but from anticipation. There was a very good chance that whoever was outside was going to creep in at any moment-

But they didn't. Albus heard a pair of footsteps mosey by him, the scuttling at first deafening due to the acuity of his ears, but petering out slightly seconds later, until it was gone completely. It wasn't until the silence returned that Albus allowed what he'd heard to register.

We were seen. One of those men had mentioned stumbling upon two people; it seemed as though he and Wilde, at some point earlier in the night, had been spotted. Albus wasn't sure by whom exactly, but Wilde *had* insisted that this was a popular spot for Dark Defectors, and Albus thus was not going to take the chance of making himself known. Randomly, he wondered if Wilde had already managed to leave the town, but he found himself unable to be overly concerned with the man's safety; Albus had offered him a chance at a new life-what happened now was entirely up to him.

Still, the knowledge that he was not alone in Struckton changed the outline of his plans immediately. Already he had ascertained that whoever had spotted him previously had gone to fetch reinforcements; there was probably a skeptical search party about as he stood here. He seriously contemplated waiting it out; he was not, he realized, equipped for a contest with any more than one wizard or witch. Confident though he was in his abilities, he had seen and participated in a great deal today, all the way from rescuing Wilde to letting him go. He was tired, and there were pangs in his stomach as well. This proved to be in itself an obstacle however; if he slept, he felt as though he would only be weaker in the morning.

We need to get out of here, he thought, but then a crippling thought overtook him. Wilde was gone. Why was he still thinking in the plural?

The answer fell upon him swiftly, and, sickened at the truth of it, he began to walk forward, almost as if to distance himself from the thought that had just crossed him. He exited the building, poking his head out first into the piercing darkness, turning it both ways before emerging entirely.

Struckton looked, somehow, radically different in the moonlight. The orange glow was gone completely, and despite the warm season, there was a biting chill to the outside now that he was not prepared for. Albus found himself shivering slightly as he adjusted to it, but all the same he kept quiet as he tiptoed along the first path that he saw, trying to remember which direction he'd heard the voices move. Deciding it was best to follow after them, he strayed his body to the left, ambling down the tattered dirt path marred with debris.

He crept along as silently as possible, keeping to corners and dense patches of shadow, hiding himself from view just as he had hours and hours ago, when leading Wilde through Mottley. Though he'd already resigned himself to not stop and rest, he was now met with a much more immediate dilemma; was his best bet to find these Defectors, and possibly size them up, or to flee the town as a whole?

He pondered this for a few minutes as he walked, though as he turned a corner he found himself leaning towards the former. Already, he'd spotted a gaggle of them.

He had no idea if it was the same two that he'd overheard earlier, but if it was, they'd met with a third. The three of them were walking away from him with their wands out, beams of light bouncing off of the worn down buildings, apparently no speaking between them. Realizing that he was outnumbered, Albus practically flew to the next corner over, though just as he did so, another man emerged from the corner as well, colliding with him.

Albus opened his eyes in shock, locking vision with him; he was a scrawny thing, shorter by a few inches and with an angular face. His face was incredibly dirty, made all the more apparent by the fact that he was opening his mouth, preparing to yell-

Albus slashed his wand through the air, silencing him without speaking. Using what little physical advantage he had, he then grabbed the boy that he now realized was someone James' age by the throat, pushing him up forcefully against the wall and holding him in place while he scavenged his pockets.

His victim made to struggle, foolishly prying at Albus' fingers when he should have been reaching for his wand-a wand that Albus now possessed. He slashed his own through the air next, sending the boy to the ground in a flash of red, then turned around, checking make sure that no one had been alerted.

Struckton remained as quiet as ever, and Albus took this time to gaze down at the young man and survey him properly. He was wearing the same dark robes that Albus had also seen the

Dark Alliance adorned in, though he didn't bear a red mask-consistent with the idea that he was a defector from the group. He crouched and rummaged through the boy's pockets further, though found nothing. He was just about to rise and pocket his newly acquired wand when he felt something poke into the back of his head.

"Don't move," came a low, sinister voice.

Albus froze, suddenly aware of the movement around him. He felt as the boy's wand was gently taken from his fingers, then his own by much rougher hands; there were multiple assailants.

"Check him," came a different voice, and now it was Albus who was being spun around.

Judging by their varied sizes, it was the same three that he'd just seen walking; evidently they'd been making rounds, rather than pressing on through the town. He now saw that one of them-the smallest-was a witch, with dark eyes and short hair cropped to her ears. The other two were both men, and that included the tall, leering figure that had his wand aimed, the one who had spoken. None of them were wearing masks.

The third, a more stout, wheezing one, immediately set himself to his own furious rummaging, as did the witch. At once the latter had ripped Ares' wand from within his robes.

"He's got another one on him!" she hissed.

"Collecting wands, are we?" said the apparent leader.

"And something else," said the shorter one, and Albus felt his heart sink as the vials of clear potion were pulled away from him.

The tallest among them lowered his wand only slightly, to receive the vials. His hand large enough to hold both, he held them up closely to his eyes.

"And what's this we have here?" he inquired.

"J-just water," Albus lied, though he detected the error in his fib only seconds after saying it. The tall man had given a shrug of unconcern, then thrown the bottles a few feet away with unnecessary force.

"No!" Albus bellowed into the night, but it was for naught; the two remaining vials shattered there on the spot. Albus watched, torn between hatred and sadness, as the clear liquid settled on the dusty ground; he half expected it to do something spectacular, like lunge at his foes or reassemble their containers, but it seemed as though *Mortem Necavero* was just a regular liquid when not in the presence of its intended targets. Albus could only watch in frustration as it dissolved out of sight.

He went to throw an angry glare at the man who'd done it, but found himself somewhat preoccupied; the witch among them had brandished her own wand, and at once Albus' hands

were bound together with thick ropes. He struggled foolishly, not sure what else to do, but then there was a flash of light, and the next thing that he knew, the world had reversed on him.

He was dangling upside down, he realized, and from only one leg. Flailing about, he meant to launch into a tirade, but the next thing he knew his mouth had been magicked shut. They had not silenced him, but instead cursed his lips to merge together.

They all laughed at what was surely a pitiful sight, though it was hard for Albus to determine such a thing with accuracy; observing things at night while upside down, he realized, was quite debilitating. Randomly, he wondered how bats did it.

The very uncomfortable position, coupled with their laughter, made him quite nauseous. Albus jammed his eyes shut in response to this, mentally kicking himself for having ended up in such an absurd position, but nearly opened them up when the deepest voice among his captors started to speak.

"Wait a minute...this is Harry Potter's son!"

Albus gave a groan of agitation, though he realized that this was a mistake; it seemed to have confirmed his identity.

"Blimey, that he is!" wheezed the other masculine voice.

"What's he doing in Struckton?" came the witch's voice. "Awful far from his daddy, isn't he?"

"I'm not interested in finding out, to be honest" came the deepest voice again.

"Ooohh...what are we're going to with him, Grayson?" piped up the smallest, his tone clearly sycophantic.

"Nothing right now," he was responded to. "Let's take him back, have a vote on things. This is definitely interesting."

There was a whining noise, but regardless, Albus felt his floating body begin to move. He opened his eyes again, breathing heavily, and saw that he was now actually swinging along in the air like a pendulum, his three captors taking their time in leading him through the darkness.

He felt his head bump against something blunt-possibly a blown off portion of a house-and realized that he was quite fortunate indeed that they'd sewn his mouth shut. The curses that he'd be uttering if he could would certainly only worsen his predicament, though interestingly, the vitriol running through his head was less for those making a fool of him and more for the fool that was himself.

He'd somehow gotten himself captured *again*, and this time, he knew, things were markedly worse. As evidenced by his current position ten feet in the air, what were undoubtedly Dark Defectors were considerably more dangerous than the Protectors of a week or so ago. Those

men and women had been irate citizens, a ragtag band of artisans that were so unfamiliar with how to take a hostage that they'd been blasting one another with spells within an hour of taking him. These people here, however, were on a different level of danger. They were taking no chances, and Albus knew that all three of them were killers, had killed possibly multiple times, and were now taking him to even *more* killers.

This thought unnerved him greatly, and yet, it was the shattered vials of a few moments ago that pained him most. Hadn't he just considered that potion to be his last hope, only a few minutes before he'd bumped into that scrawny wizard?

With yet another jolt, he realized that his kidnappers had left their accomplice behind, unconscious and without a wand. This disregard for the well-being of someone that they were friendly with suddenly refocused Albus on the danger he was in. He couldn't pine for a way to destroy the Wand and Veil now; not when it was looking very much like he'd never get the chance anyway.

It was in silence that he swung back and forth behind them, his captors apparently still vigilant for more signs of trouble. Despite a feeling of surging faintness, no doubt from blood rushing to his head, Albus tried to capitalize on the lack of activity, scouring his short term memory for ideas on who was armed with what.

All three of the Defectors leading him, he knew, had wands of their own, but the shortest, obnoxious little fellow had been the one to take his wand from him. The witch had snatched the boy's wand from his fingers, which he didn't care for, but had taken his spare as well; she now had Ares' wand as well as her own.

Despite his sincere concentration on the matter at hand, Albus couldn't help but have his attention caught by an unusual burst of movement in his peripherals. For less than a second, he thought that a shape had moved alongside him, albeit behind a house and concealed in darkness. It had been very rapid-as though twice as fast as usual movement-and excitement exploded inside of him at the thought of help. Fango Wilde, he realized, must have stayed behind after all, and with any luck, he'd be making his move soon-

But it never happened. For five more minutes Albus kept his eyes peeled at the same angle, though all that this did was dig into valuable time that could have been spent planning the escape that he would have to orchestrate himself. *Probably a hallucination*, he thought bitterly.

He had no time to sulk, though, for the escape plan that was in its infancy would need to become more developed soon. Already he could feel the swaying start to slow. And then, there was speaking.

"What do we got here?" came a voice more elderly than those who'd captured him. Albus looked ahead-though still upside down-and realized that they'd come to a halt, having reached their destination. He looked around sourly and saw that the Defectors ran much deeper than he'd assumed; there were at least thirty of them.

"Oh, nothing special," said the witch who'd brought him along. "Just Harry Potter's son."

"Bollocks!" someone shouted, and there was additional murmuring all around him.

"See for yourself," said the wheezing wizard, and Albus felt as though he was an article of clothing being ripped from a hanger. The jerking motion sent him straight to the ground in a heap, his body barely having time to position itself in a way that lessened the blow.

Now only on his side, he was able to better register his surroundings. The thirty something Defectors around him were all identical in the robes that they wore, and again, all of them maskless. They varied greatly in personal appearance however, especially age, and interestingly enough, in poise too. They were in a clearing of sorts, a circle that may have once been a public area where children would play; the destroyed homes around them not connected but rather forming a trapezoid to condense them. Some of the Defectors were standing upright, looking flustered. Others had a more composed look, sitting or leaning, and Albus noticed that it was these among them who were more likely to be elderly, as though they'd been through it all before.

He couldn't see much else after this, however, for a hulking shape had moved in front of him.

"Hmpf, well look at that," he said. "It *is* Potter's boy."

"Which one?" asked another witch. "He's got two, doesn't he?"

"The younger," the large figure obscuring his view said. "I recognize him from the prison."

Albus tried to figure out when this might have been, then realized with an inkling of satisfaction that the man in front of him had probably been bloodied by Fairhart as they'd fought through the interior of Azkaban-or possibly even by himself. Already, though, there were more whispers in the night.

"Well what's he doing here, then?" came a thick accent that Albus couldn't quite pinpoint, though it was definitely masculine.

"We've got no idea," came the leering voice of Grayson, the only Defector that Albus was now able to identify by name. "But whatever it is, I doubt his father knows about it."

"I doubt anyone knows about it!" came another voice, this one a squeal from behind him. "And best we keep it that way isn't it? Just kill him."

Albus felt his heartbeat quicken, though surprisingly, there were noises of dissent at this suggestion.

"Absolutely not!" cried a witch who Albus could see was bouncing on the balls of her feet. She had a young face, but a seasoned look to her nonetheless. Albus felt something akin to gratitude at her vehemence, though the logical reason for her reluctance which followed

dampened that somewhat. "The boy is much too valuable! *This* is the bargaining chip that we've been waiting for!"

There were murmurs of agreement at this, and Albus, still unable to speak and now inhaling dirt at an alarming rate, tried to move over a few inches, to lessen the pain on his shoulder. A man whom he hadn't even realized was near him noticed, however, and gave him a swift kick in the face.

"Don't you move!" he spat, and Albus felt blood flood his mouth. Unable to spit it out, he was forced to swallow it, a sickening act that made him stare up at the man hatefully. He had bushy eyes and a large, hooked nose.

"I'll take out your eyes, boy," he threatened lowly, and Albus stared back defiantly, suddenly wishing that the moment that Ares had prophesied would come to fruition now. He knew that it was a stupid, immature thought, but if the Albus of his nightmares was going to take over permanently, he realized, there were few better times than this one here. He knew that he wouldn't be able to comprehend the carnage that would be unleashed, knew that he wouldn't even technically exist for it, but he could imagine the scene occurring here and now, in a variety of grisly scenarios, and in each of them, the malicious man in front baring down on him was the first to combust into millions of pieces.

"Let's not be too hasty," came another voice from the corner. "I agree with Sarah, we need to work out a buyer and a proper price, before we do anything else."

"I say we give him over to the Hand," said the girl known as Sarah, who'd first suggested keeping him alive.

Albus allowed this statement to tear his eyes away from the man looking down at him, mulling over it. That was not, he realized, the worst possible scenario. He was looking for Darvy after all, though he'd have to do some maneuvering to make the meeting more on his terms...

"Agreed," said a dark man on Albus' left. "We need to clear things with the Hand; save grace after leaving. Make it clear we're not against him, just not trying to serve, he'll understand"

The man next to him laughed; a sentiment that Albus himself shared. "The Hand is insane, twice as crazy as any two men I've met combined. We'd better be *real* sure that the boy is on the top of his priority list, before we go trying to make peace with him"

"Aye, that *would* be the best bet, wouldn't it?" said a man behind this one. "We know the Hand wants the boy. Wants him dead too, don't he? We could arrange that..."

"And how would we send him over?" asked Grayson. "Nobody knows where the Hand is. And I don't fancy having negotiations through the Dark Alliance..."

There was more smatter of agreement at this, and Albus realized just how truly unique of a position he was in here. The Dark Defectors, it seemed, had needed to form a democracy to

survive; perhaps the only group he'd encountered so far operating under such circumstances. There was no one powerful wizard among them, nor a charismatic manipulator or even a band of handsome justice-driven brothers. His fate, it seemed, would end up the result of a vote; given the reputation of the constituents, though, he wasn't overly encouraged by this prospect.

"Give him over to his father," said another voice, and this easily garnered the most communication so far. Albus found himself practically nodding along, however, he realized that this was actually a more polarizing option than he'd first thought. Going back to his father would spare him in the short run, but it would not save him from his eventual fate, and more importantly, raised the likelihood of him endangering his loved ones...

He had little time to mull over it, though, as it seemed as though this suggestion was going to be shot down quite quickly.

"Absolutely not," said a scrawny, elderly man in the corner, with a sagging face and a black mustache. "I spent twenty-five years in Azkaban because of Potter, I'll kill his son before I do him a favor-

"Oh save it, Walden," snapped the man next to him, "you'll do nothing on your own-

"Harry Potter is by far the best choice that we have," piped up the woman with the short hair, the one who had Ares' wand. "If we're going to give him up, that has the most benefits to it. Potter is all that remains of the Ministry. He can grant us immunities that no one else can-

"Ministry!?" shot out the man who'd kicked Albus; the blow which still had blood sliding down his throat, though thankfully, less than before. "The Ministry is *done!* Waddlesworth went and ran it into the ground-

"Waddlesworth!" someone practically shouted. "We could hand him over to WAR!"

There seemed to be mostly negative noises made in regards to this, though Albus felt himself again fighting a nod. He had made deals with Waddlesworth before, could make new ones...

"No point," said Grayson. "Waddlesworth is finished, a shadow of what he was. Couldn't give us anything even if he wanted the boy. No gold, no status. Nothing worth bargaining for."

"Aye, a Sickle saying right there, I reckon it's mostly true," added someone who Albus couldn't see. "Flimsy fool just lost the will after that 'United Ministry' fiasco. And didn't ya hear? Hammer got killed too, picked off by some random Renegade gang. Waddlesworth's been a ghost since then, I heard."

Albus actually widened his eyes at shock at this statement; it was not just surprising to learn that the Hammer had been killed, but also that Waddlesworth was in such dire straits. He knew that there had been financial difficulties, and that devotion to WAR had dropped, but he'd never thought of Waddlesworth as being capable of *not* wanting attention.

"Pfft, serves the big bloke right," muttered the short man who was in possession of Albus' wand. "Broke my nose once..."

"Who hasn't?" chirped up someone next to him, and he sneered.

"I say we put the matter to rest for a moment," came another, crispy voice, and Albus' ears actually perked at this one especially, as he could've sworn he'd heard it before. A moment later, he realized from where. "There's another one out there, after all. This proves I'd seen right!"

"And what happened to the other one, then?" came the calm voice that debated the topic before, when Albus had first realized that Defectors were in the area. "How did you find him?" the same person asked, apparently aiming their question at Grayson.

"We sent Peterson off back to you lot, saw a flash of light minutes later," he answered. "Caught him from behind, there was no one else there that could have seen us coming-"

"Enough of this!" bellowed a voice that Albus had already heard, and he managed to identify it as the person behind him, the one who had initially suggested his murder. "Talking about what's best for who and how to work it out. Ain't no going back for us, boy is a dead end. Let's just kill him and have it done with."

Albus felt his breathing quicken at this declaration, but more so at the noises of consent that followed. It seemed that despite the different options at their disposal, the safest and surest bet for many of them was to stick to their violent nature. Sensing that this vote wasn't going to be overridden, Albus started to squirm, not caring that the visceral man who'd kicked him was likely to take notice. If only his mouth hadn't been sealed shut; if he could state his case, use some of that cunning that Slytherins were known for...

There was already movement towards him, and it was quick and decisive. Albus gave a yell that came out as muffle, still tasting droplets of blood on his tongue, though at the same time he moved his head about strategically, to spot where the blow would come from. If he could not use reason, he would have to fight back physically; after all that he'd resigned to do just an hour or so ago, it could not end like this, not in this way, to these people, though he knew that he had no protectors left-

There was a loud, yet distant banging noise. It came so suddenly and with such force that many around him jumped; even Albus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Immediately the Defectors looked up, and Albus, pleased for the distraction but curious as to its origins as well, stretched his neck at an angle in the same direction.

Even sideways, he managed to identify the source of the noise. Somewhere off in the distance- Albus judged it as perhaps a half of a mile away- light had pierced the sky. Streaks of green were erupting into the stars, dancing gracefully yet carrying a sense of power and purpose to them as they reached their acmes and arched, then disappeared. More, similar noises followed, as well as more jets of light, all of which Albus realized now were exploding into smaller pieces.

The only logical conclusion that Albus could make was that it was a fireworks display; and yet, given the time and place, he had an inkling that this wasn't the case.

The encroaching Defectors were all ogling it as well, though as the lights continued without any sign of impending cessation, they began conversing quickly. Albus again found himself straining his ears, mystified by the showing in the night's sky but very aware of his grim situation as well. The Defectors were speaking all at once, and with such rapidity that it was unintelligible. It wasn't until the one known as Grayson started to roar his words that that the conversing came to a close.

"ENOUGH!" he barked, looking livid, his choppy silver hair hanging over a seething face. "Nobody panic; we just divide up. You lot, come with me to find out what's going on. You here, stay with the boy-"

There were noises of protest before he could even finish, many apparently uncomfortable with their assignments.

"No, I'll go with you-"

"No way am I going over there-"

Grayson ignored them however, turning on his heel and hurrying off towards the emerald display, which was still active and somehow even louder and more vibrant than before. A sizeable group-looking very little like the one that had actually been selected-hurried off after him, scattering about through the dusty roadways and disappearing into the darkness.

Albus allowed himself only a handful of seconds to count and see who was remaining. The group had definitely diminished; there were only ten or so remaining, and the only one that he recognized now was the witch who had taken part in his capture. Interestingly, though, many of them were still looking up at the intriguing sparks, or trading worried glances-

Knowing that he was not going to get another chance, Albus leapt into action. The witch with the short hair happened to be closest to him-he rammed into her with his shoulder, catching her completely off guard and sending her crashing to the ground. Not hesitating to see what kind of attention his act had garnered, he threw himself down after her at once, using his bound hands to search her for a means of invaluable assistance-

He found Ares' wand only a second into his searching, and gave a whimper of relief as he whirled it upwards to defend himself. The others who'd stayed behind were shouting and firing hexes, but Albus, even with his hands bound together, managed to perform the circular defensive movements he'd learned under Fairhart's tutelage. Concentrating fiercely on the intricate pattern that he'd memorized, he reflected all but their green curses, cognizant to side step these; it was difficult coordination, but all of his practice from Azkaban and, indeed, earlier today, was proving to have sharpened his abilities.

He watched as an orange hex deflected itself at a downward angle, hitting a man in the knee

and forcing him to twist into the curse of whoever was next to him. Albus then managed to send a stunner to his left, where it connected with the woman who had just risen, placing her back on the ground.

His deflections were not intentionally accurate, but there was enough of them that these occurrences were coming as a consequence; just as he noticed that his opposition was dwindling, though, he decided that it was no longer in his interest to risk fighting. Stopping in the movements abruptly and charging ahead, he raced past two Defectors and elbowed a third in the face sharply, then tore into the darkness after those that had made for the green lights.

Albus could hear the party behind him begin to take chase; he found himself consciously counting their steps, trying to determine how many ahead of them he was. He was sure that they were running with maximum effort, but also quite sure that he was too, and with a much greater determination. His legs were quaking with each long stride, his face burning with heat. The toll that the day was having on his body was never more noticeable to him, and yet, he knew that he could not give in, not even consider it-

Finite, he thought to himself, staring at Ares' wand, and to his immense pleasure, the ropes around his hands disappeared, and his mouth opened. He gasped for air at once, clearing his throat of the taste of blood and rewarding his nostrils for their endurance; he'd inhaled quite a bit of dirt and dust through them. Even with his mind primarily on his legs, Albus managed to roll Ares' wand over in his hands, pleased with its performance thus far. It did not feel as comfortable to him as his own did, but it would have to suffice. He made a note to retrieve his at some point however, hoping that the annoying, small one who'd taken it decided to keep it rather than break it.

He took sharp turns whenever he could, finding himself lost but pleased with this result. The sound of his assailants had lessened and ultimately subsided within a minute or two, leaving him now to slow and catch his breath, as well as to determine just in which direction he'd been going. With little options he'd forced himself in the direction of the other Defectors, towards the green flashes in the sky, but as he looked up now, he saw that the sparks had vanished completely, along with their accompanying noises. Whoever had fired them, he realized, was surely paying for their mistake now; whatever the case though, he found himself fortunate for their interference.

Just where he was now, however, was the next question that he needed to answer. He'd made many quick decisions in his fleeing, taking as many confusing turns and squeezing through as many crevices of shattered wood that he could to successfully lose his pursuers. He felt confident that he'd left them behind, but just how close was he to the Defectors that had gone towards the fireworks?

Albus backed up slowly, staring up and trying to shift his position so that he could get a better view of the surrounding area. Again he was in a clearing of sorts, though this one was much more adorned with wreckage; the houses surrounding him had been reduced to a third of what he imagined their previous sizes to be. He continued to walk backward and increase his vision of the disarray, clutching an aching lung with his free hand as he did so, though he jolted when

he felt himself bump into something; something that also appeared to be moving.

He jumped, giving a yelp and spinning on the spot, where he saw that another figure had backed into him as well. Albus brandished Ares' wand in a fluid motion, determined to jinx first and ask questions later, but the face that met him made this nearly impossible.

"Morrison!?"

Chapter 11: The State of the World

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It was indeed his friend.

It took less than a second to fully identify him, however strange it was to process. He had it all; the height and the gangly frame, the cropped, mud colored hair, the facial expression that despite its severity managed to retain its goofiness. There was no chance that it was an imposter-none, and yet, Albus found himself unable to utter more than his name, or to even move.

But Morrison's face had lit up upon seeing him.

"Al!" he exclaimed, beaming, but almost at once the grin slid from his face, replacing itself with a look of confusion. "Are- are you wearing a Hufflepuff tie!?"

"*What!?*" was all that Albus could muster, before looking down and realizing that the tie that he'd put on earlier in the day was in fact still around his neck; strange, he hadn't seen it swaying when dangling upside down.

"A Huf-"

"It's- it's a long- there's no time to explain!" Albus finally threw out, and for a moment, he considered that this was his first true hallucination, the first occurrence of his mind slipping into the point of no return.

But then Morrison nodded in agreement, and when he reached and seized him by his sore shoulders, Albus conceded from the additional throbbing that his friend was real. Then they were running together.

"What are you doing here!?" Albus demanded, already breathing heavily as the two of them took off together, turning a corner and ducking underneath a hunk of splintered, hanging wood. "How did you know-"

"No time to explain, remember?" his friend said cheekily, several paces ahead of him; not only were his legs longer, but he looked to be in considerably better physical straits as well. "Now come on, catch up-"

Albus shook his head as he ran, still in disbelief. None of this made any sense to him, and yet, pieces of the last day were suddenly falling into place. *I'm going to send you help.* Those were the words that Scorpius' father had said to him earlier. And that meant-

"Where's Scorpius?" Albus asked, doing his best to run alongside his friend.

"Back at our camp," Morrison said absently, though he immediately screeched himself to a halt. "That reminds me!" he said, sounding slightly panicked, and then he raised his wand high into the sky. Before he could do anything, however, Albus remembered the green sparks from earlier, realizing that he now knew the culprits of the timely diversion.

Sure enough, emerald sparks had shot from Morrison's wand, high up into the starless sky, though unlike before, they were not accompanied by loud pangs.

"What are you *doing!*?" Albus hissed. "You're going to attract-"

"I'm going to bring people here," Morrison said, and he then flashed his teeth. "But we're not going to be here. That's the sign for Scorpius; you've been found. He'll know to go back to the camp."

"The camp?" Albus inquired.

Morrison stared at him. "Like a tent? And stuff? You don't kno-"

"I know what a camp is!" Albus spat, flustered. Simultaneously though, his relief at having a companion, especially one so familiar, was alleviating the tremendous emotional weight that he'd carried since using the Foulest Book.

"Okay, well then let's go!" Morrison insisted, and they resumed in their running, Albus peering up and watching as the jets of green shattered themselves into smaller pieces above.

"How far away is it?" Albus asked.

"Eh, a few minutes, just keep- watch out!"

Albus had seen it too; from around a corner, a Defector had emerged, a sneer on his bearded face and a wand pointed right at them. They continued in their motion though, Albus firing a stunner that was deflected, Morrison's follow up hex hitting him square in the chest and spinning him through the air backwards. He landed with a crash into a pile of rubble, both of them stepping over him a moment later, though Albus took care to aim Ares' wand down at him as he did so, this stunner connecting.

"Anyway, as I was saying-" Morrison made to resume, but Albus shushed him.

"Let's just get there!" he insisted.

Morrison nodded, and again they ran side by side, their cloaks whipping along behind them in the fierce wind. It was the darkest part of night now, and Albus could barely see just what it was he was stepping over and away from, but neither of them lit their wands, unwilling to tip off their location any further.

Albus still found it surreal just who he was with, but this had subsided slightly in favor of fear for his other friend. Scorpius was off on his own somewhere in Struckton, probably near where Grayson and those other vicious wizards and witches had gone...

Morrison started to slow a minute later though, peering around through the darkness like a dog that had captured a scent. Albus slowed with him, surveying the area and realizing that he couldn't think of anywhere worse for a campsite; it was the very middle of a road, sandwiched between the remains of two destroyed homes. Despite this, Albus could feel a strange pull as he walked about the area, as though something gently tugging at the hem of his robes.

"Just hold up a second," Morrison said, now stopping completely and waving his wand through the air. He started muttering, and moments later, Albus began to make out a faint light. At the next second, what looked like a rip split right through the space a few feet away, opening slightly and revealing an image that Albus was all too familiar with. It was Scorpius, and he was sitting by a fireplace, a book in hand.

"Look who I brought home!" Morrison said with glee, stepping through the rip, Albus following suit.

Scorpius looked up smugly, closing the thin book over as he did so. "Al!" he declared, and then he stood.

"It's me," Albus conceded, tossing his arms up slightly, but he had only a moment to register the thin, pompous smile on his friend's face, for it shortly turned into an expression of disgust.

"Why the hell are you wearing a Hufflepuff tie?"

Albus groaned, then ripped the article of clothing from his neck and slammed it to the ground, promptly stepping on it for good measure. "Never mind that- what's going on? What are you guys doing here?"

Morrison made his way over to Scorpius, the two of them exchanging a look of amusement, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. Neither of them spoke though. Morrison then settled himself down next to the fire and reaching into his pocket, from which he produced a slab of chocolate that might have been from Honeyduke's.

Albus exhaled sharply, annoyed at their lack of communication. He gazed around the campsite, which he now realized must have been very well concealed by magic, for not only was it hiding a raging fireplace, but a rather sizeable tent as well. He spotted a rather well-made stool nearby, one that had probably been conjured, and then settled himself on it, now turning his attention back to his friends.

Morrison was mid-way through his candy bar already, but Scorpius ran a hand through his sleek blonde hair, his pointed face wearing a look that suggested he was expecting a warmer reunion. Albus couldn't quite muster one up though; not with what was racing through his mind.

He'd worked out the largest details; Mr. Malfoy had evidently revealed Albus' intended location to his son and Morrison. They'd arrived in Struckton, somehow worked out that he was in trouble, and then had aided him in escaping it. Albus was immensely grateful for this; more grateful than he knew he was letting on in his pouty expression, but at the same time, the appearance of his friends was a harsh reminder of just what it was he would soon be losing. Just hours ago, hadn't he adamantly surrendered himself to the notion that he couldn't be around his loved ones? That it was too dangerous?

"Look," he started hoarsely, "I'm thankful that you guys are here, I really am-but you don't want to be here. Believe me, you guys *don't* want to be near me right now-"

Scorpius laughed, then turned. "Hear that Morrison?" he said. "Al's got us all figured out, hasn't he?"

"That he does," Morrison said, thrusting the last piece of chocolate into his mouth.

"Yup, that's right," Scorpius went on, turning back to him. "We don't want to be with you. Weren't even looking for you, actually. Us being here is just a crazy coincidence, that's all."

Albus rolled his eyes, but Morrison spoke up next.

"Went out for a stroll, didn't we Scorpius?" he added, now licking at his fingers.

"Oh yeah," said Scorpius. "Though we'd take a walk. In, you know, *Struckton*. Thought we'd have a nice jog in the dark, were actually looking for a place to get some ice cream, before we got lost-"

"Knew we shouldn't have taken that left, that's a galleon you owe me, mate-"

"Hey we never shook on that-"

"Okay, I get it!" Albus barked, unwilling to hear the rest of the charade. This was *too* familiar now. "I get it, okay, I know what you guys *want* to be here-"

"Woah, woah, woah, slow down Al," Scorpius said. "We didn't see say we wanted to be *here*. I mean, don't get me wrong, it *is* lovely and all," he smirked, gesturing towards a particularly large heap of destruction, and Morrison interjected at this point, now licking the wrapper.

"Very serene. That's a word, right?" he added quickly.

"Yes it is," Scorpius said proudly, "and a good one to describe this place I think, but no, Al, we actually don't want to be *here*, in particular. That's on you."

Albus began rubbing at his forehead; he'd been with his two best friends again for less than five minutes, and already they were giving him a headache. The powerful urge to sleep had left him momentarily, to return with a vengeance later, he was sure, but for now, he desperately needed

to finish in his piecing together of the night's events, and, more importantly, in successfully explaining to his friends just what they'd gotten themselves into.

"How long have you guys been after me?" Albus asked, trying somewhat to postpone the difficult topic that he knew would soon emerge.

"Eh. Maybe a day after you left?" Scorpius asked himself, and he then turned back to Morrison as though to confirm.

"Sounds about right," Morrison said, now leaning back and clutching his stomach.

"We went to Hogsmeade first," Scorpius said. "Thought you'd want to see what the world was like before anything else."

"That's what *you* thought," Morrison argued. "I wanted to go to Hogwarts first."

"Well that is where I went," Albus conceded, and Morrison raised his arms in triumph.

"Oho! That's *two* galleons, that is—"

"You really need to learn to how to do a handshake," Scorpius said, shifting his eyes, "you're losing money right now mate—"

"Well I did go to Hogsmeade," Albus said, feeling comfortable with his friends despite himself. It was such a relief to see their faces again after so long, after everything else that he'd seen, and yet, he felt queasy at the thought of how much they'd missed, how much he'd have to explain...

"—Anyway, we heard from my dad that there'd been a little run in at Fairhart's old cabin? What was that all about?"

Albus sighed, suddenly remembering Fairhart's letter. He didn't even want to explain that; it simply felt too private. "I'll go over it later," he grunted, before looking back over his shoulder. "You sure this place is secure, by the way?"

"Oh yeah," Morrison assured him, now lying completely back. "Some guy waked right by us earlier, Scorpius has this place sealed off real nice."

"We're fine," Scorpius added, not even acknowledging the comment about his proficient protection spells. "Anyway, go on, just tell us—"

"I'll tell you later," Albus said. "Just— you guys first. You heard I was at Fairhart's, what then?"

Scorpius put a finger to his chin, as though trying to remember. "Well, really, we just went to the places your dad wasn't going. Compiled a list, tried to track you down. My dad was telling us places you weren't, saving us time, and we crossed off the rest. Last thing we checked up on before coming here was Mirra's place," he added.

Albus felt his insides squirm at his girlfriend's name. He was spared having to awkwardly follow this statement, though, for Morrison was now holding up the thin book that Scorpius had put down, reading it.

"Yup, that's right. Got it right here."

"What's that, you guys have been keeping notes?" Albus asked.

"Just keeping track," Scorpius said innocently. "Don't recognize that thing?"

"Homework planner," Morrison revealed lamely, before Albus could even give it another look. "Mel got it for me, remember? Thought I'd put it to good use-"

"So you guys have just been trying to catch up with me then?" Albus asked.

"Catch up?" Scorpius shot out, looking almost offended. "Mate we're ahead of you. Showed up here before you did, probably, watched you get hauled away too, from a bit of a distance-"

"It was you guys I saw!" Albus blurted out, suddenly remembering the movement at his side during those awful few minutes. "Why didn't you just-"

"-Interfere then and there?" Morrison piped up. "I wanted to mate, honestly, but *Scorpius said-*"

Scorpius held up a hand, quieting him. He then cleared his throat, as though to state his case properly. "We already had a plan worked out, and there were too many variables. We didn't know where they were taking you, didn't know how many there were, or how close they were. We got an idea of what was going on, then stuck to the plan. That's all there was too it."

"Well did you *plan* on me being seconds from dying?" Albus asked coolly. "Because I was ruddy close, actually-"

"Hey, we got you out of there, didn't we?" Scorpius defended. "And besides, you've got no right picking how we offer help, given you don't think we can handle it anyway-"

"That's not true," Albus remarked, shaking his head, "that's not what I said-"

"Well that's not how you've acted!" Scorpius blurted. "Running off without us and all, making us track you down all on our own-"

He stopped here, however, for a muffled noise had swept over them. All three of them turned, Morrison actually rising from the ground, just in time to see two angry looking men emerging from an alley, staring straight at them. Their heads turned shortly thereafter, though, as though they'd scanned the very spot in which they all stood and had seen nothing. The next thing Albus knew, space had seemed to bend around them; there was a warping in the area, and slowly, the straight path that their aggressors were walking started to curve, until they'd eventually moved around the campsite entirely, muttering to themselves and then disappearing into the

darkness.

"See?" Morrison said, once they'd passed. "Told you," he added, giving Scorpius a clap on the shoulder.

Albus nodded, the small knot that had formed inside him loosening; the dangers of the night did seem to have ended. Before he could stray the topic into something more pleasant, however, Scorpius had already launched back into his diatribe.

"Just admit it, you're peeved that we're even here. Reckon you don't need us-"

"I really don't!" Albus said foolishly, though he'd meant something entirely different. Scorpius gave a hoarse laugh, though.

"Is that right?" he insisted, again throwing a look Morrison's way. "That's funny, I must've been bewitched and not realized it. Seeing things all opposite. You mean to tell me that was *you* right-side-up earlier, hopping along, and those three hanging upside down? And all the buildings, upside down too. Interesting-"

"No, I don't mean it like that," Albus told him sharply, now feeling the urge to stand up. His aching body wouldn't let him, though. "I know I needed you guys tonight. I know you came through. It's just- you don't understand-"

"Come on mate," Morrison said, and he sounded earnest. "Try us."

Albus sighed, scratching above his eyes. "I'm not right in the head," he said simply.

There was a pause-and another look was exchanged-and then Morrison threw up his hands. "Well mate we knew that. You haven't been right since we met you. Running into dungeons and all that-"

"No," Albus insisted, shaking his head. "I mean I'm losing my mind. I'm going insane."

"What are you talking about, Al?" Scorpius asked him.

"I spoke to Ares," he started quickly, and Morrison gave something between a snort and a cough.

"Blimey, he wasn't joking-"

Again, it was Scorpius who silenced him, this time with only a single finger. "Go on, mate," he said to Albus. "Fill us in. What have you been up to?"

Albus stared away briefly, afraid that tears would start again if he prolonged his gaze. Fighting the urge, he started from the beginning-or as close to it as he could get.

"I went to Fairhart's cabin," he told them, and they both nodded. "And I- he left a letter there for me."

"What'd it say?" Morrison asked at once.

"Noth- not much," Albus responded quickly. He was not going to fully delve into the considerable contents of Fairhart's letter, not even for his best friends; as far as he was concerned, it was not his business to share. "But stuff about Darvy. And his weapons. Fairhart-I know you guys reckon he was a nutter-but Fairhart had this idea. He thought that Darvy was only strong because of his possessions. His army. That he himself wasn't a threat. He...he sort of left me instructions. Told me I could destroy those things. The Book, the Wand, and the Veil. He told me to go after the Foulest Book first. Said it was the most important."

"That is kind of crazy," Morrison commented, but Scorpius was now rubbing at his chin, as though considering.

"Books can give you the knowledge on the other two," he said, and Albus raised his eyebrows at this, somewhat surprised at how quickly his friend had caught on. "But destroying them...how?"

"I made a potion," Albus said, excluding the details of Snape's portrait. It was not for lack of wanting to give his namesake credit; rather, he thought it not his business to tell, much like with the letter. "And then my dad showed up. And yours too," he added to Scorpius.

Scorpius nodded, beckoning for him to continue. It was here that Albus tensed up most though, knowing full well that he was heading into some rather depressing territory.

"Before I- I left, those weeks ago, I found out from my dad that Fango Wilde had the Foulest Book. I didn't consider it out of Darvy's grasp though. I figured it still needed to be taken care of. I tracked Wilde down. I went places that you guys couldn't have gotten to," he revealed, a sheepish expression on his face, but they both ignored it. "Anyway, I ended up in Mottley. Found out that Larson and his gang had Wilde for themselves, wanted him for information on Darvy. I ran into Eckley too," he added thoughtfully, thinking of the boy that he'd abandoned so many hours ago.

"Eckley!?" they both exclaimed.

"Yeah...he was- because of the whole- the stupid- the Lions or whatever," he glossed over it all. "And we realized we kind of had mutual interests, and we teamed up for a bit."

He hadn't expected these words to be the most inciting yet spoken, but for one of his friends, they proved to be just that. Scorpius had turned his body away, as though he'd been punched in the face.

"Are you serious, mate?" he asked.

"What!?" Albus replied stubbornly.

"You asked for *Eckley's help*, before ours?" Scorpius shot out. "That's low, that- that's- that's worse than the Hufflepuff tie!" he lashed out, pointing at the tattered loop in the dirt.

"It wasn't like that!" Albus groaned. "I needed help getting Wilde, that was all! And besides, he's been fine recently and you know it!"

Scorpius crossed over his arms, saying nothing. It was thus Morrison who took up the mantle.

"Alright, well, betrayal aside, you bumped into Eckley and then what?"

Albus rolled his eyes before continuing. "And then we got Fango Wilde," he said smartly. "And then...well things got a little out of hand. And then your dad showed up again," he added to Scorpius, "and then Wilde took me here, where the Book was."

"Alright then," Scorpius returned to the conversation, though he still looked annoyed. "Then where's Wilde? Where's the Book?"

"Well I let Wilde go," Albus said, and both of their jaws dropped. "And then I destroyed the Book."

Mouths still ajar, Morrison and Scorpius exchanged glances yet again, though when Morrison spoke, he sounded more impressed than anything. "Blimey, you actually have been busy, haven't you?"

"Yeah," Albus replied sourly, as Scorpius nodded in agreement. "But that's- that's not all. I used the Book first. I spoke to Ares."

An eerie silence seemed to stretch over the three of them for a moment, and Albus was sure that it was the subject matter. When he'd been partaking in it, he'd thought little of it; now though, he realized that he'd dabbled in Necromancy earlier, and was now going to recount it for his friends.

"Ares was the only one I could really speak to," he explained. "Given...given the circumstances. He was helpful though. Or at least...he told me things. We talked about the Wand," he added lamely.

Scorpius was now scratching at the back of his head, looking queasy. Morrison too wore an uncomfortable expression, but he nodded his head in preparation for the news nonetheless.

"He told me that the Wand...that the Wand has sort of- sort of infected me," Albus told them. "Those dreams I was telling you guys about," he continued, "and those things I've been doing. When you see- when you would see my eyes. What you saw me do to the train. What I did to Azkaban," he added, "it's because of that. The Dragonfang Wand made me its owner, it respects me. I can't explain how-I can't explain why, I mean, I've *heard* why-but whatever the

case, the Wand is responsible for everything. And because of it, I can control the things that Darvy creates. That's why I thought I could stop him."

There was another silence following this, one where all that Albus managed to take in was the orange glow of the fire. It was Morrison who spoke next.

"You mentioned your mind, Al. What's going on?"

Albus wiped at his eyes, though he wasn't quite sure if there was a reason too yet. "So long as the Wand exists, it's attracted to me. And it's going to take over. Those nightmares were just the beginning. Ares told me that it's going to get worse. That eventually, I'm not going to be able to control myself at all. How I was with the Hogwarts Express...that's going to be me, permanently. But it won't *be me*," he implored, trying as hard as he could to convey how reluctant he was for such a transformation to occur. "It'll be the worst part of me. The Wand is...it's hijacking my mind. It's going to leave only a piece of me behind, the worst piece."

He ended it there, hanging his head, but no sooner had his gaze dropped did he feel his friends at his side. Scorpius clapped him on the shoulder, but Morrison sat down once more, legs crossed over, putting them nearly at eye level.

"You'll be alright, Al," he said, and somehow, he sounded as though he believed it; perhaps he hadn't fully understood.

But Scorpius was the same way, his voice as soothing as Albus had ever heard it when he spoke. "Don't give up yet mate," he said. "There might still be a way. We can get you help. We have to get you home though, back to your dad-"

"No," Albus said, shaking his head. "No- no, you don't- no." He wiped at his eyes once more, and this time it was a necessity. It had been bad enough processing it once, but being forced to examine the thoughts with his friends present was somehow worse, despite their support. "No, I've already made up my mind. I'm not going to spend whatever time I have left trying to fix things. I'm not going to waste my time, I'm not going to waste everyone else's. I'm going to find Darvy," he told them, looking at them each in turn. "I'm going to do what only I can do."

Neither of his friends seemed capable of answering this ominous statement on a whim, but after a moment of apparent consideration, it was Morrison who spoke up.

"And you think you'll be able to?" he asked, a small frown creeping up on his face. "Even with what's going on, you'll be able to get like how you were on Azkaban-"

"No," Albus admitted. "No...I don't think so. In Fairhart's letter he- he touched on it. He mentioned that the Wand might not be granting me its power anymore. I should still be able to control those monsters...I'm still bound to the Wand after all. It's turning me crazy, isn't it? But it's not going to help me anymore, not going to lend its power. I'm going to have to face him on my own."

"Well...not to dampen your mood," Scorpius interjected, and Albus gave him a blank look, "but this may be bigger than just deciding to go after Darvy. Don't get me wrong, you're a skilled wizard, but are you sure you can *take* Darvy? Let alone get to him?"

"I've made it this far," Albus said, to himself as well. "And I have a lead on Darvy. I know you guys will think it's stupid...but I- I still feel like I'm the best one to do it. The rest of the potion I made got destroyed," he told them both, and they frowned, "and I know that I may have lost that power...but in the end, I'm the best man for the job, the one that can get closest to Darvy, that can make it a fair fight. And besides, I've got nowhere else to go now."

"That's not true, mate!" Scorpius insisted.

"It is," Albus countered. "Now that I know what I am, how bad things can be? I can't go back now. Can't risk it, can't risk that happening. That's why you guys can't be here," he told them both sadly. "When I left the first time I had this idea that it was just supposed to be me, that I was risking too much by bringing people along, be it you guys, or my dad, it didn't matter. But now I understand just where that feeling comes from. Now I know it's the truth. I've seen what that freak in my nightmares does to people," he added menacingly. "I can't let that come true."

Albus had expected another stretch of silence to follow this, but interestingly, Scorpius had a response prepared.

"We get it, Al" he said, and for a blissful moment, he sounded defeated. "We understand what you're saying," he continued, nodding at Morrison, who looked very much like he wanted to argue. Scorpius pressed on though. "But what *you* don't understand, is that we've weighed the options. Nothing's changed. You're right, you might hurt people if you're around them. But you know what? You're hurting people when you're not around them too. And I think we've been through enough together for us to pick just how we want to get hurt, isn't that right, Morrison?"

At this, Morrison nodded approvingly. Albus looked between them, struggling for words, but it Scorpius again who struck first.

"We know the risks, we know what we're getting into. But we're with you, all the way."

"I could lose it any second-" Albus tried reiterating.

"You won't get lost with us," Morrison assured him quickly.

"I've gotten lost with you guys loads of times!" Albus insisted, unable to help himself, and his friends laughed.

"It doesn't matter," Scorpius told him. "We've made up our minds, made them up a while ago. We let you do your thing, get your feet wet, but whether you think you need us or not, we're here to stay."

"That's right," Morrison agreed. "Been through too much together to sit back and watch it split

up. These bonds are unbreakable, they are. Not even some tooth-wand can get in the way of that."

Albus grinned, in disbelief at what he was hearing. It was not that he doubted the sincerity or valor of his friends-it was that he doubted his own luck at having found them so long ago. He tried to establish an argument in his head, but found it remarkably clear, all things considered. There was just one nagging thing...

"But what about what you're leaving behind?" Albus asked. "And your parents!" he added suddenly. "Scorpius, your dad- I mean, I worked out-

"Ah, right," Scorpius cut him off, nodding his head as though he couldn't believe he'd forgotten. "Well, things are a little mixed among my parents actually. My dad is supportive-sort of. Almost right after you left I went up to him, told him I was going after you. He argued at first but seemed to realize that I wasn't going to back down and actually...well, he offered his help. He has a lot of faith in you, mate. Trusts that if you think you can do this, you can, but that you need help, and he accepted that that was the point where I came in."

Albus nodded, feeling a rush of gratitude for Scorpius' father. Only a few months ago they'd been teacher and student, but it seemed as though Albus' work-both in class and in dealing with the Protector's Club-had given Mr. Malfoy the impression that he could handle himself. The real intrigue of the matter, however, came from the fact that Scorpius' father was currently fighting alongside his own...

"So he's- he's not trying to help my dad, then?" Albus asked, and Scorpius shrugged.

"Not really," he admitted. "I mean, I don't think he's *sabotaging* him or anything, but he definitely reckons that you can hold your own. Add in our help," he went on, nodding towards Morrison, "and he thinks that you have a real shot at...whatever it is you aim to do."

"That's right," Morrison tacked on, beaming. "Scorpius' dad is playing double agent kind of. For Team Morrison!" he exclaimed, raising his arms triumphantly.

Albus gave him a weak smile, but then turned back to his other friend, who he thought would be able to provide more accurate answers. "So your dad supports me then...but I guess I just don't get why he would let you go off and risk yourself so easily."

Scorpius gave a shrug, but when he spoke his voice was slightly lower, more fragile in its contents. "To be honest mate...I think he's realized that we're trying to do the right thing here, more than anything. Before I first left he told me that when it comes to the war from his time, he regrets the things he didn't do, more than the things that he did. I suppose he doesn't want me to have those same regrets."

Albus nodded, understanding that without knowing just what it was Scorpius' father had done in that time, it would be impossible to understand his motives here. But that still left...

"And your mum?" Albus asked, hesitantly, and Scorpius' face burned red guiltily.

"Right, yeah, about that. Well, she's not exactly *privy* to everything going on, not really. I mean, she thinks I'm just out searching with my dad, and your family. And I've managed to check in every now and then, so I've sold it pretty well. Seeing as I'll be staying with you now though," he continued forcefully, as if declaring it aloud now made it official, "things are probably going to get a little rough on that end. I'm sure my dad will think of something, though."

Albus certainly hoped so, but he turned next to Morrison, wanting to ensure that they both understand the true implications of actually joining him.

"And you?" he asked. "How's your family taking it?"

Morrison snorted. "Told my mum I was going out to look for you, she asked if I'd be home for supper, I said maybe, haven't really spoken since."

Albus stared at him, horrified. Morrison held up his hands as though to abate him.

"Look, it's not what you think, okay! I mean, she cares, I know she does, but we've got a whole web of lies going on, me and Scorpius. She's a bit like his mum, thinks we're out searching, but in groups and whatnot. Expects there to be some days where I'm not seen. And besides, she's too busy fawning over Lisa now to care anyway," he added, in something of an undertone.

"Why's that?"

He rolled his eyes. "She's pregnant," he said simply.

Albus' own eyes bulged. "No way! That- that's great!" he said, though he tried calculating just how long ago he'd attended the wedding. He knew it hadn't even been two years, and yet, it felt like ages. Everything was so different now...

He was sincere in his kindness, however. The idea that life was going on for other people, as though the dark realities of this world could not impede such natural wonders, was among the most pleasant thoughts he'd had recently.

"Really," he went on, as Morrison made a face of indifference. "I mean- that's awesome, really. You're going to be an uncle mate! Has she picked out a name yet?"

"For the kid or for the father?" Scorpius piped up from beside him, and Morrison actually reached over and gave him a rather hard thump on the shoulder.

"Haha," he said sarcastically, "I'll have you know that Lisa and *Mike*, her husband, are actually doing quite well! Though no, I don't think they've gotten to thinking on names just yet."

Albus smiled at him, suddenly slightly more chipper than he'd been moments ago. The weight in his chest returned a moment later, however, and it took him another moment to realize just what

the sinking feeling was.

"I've missed a lot, haven't I?" he asked aloud, to both of them, almost rhetorically. So busy had Albus been that he'd often failed to realize just how much else was going on around him. He'd had errant thoughts about his friends and family, and a brief conversation with Eckley even, but given the confusing state of the world now, there was no telling what a few weeks away from it all could amount to.

And beyond that, he felt a chill run through his spine at the prospect of missing everything after. What would the state of his mind be, at the time when Lisa Vincent's child was born? All things considered, the best case scenario for that period might be his death. Just how much was he going to miss?

His friends didn't bother in consoling him, apparently realizing themselves that there was little to be optimistic about in this regard. Whether they'd come to terms fully with what he'd said about the Dragonfang Wand, he wasn't sure, but certainly, they had a much better idea of what he'd been absent from so far during his excursions.

"Mate," Scorpius started slowly, "if you want to know what's been going on with everyone...we'll tell you."

"But only if you want to," Morrison added, a serious expression on his face.

Albus sighed. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to know or not. And yet, the idea of turning down an opportunity for information on his loved ones felt terribly selfish.

"Go on, then," he said, frowning. "How's my mum been?"

"Furious," Scorpius said lamely. "Much different from when you got picked up by Fairhart. She was distraught then, all worrisome and the like. Now she's just scary."

"She's still worried, of course," Morrison told him, catching the pained look on his face. "But it's a more...aggressive kind of worry. Probably because this time you sort of did bring it on her deliberately."

"Apparently she keeps wanting to join up with your dad's lot," Scorpius told him, "but all of her energy is going into preventing James from coming after you. He reckons he wants to be out looking for you-"

"-and I think he has a point, personally, he's of age-" Morrison interjected lowly.

"-but she's not hearing any of it," Scorpius finished. "The idea of two sons missing is just unbearable, apparently."

"Who's taking care of Lily!?" Albus shot out, now feeling extremely guilty; though he knew that it was in their best interest to be apart from him, *they* didn't know that, and whatever the case, he

was sure that his home was rife with discord as a complication.

"Well they've got Hagrid assigned as a personal bodyguard of sorts," Morrison assured him. "But last I saw she was pretty upset. Was saying how unfair it is that you left after just coming back."

Albus looked away, wishing that Morrison had kept the last sentence to himself. Realizing that his friends were not going to hold back did nothing to deter him though. "And my cousins?" he asked. "How are they-"

"Well we haven't got all night mate-" Morrison started, but Scorpius was a bit more tactful.

"To be succinct, they're all doing pretty bad. Hugo seemed to be pretty off in particular, last I saw, though Rose is doing her best to keep his spirits up. She's putting a lot of faith in their parents, anyway, given that they're out there looking for you too."

Albus nodded, his next words getting caught in his throat. There was one more person that he wanted to ask about, and yet, he couldn't quite bring himself to voice it aloud-

"Do you want to know about Mirra?" Scorpius asked, and he sounded severe. Morrison gave him a panicked look, conveying something similar to a reprimand, but Albus, with the invitation made, gave a slow nod.

Scorpius heaved a sigh before delving in. "She's not holding up well at all, mate. Plain and simple."

"Admittedly we haven't spoken to her in a little while," Morrison commented, "but she just seemed cut off. I mean, she lives with her grandparents, and they don't really get everything that's going on-"

"-And obviously we were a bit brisk with her, trying not to let her know what we were up to, knew you wouldn't want her coming along-"

"I reckon she's gonna be bonkers over us," Morrison said suddenly, mouth twisted in terror; apparently he'd just realized that their refusal to bring her along on their endeavor constituted betrayal.

"But she's safe, right?" Albus asked them both, and strangely, he could now feel a pulse in his neck. "When I spoke to Eckley he mentioned that she was considering doing something really stupid-"

"I don't know if she's reached that point yet," Scorpius told him. "But I'm not going to lie...last time we spoke to her, she seemed close."

They both stopped speaking here, leaving Albus to feel, somehow, even more guilty. He remembered his conversation with Eckley only days ago, remembered his declaration that Mirra

had so little in her life, and just how harrowing it would be if he didn't make it back. But all things considered now, the hypothetical had turned into something much more assured.

She's going to hate me, he told himself, more sad than bitter. He and Mirra had been through so much together; experienced so many things beyond the scope of a normal relationship. If he truly needed to stay away from her, truly needed to put her in such a position of desperation, then it was the most he could do, he realized, to ensure that there was no harm that could befall her. That meant stopping Darvy, and ending the war that had rippled throughout the wizarding world in all facets. It seemed to always boil down to that.

"Do you guys think I'm doing the right thing?" Albus asked, not even sure what merit the answer could even have.

Scorpius turned his pointed face skyward. "Honestly Al, I don't know. But if it counts for anything, I don't think you're doing the *wrong* thing."

"Agreed," Morrison said. "If you saw what you saw, and heard what you heard, and- and feel what you've felt, then only you really know what needs to be done, and I don't think you'd do the wrong thing here mate. Other times, yeah. But not this time, not here."

Albus looked between them, ready to offer just one more question, a question that he knew had been answered in full many times over during their conversation, but one that still needed to be asked again...

"And you guys are sure that you want to stay with me? That you're willing to leave that all behind? Go places, risk your lives-"

"Mate I don't think I have the strength to go over this with you again," Scorpius said.

"We're in this together," Morrison said. "And all that's all there is to it."

Albus nodded slowly, and then rose from his seat. He looked between his friends, clapping each of them on the shoulder, realizing at this one moment just how much it was he truly needed them. How grateful he was for them, how important they were to him, and, perhaps most of all, just how much of an idiot he'd been to leave them behind in the first place.

"Well I suppose that's settled, then," he said, doing his best to hide what he knew was a watery smile. "So I suppose we'd better work out the plan from here then; first things first, we've got to get my wand back. I'm using Ares', actually, but I know who has mine and in the morn-"

But Scorpius was already smiling his knowing, haughty smile, and when Albus looked down he saw that his friend had produced the very object of his desires.

"How did you...?" he started, examining the wand as Scorpius handed it over to him; once touch and he recognized it as his own.

"While Morrison was fetching you I ended up picking off a few of those blokes that fell for the fireworks. Recognized one of them as having been there when you got taken, dug through his robes a bit and found this. Always a step ahead, mate."

"And just how long were you going to go letting me think it was gone, then?" Albus asked shrewdly.

"Eh. I figured I'd let you mention not needing us two or three more times before the big reveal."

Albus scowled, but Morrison chortled. "Nice work, mate. So that speeds things up a bit then. What's our next destination?" he asked, turning to Albus. "After we get rested up, that is?"

"Right," Albus said, trying to figure out just how to word the next problem that they faced. "The thing with that is-"

"You *do know* where we're going, don't you?" Scorpius asked him, now taking a seat by the fire and producing his own candy bar. Morrison stared at it hungrily as he peeled at the wrapper delicately. "I mean, you mentioned having a lead on Darvy, didn't you?"

"I did," Albus confirmed, still tracing his fingers over his wand for comfort. "And I do! I know the place I want to check out, but I don't know how to get there. Some place called Kakos-"

Scorpius started choking, then spit a wad of chocolate out into the fire.

"Aw man, what a waste of a piece-" Morrison complained, but Scorpius was now eyeing Albus with an expression of utter bewilderment.

"Wh- what did you say!?"

"Kakos," Albus repeated, his eyes narrowing. "Have you heard-"

"*The* Kakos?" Scorpius asked. "The Toxic Quarry, that is?"

Albus stared at him, now almost forgetting his wand completely. "How do you-"

"Okay, someone's going to need to fill me in here," Morrison told them both, and Scorpius turned to him.

"The Toxic Quarry is a bad place," he said. "*Really bad*. Like Knockturn Alley, but a hundred times worse. I've even heard people in Knockturn Alley talk about it like they wanted nothing to do with it."

"Have you been there?" Albus asked, suddenly feeling extremely excited.

Scorpius scratched at his chin and bared his straight teeth, as though digging for a memory that he'd long tried to repress. "Yeah," he said. "I have."

Albus felt like his heart was going to explode. Yet again he managed to forgo the immense fatigue that his body felt. This was big; a huge, entirely unpredictable step forward.

"What were you doing there?" Morrison asked, sounding both intrigued and impressed.

"I dunno!" Scorpius blurted out, rather defensively. "I was really young. My granddad took me there. He had a pretty bad crowd back then. Like that Rookwood fellow," he added, specifically to Albus. "Was supposed to be watching over me once one day, and took me there to meet a pal or something, I think. Blimey, I'd forgotten all about that," he said, more to himself than to his friends. "I remember a huge fight afterward, parents were furious; my mum wanted him out of the Manor..."

"Could you Apparate us there?" Albus asked tensely, and Morrison gave their friend an inquisitorial look as well.

Scorpius suddenly looked very uncomfortable though; as though the prospect of returning to such a traumatizing place from his youth was making him immediately regret his previous statements of loyalty. Nevertheless, what he vocalized proved to be quite the opposite.

"Yeah," he said lightly. "I mean- I think. It's been years but...but yeah. If that's where you need to go mate."

Albus nodded, again realizing just how vital his friends actually were to his success. Not only had they rescued him tonight, but Scorpius had retrieved his wand and was now proving instrumental in his search for Darvy.

"Right...well that's settled then," he said, still somewhat in disbelief at how serendipitous the night had been. He'd accomplished a great deal today, he realized; regardless of how many ups and downs there'd been. "So I suppose we should turn in for the night, then," he continued, eyeing the tent with longing.

"You get some rest, mate," Morrison said, now also sitting by the fire. "We need to keep watch; we'll take turns on it."

"I can take turns too-"

"Get some sleep," Scorpius said. "A long one. You look awful," he finished, and Morrison nodded from next to him.

Albus looked between them, still in awe of just how lucky he really was. "Guys," he started, "thanks...for eve-"

"Bed!" Morrison interjected, pointing at the tent. "Now!"

Albus grinned and ambled past them, the soreness in his joints returning at the prospect of well-earned rest. He crawled into the tent with much more difficulty than he'd expected, telling

himself that he would peruse the innards and comment to his friends on them before turning in, but the moment his body hit something soft, he collapsed, and at the next moment, sweet sleep had taken him.

Chapter 12: The Toxic Quarry

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Had it not been for the snugness and sense of security that accompanied him now, Albus would have thought the events of the previous night to be a dream.

The idea that he was now with his friends again was simply too comforting, too blissful to be had on a venture in which there had thus far been so little to make him smile. And yet, as he lay with his face pressed into warmth, his still-sleeping limbs spread about widely and his tongue rolling over the patch of flesh that had accumulated overnight in his injured mouth, he knew that it was illogical to consider otherwise. He was no longer left to face his daunting future alone.

Straightening his posture and grinning stupidly, Albus took the time to soak in where he'd rested for the night. He was still alone in the tent; a tent that he just now realized wouldn't be able to hold three people anyway. Its size had been expanded magically, he could tell, but not by much; it was clearly a muggle object that had been charmed. It was solid black in color, containing nothing other than the blankets and sheets that he'd collapsed on previously. They came in an array of hues, though, identifiable now because of the light seeping in, and Albus managed to sleepily reason that the coverings and padding lacked consistency because they were the product of a merger; both Scorpius and Morrison, he figured, had snatched up some articles from their homes and fled.

Now rubbing at his eyes, Albus poked his head out of the tent and peered through the blinding light at what proved to be an amusing scene; Morrison had fallen asleep with his head propped upon the stool from the previous night, his mouth hanging wide open as he snorted and licked at his lips. Scorpius sat with his legs crossed a few feet away, near an extinguished fire, flicking his wand with concentration to launch tiny blue pellets into his friend's gaping mouth.

"What are you doing?" Albus asked, as a pellet bounced off of Morrison's nose.

"Trying to break my record," Scorpius answered him flatly, though he turned with a surprised look afterwards, apparently just now realizing who had asked the question. "You're up!" he said brightly.

"I'm up," Albus confirmed, now standing straight and stretching. He gazed around the surrounding area next, which, despite the shimmering enchantments, was quite clear. The orange haze that seemed to hang over Struckton in the middle of the day was present in the morning as well, though it wasn't as powerful. The bright light made the decay of the town more apparent though, details of the formless remains of the homes now apparent. Albus could see everything from window frames and table legs to chipped vases and the pieces that may have once made up lamps, all protruding from the cluster of clutter as though determined to be noticed.

"And you seem well rested, too," Scorpius told him, now back to conjuring pellets. The next one soared over Morrison's head completely. "Damn, back to zero..."

"How long was I out?" Albus asked, taking a seat next to him.

"Quite a while, actually," he answered. "Past noon now, I think."

"Did I miss anything?" Albus asked, suddenly feeling slightly glum. Now that he'd had his rest, he realized how selfish it had been to forgo watchmen duties the night before; despite the intrepidity of his friends, he should have insisted upon helping at least slightly.

Scorpius seemed to sense this idea, however, as he spoke his next words in a rather dismissive fashion. "Nothing at all mate, promise. Had some people walk by once or twice, but nothing ever came of it and that died down a while ago. And we're both pretty rested up," he added, indicating Morrison. "I'm just coming off a three hour nap or so, honestly..."

Albus nodded, turning his attention back to Morrison, who did indeed look as though he'd just entered a deep sleep. He was mumbling to himself as though dreaming, anyway. Albus went to make a comment to Scorpius about this, but before he could muster anything, his friend had already steered the conversation into more stressful territory.

"And just so you know," he started, "me and Morrison spoke about you last night, agreed on some things."

"I figured," Albus said lamely, bracing himself.

"Well what we settled on most-and I'm going to make this very clear-is that we haven't given up on you just yet."

Albus gave his friend a warm smile. "I know you guys haven't-"

"No," Scorpius said, shaking his head. "I don't mean in finding Darvy or whatnot. Because you haven't given up on that either. I mean with your head," he added, pointing to it. "And whatever strange stuff is going on up there. I know you reckon there's no way to stop- to stop whatever it is the Wand is doing to you, but me and Morrison aren't having any of that. We can go after Darvy, sure, but let's get this straight; we've got every intention of making sure you've got a long, sane life afterward."

Albus gave a melancholy sigh; in truth, he hadn't given up either, not *fully*. The destruction of those vials had been a crushing blow though, and beyond that, Ares' discourse on the inevitability of it all was still biting into him. The former Auror had seemed to suggest that destroying the Wand wouldn't be enough for curing him because the Wand itself was just an object; a body. But what could be done to it more than physically destroying it?

"I get it," Albus told him. "I do. I just- I wanted to prepare you guys for the worst, that's all. And I really feel like we don't have much time either."

Scorpius gave his own sigh, but looked away. "We'll figure it out mate," he said. "We always do."

As if on cue, Morrison tilted his body to roll over; the moment his head had left the stool, however, he'd jerked himself awake frantically, eyes bulging.

"Whassagoignon?" he said, to no one. "Did the dogs knock it over again?"

This nonsensical statement was enough to make Albus laugh, forcing Morrison's attention towards them both. He peered at them for a second from the sitting position, then wiped at his own eyes, still stirring.

"Dreaming you're at Mel's place again?" Scorpius asked him.

Morrison scratched at his head, now blinking furiously. Once he seemed slightly more cognizant, he answered. "Yeah...but we were under water," he added cryptically, scratching at his chin.

"Right," Scorpius said sharply, rising, "well Albus is awake, so I'm going to get started on breakfast, then we'll pack and head out?"

"Sounds good to me," Morrison said, looking around. Albus engaged his friend curiously though.

"What is going on with Melonie?" he asked, not sure why she'd slipped his mind the previous night. Morrison's girlfriend was as likely to be as distraught over his leaving as his family-if not more so.

"Don't know," Morrison admitted. "Haven't spoken to her," he added with a chortle.

"You guys didn't break up!?"

"Nah," Morrison answered, batting it away. "Just had a small row when I first told her I was going after you. She'll get over it."

"Huh..."

Albus turned away at this, opting to watch Scorpius get to work on their first meal of the day instead. Already he'd reignited the fire from the previous night, and just from the anticipation of food, Albus felt his stomach give a lurch of hunger.

"Don't get too excited," Scorpius insisted, catching on to his salivating face. "Travelling a bit light, just going to cook up some beans..."

"Hey I'll take it," Albus said, now settling himself down at Scorpius' side. "Where'd you guys get the tent, by the way?"

"Borrowed it from Mike," Morrison chirped up from behind. "Well-stole, really. Muggles love

camping, he's got plenty."

"We added on what we could," Scorpius continued for him, and Albus noticed that he'd pulled a pot out of nowhere, and had already gotten started, "but it hasn't been much of a concern, we've been able to head back every now and then anyway."

"Up until now," Morrison said, now sitting across from them. "I reckon there's an inn at this place for us to stay at? Or something along those lines?"

His question was directed at Scorpius, but Albus felt compelled to answer it. Cringing slightly, he admitted what little knowledge he had on the matter. "I'm not sure," he said. "I don't even know if Darvy will be there, it's just the best lead that I've got, currently."

"Well what makes it a lead?" Scorpius asked. "What's Darvy got to do with the Toxic Quarry?"

Albus scratched at the back of his neck. "Well...according to his brother, he was born there."

A small silence overtook them following these words; Albus was fairly certain that being associated with Darvy made the town of Kakos more ominous, as opposed to the reverse. Sensing this, he made a hasty offer.

"Look, we can try something else if you guys aren't-"

Scorpius held up his hand. "A lead is a lead," he said. "You're in charge here, frightening as that is," he added. "Admittedly I would prefer it if Darvy had been born on some tropical island, but there's nothing we can do about that, is there? Besides, I haven't been to the place in years. Maybe it'll be more pleasant!"

There was a false cheeriness to his voice that Albus realized a moment later to be heavily disguised sarcasm; nevertheless, he opted not to argue the matter. Within minutes Scorpius had sloppily spooned their meal into three conjured bowls, and when they ate, it was done quietly, albeit with speed. Albus scarfed his down even faster than Morrison, which giving his friend's tendency to inhale his food, was saying something about the state of his body.

The meal was a satisfactory one, relatively speaking, and as they began packing away their things, Albus (with very little to do in this regard) decided to engage his friends with questions of a more recent nature.

"So do you guys know what ended up happening in Mottley?" he asked, and when they both gave him a confused stare, he elaborated. "The place where I found Wilde? Where I bumped into-"

"Oh right," Scorpius said, and he shrugged. "Didn't hear much from my dad, actually. We were waiting near the Manor when he Apparated to us. Told us that a huge fight had happened, that he'd run into you, and that he knew where you were going."

"So the fighting had definitely stopped then, when you spoke to your dad?" Albus asked.

"Seemed like it. Probably *just* prior to meeting with us too."

"Did he happen to mention-"

"Your family's all fine mate," Scorpius said, waving his hand. "Dad, uncle, aunt, whatever. My dad even mentioned that he was going to try to lead your folks a little off the path, actually..."

"Did you happen to hear about Eckley?" Albus asked. "I kind of...left him unconscious somewhere."

Morrison gave him an amused look, while Scorpius offered an expression not dissimilar from pride; apparently this information was attenuating the feeling of betrayal that he'd harbored the previous night. "No word of him, but I'm sure that just means he got recovered; my dad knew him after all, taught him and everything. He would have told me if anything really bad had happened."

Albus nodded, but then raised a rather different question. "Well- erm- how did *you* guys get here? Neither of you-"

"Apparition isn't *impossible* if you've never been somewhere, just really difficult," Scorpius said. "Have to have a solid idea of the place and everything. Once we had the name of this place, we looked over some maps, worked out a rough idea of the surrounding area. And you remember we have a little prodigy here, don't you?" he added, making to scratch behind Morrison's ears, as though he were an obedient dog.

But Morrison fought him off, laughing. "Well I didn't get the job *completely* done. Got us close enough though, didn't I? About a mile south of here or so, not much of a walk."

"And you guys remember the way out, then?" Albus asked, as they all surveyed the surrounding area, checking to see if anything was left behind.

"Eh, close enough," Morrison admitted.

"And on that note," Scorpius started, brandishing his wand, "are we all ready to go? I'm about to take the enchantments off of this place."

Albus did one last sweep of their spot, realizing somewhat sadly that there was little that he could leave behind. Fairhart's wiped letter was the only sentimental item on him now, and for practicality he had just his wand and Ares'-which, he realized, he'd already gotten some use out of.

"Alright," Scorpius said, looking between them, "keep your eyes peeled." And he waved his wand.

At once the shimmering barriers that had encircled them disappeared, and Albus felt himself tense up at once. Struckton looked identical now to how it had, but the feeling was quite different; without the magical protection of their campsite, they were rather exposed, a fact amplified by the time of day.

"So about how far are we from the exit?" Albus asked them both, his voice instinctively lower.

"Not far," Morrison said. "Twenty minute walk, at the most."

"But we go slow," Scorpius said, his wand held outward. "With any luck, those homeless blokes are still sleeping in a bit."

Having the Dark Defectors mentioned out loud reminded Albus of just who they were identity wise-and this train of thought took him to their apparent indecisiveness the night before. He did not want to tell his friends just how close of a call it had been, but he had heard some things that he was rather curious about.

"So have you guys been keeping up with Waddlesworth at all?" he asked them, dragging his own wand from side to side, the added vigilance now second nature to him.

Morrison made a low, dismissive noise, but Scorpius was slightly more informative. "Not much to hear about him, actually. Granted we haven't had our noses in the *Prophet* all that much, but he's become something of a ghost recently, from what I've gathered."

"And he's been giving the Bloody Baron a run for his money, hasn't he?" Morrison commented. "Apparently just a sulky mess, not talking about the Dark Alliance, or Azkaban, or anything."

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Albus answered, and this wasn't exactly a lie. "Just heard some stuff, that's all, wasn't sure if it was true. Apparently the Hammer got killed, too?"

"Well that's probably part of the downward spiral," Scorpius told him, glancing over his shoulder for a moment.

"Kind of saw that one coming though," Morrison said. "Guy was always trying to pick fights; knew it'd catch up with him."

"Yeah, Waddlesworth's got no one, as far as we can tell," Scorpius continued. "I mean, WAR still exists, but it's a bit fragmented, not even half of what it was. Especially with all these other groups rising up and whatnot..."

Albus nodded, pleased to have confirmation of these facts. Still, he wasn't quite sure just how he felt about it. He had no kind things to say about Waddlesworth-indeed, had even come to view the man as somewhat revolting-but there was no denying that his story was a powerful reminder of just how often power was shifting in these dark times. There had been a brief

stretch not terribly long ago where Albus had been rooting for the man, though that was before he'd taken his father's release from Azkaban into his own hands. WAR had permeated everything then, the public, the Ministry, even the halls of Hogwarts, an idea that now seemed almost laughable...

"So what went on with you and Fango Wilde?" Scorpius asked, and Albus had been so lost in his thoughts that he wasn't even sure how much time had elapsed since their last discussion.

"Huh? Oh- erm, kind of a lot to it. Goes back to Fairhart," he added lamely.

"Fair enough," Scorpius answered, and they fell quiet once more.

The following silence seemed to nag at Albus as they walked, a harsh microcosm of how he felt as a whole. It was great to have his friends at his side once more, to have their support both physically and mentally. The lengths that they'd went to be by his side exceeded any expectations he could have had, and even as they walked along together, vigilant of the situation but dawdling somewhat in their own heads, he felt more comfortable-more comfortable than he had in weeks.

And yet, they were pursuing entirely different things. Morrison and Scorpius most certainly wanted Darvy defeated, but without Albus undertaking the task first, they probably would not have taken it upon themselves to get this far. It was still his mission, encouraged by Fairhart but ultimately a product of his own reasons. Stopping Darvy, ending the war. Destroying the evils that he'd been using to devastate the wizarding world. Possibly saving his own mind in the process-but only possibly.

His friends were now at his side to stay, but for the first time since he'd known them-despite all the trouble that he'd gotten them in-he felt as though he were their leader, and thus, truly responsible for them. It had nothing to do with talent or character, or resourcefulness or any personal merit of any kind; it was simply because it was his task that they'd signed themselves up for. This was a different feeling than with Fairhart, however similar the feelings of camaraderie were. With Fairhart, they had just been two wizards. They had had mutual interest, and had rekindled a friendship originating from his youth, but there were moments where each had favored different outcomes. This was not the case with his two friends here. No matter how much weight they pulled, they were still looking for him to initiate, were putting themselves at risk in the hopes that *he* wouldn't lead *them* astray.

What did that do to his priorities? Their safety was always paramount, but now he found himself foolishly comparing himself to the likes of Eckley and his brothers, forced to determine when the health of his allies outweighed the chances of success. What would Albus do if something happened to one of his friends? What if he was close to getting to Darvy, but found Morrison or Scorpius to be in need of help? After all that he'd resigned to give up in completing this endeavor...which would he choose?

Is it really that difficult?

The whisper had been right in his ear, accompanied by the feeling of a hand clasping his shoulder. Albus turned, wand drawn, just in time to see a sneer and a pair of glittering eyes dissolve into the daylight.

"What's going on?" Scorpius asked, as both of his companions turned as well, wands raised.

"Nothing," Albus said quickly, though he found his hand rubbing at where his shoulder had been grabbed. Or at least, where he'd *felt* it be grabbed.

His friends were looking at him with interest though.

"There- there was a bug on my neck," Albus lied. Morrison chortled and turned back around, but Scorpius wore a disbelieving expression. He didn't press the point, though.

"Right," his blonde friend started, a little uneasily, "well, exit should be right up around this corner. Look about right, Morrison?"

"This is definitely it," he answered, and Albus, despite what was nagging him, couldn't help but be impressed with the navigation skills of his peers.

The area in which they stood now seemed identical to all other portions of Struckton in terms of its components, but was set up rather differently. The piles of clutter that had once housed families were scarce; instead, it was larger heaps, arrayed in clumps as though the structures had been less uniform; office buildings, dining establishments, whatever else had once marked a functioning society for the now desolate town. The ground was more telling of things, though; Albus could see that the dirt road that they'd been following, already hard to discern, had faded out almost completely, suggesting that they were truly at the end of the dwelling.

"This is where you guys came in at?" Albus asked them both.

"Not too far from here," Morrison said, pointing off in the distance, though Albus couldn't see what he was indicating.

"Well we lucked out," Scorpius said, finally elevating the volume of his voice to a more natural point. "No trouble in leaving."

"Haven't left yet," Morrison said, grinning.

Albus watched as Scorpius gave him an expectant glare; as though daring him to offer his usual out. Albus did no such thing, however, unwilling to offend, and besides, he was already forcing himself to contemplate what lied ahead in Kakos. He had the strange feeling that once they were there, they would feel very limited in their options for leaving.

"Alright, huddle up then," Scorpius said, looking almost irritated as Morrison bounded up to him, clutching him roughly near the neck.

"Don't choke me-"

"Not choking, just trying to get steady-"

Albus approached as well, only lightly clutching Scorpius on the shoulder. Before his friend could do anything though, he asked what he thought was a prudent question.

"Erm...do you know exactly *where* it is you're taking us? Like outside the town, or some place-"

"Haven't been there in years," Scorpius reminded him crisply. "For all I know we're going to end up stuck in a wall."

"Do you think that there'll be charms blocking us?" Morrison inquired.

"Well if so, we'll just get forced out-"

"I doubt it," Albus said, thinking about it. "From what I've heard of the place, it seems like the ability to flee any moment is pretty important; no one's putting up those kinds of spells unless it's their own property."

"Well let's hope you're right," Scorpius said, and Morrison gave a nod. Albus then felt as his friend clenched his body, jamming his eyes shut as he did so. "Okay, let me think on this now...turn with me...1...2...3-"

Albus turned with his friends, barely managing to keep his posture as they did so. Morrison had considerable more force to his movement, and for a moment, it seemed as though he was the one hurdling them through space. Albus closed his eyes as the process took place, though it didn't matter; everything was black anyway, black and compressed, and despite the feeling that his body had reduced itself to a speck, he could still feel his fingers curled around his friend's lanky shoulder-

His feet hit solid ground, though they slipped soon after.

"W-woah-"

He felt as someone grabbed him roughly, realizing a moment later that it was Morrison. Seized by his other hand was Scorpius.

Albus made to turn, to get a good idea of where they were, but noticed at once that there wasn't much around him; additionally, he was standing at an angle. It wasn't until he looked down that he realized just why that was; they were standing on top of a building.

"What the-"

"Sorry!" Scorpius said earnestly.

Albus continued staring though, trying to gauge just how high they were. It wasn't a terrible fall down to the road below; they were on top of a stone cottage of sorts, the triangular top of which was slanted, thus forcing the three of them to fight for balance.

"They must have built something here since last time-" Scorpius started to defend himself, nearly falling over again, only to be seized roughly by Morrison and held in place.

"Hey!" came a call several feet below them, and Albus and his friends all looked down. An elderly man with a grizzled beard that hid his face was looking up at them with agitation, his cloak not quite concealing the cane that he was using for support.

"Erm- yes?" Albus asked, shifting a look over to his friends.

"You lot aren't supposed to be up there!" the man barked.

"Really?" Morrison answered sarcastically. "And here I thought the loo was up here-"

"We're doing work up here," Albus interjected, not wanting to cause trouble only seconds after arriving. Scorpius backed him up immediately.

"Yeah. Fixing the uh...the roof," he said simply, tossing his hands up.

The man below them scoffed and batted his own gnarled hands, but turned away nonetheless. Once he was out of sight Albus braced himself, then leapt down from his spot, landing fifteen feet below relatively unharmed. He heard heavy, identical noises a moment later, and knew at once that his friends had joined him. And then, he took in his first true view of Kakos.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting, and yet, he thought that what he saw was appropriate. It was a scene ripped from a fairytale-one of the darker ones. It was a cramped, withered place, with cobblestone streets and all of the markers of an older society. He saw that the street that they were on was lined with shops, but not the type in which you went in and browsed; instead it was small areas, stands almost, where designated artisans were calling out their crafts. Albus saw a butcher right away, on his left, and a little bit further on than appeared to be, interestingly enough, a blacksmith.

"Blimey mate," Morrison said, turning to Scorpius, "I think you Apparated us into the past."

Albus wasn't sure if his claim was legitimate or not; it *did* seem like they were in an earlier point of history. Gazing ahead he could even see what looked like a bell tower, and he was pretty sure that it was still functional too.

His eyes were not doing all of the investigating though; his other senses were in a frenzy of their own. Scorpius had taken them right to what seemed to be a marketplace of sorts, and the resemblance to Knockturn was uncanny in more than looks. True, it was a shady looking thing, with nearly everyone adorned in black and hiding their faces from view, but the bustle had a general *feeling* of distrust to it; people were communicating in hoarse whispers, only occasional

raising the volume to engage in yelling. It was a stuffy assortment too, passerby constantly bumping into one another without apology, and Albus could have sworn that one of them had tried to rifle through his pockets as he'd went by.

"Let's get out of here," he said at once, eyeing what appeared to be a cobbler on his left; he was a sour looking man with a prominent chin, and he was waving his wand slowly over a single brown shoe, apparently repairing it.

"Where do we go?" Morrison asked.

"Anywhere else," Albus answered, and they all instinctively turned around to head the other way. It was only as they fought through the crowd that Albus realized what was truly unsettling about the Toxic Quarry, more so than even its primeval atmosphere and eerie appearance. It was the smell.

The odor was so overwhelming that Albus couldn't believe that he hadn't recognized it first and foremost. There was not a specific color to Kakos like there with Struckton; no distinct shade that seemed to accompany the surrounding architecture. Instead it was a lingering scent that seemed to define the area, one neither appealing nor disgusting—simply prominent. The entire town itself, from the mere sample that he'd familiarized himself with, was grey and black and silver, the hue of the stone roads, and somehow, it even *smelled* these colors as well. It was a stale stench, thick and gaseous yet delicate, not attacking his nostrils but merely tickling them menacingly. Albus wasn't quite sure how he knew—perhaps it was from his extensive work in the field recently—but he determined at once that it was the product of potions. Not just one potion, or one kind of potion, but an assortment of them. The Toxic Quarry, he realized, was aptly named.

"I smell it too," Scorpius said from beside him, apparently aware of the look on his face.

"Smells like my aunt's house," Morrison commented, to himself, but Scorpius then silenced with him a look.

Together the three of them fought their way through the crowd, Albus catching some very unsavory sights as they went. Near him a man covered head to toe in bandages was leaning casually against some shop, somehow managing to knock back a vial of some bright green liquid through his coverings. A little ways off from him a woman was racing across the road barefoot, a squalling toddler buried into her chest.

"Woah!" Morrison said from slightly ahead of them, screeching to a halt at once. He held out his arms, causing Albus and Scorpius to do the same.

"What—" Albus started, but then he saw it. The cobblestone pathway that they were about to cross had been held up momentarily; a carriage was driving through, pulled by two dark brown horses.

"No way," he heard Scorpius mutter under his breath, and Albus shared in the sentiment. Just

how stuck in the past were these people?

Or perhaps, he realized, they'd opted for this. What if living as though it were a hundred or so years ago was not some sort of failure of the society, but rather, a preservation of what most of the people embraced? One thing rang clear above all else in Albus' head in only the few minutes that he'd been here; this had never been a Ministry regulated area. Just as Ares had revealed to him, Kakos was a haven for murderers and thieves, and all things illegal; in many ways, they were separate from the Wizarding World. Was it so unreasonable to think that the people preferred it this way, rather than were merely living in it as a consequence?

"Do you think there's any muggles here?" Morrison asked, watching as the horses trotted by.

"Doubtful," Albus answered him.

"Interesting," Scorpius quipped, "I could've sworn that Hogsmeade was the only all-wizarding dwelling in Britain..."

"Well I reckon this place doesn't get included in a lot of discussions like that," Albus said with a frown. "But come on...we should find a place to stay."

"Ahh...I dunno," Morrison started as they crossed the road, and most uncharacteristically, he sounded quite nervous. "I was thinking we could just stay camping?" he asked, indicated the baggage around his shoulders. "I don't fancy sleeping near these people..."

"Setting up a tent in the middle of a busy road is going to get us quite a bit of attention," Scorpius said, mirroring what Albus was thinking exactly. "Let's find an inn or something. Come on, stop being a baby..." he added, taking in Morrison's shrewd expression.

They meandered along from here, all of them keeping their eyes out for some place where they might be welcomed. Albus reminded himself that despite the nature of this place-really, the inherent danger of it-Kakos was a functioning society, in a sense. Just as would have been the case in a place like Diagon Alley, they should be able to find reasonable room and board; a base of operations of sorts. He was quite anxious to do it, too. The quicker they established a place they could return to, the sooner they could go out looking...

This mere thought gave him chills, as though it alone had succeeded in bringing his current whereabouts truly into focus. Was Darvy somewhere in this village? Was he hiding in his first home, counting on the very anonymity that Albus and his friends had just been discussing?

"This looks like an alright place," Scorpius said from next to him, and Albus turned to take in what he was seeing.

They had managed to work their way completely from the chaos that had been the shopping area, and now were on a rather still, slanted street, leading up directly to a hulking structure that Albus identified at once as an inn.

"Lodgings'," Morrison read off of a battered sign only a few feet ahead of them. "Well they sure can advertise, can't they?"

"I'd rather it be clear than get taken by surprise," Scorpius drawled, and he led the way up the winding road. Albus took up the rear as they went, glancing over his shoulder nervously as he did so. For some reason, the lack of people around him was just as disorienting as the previous gaggle.

They were only outside of the establishment for a moment before Scorpius pushed the heavy door open, but Albus noted in that moment just how plain and inconspicuous the building was. It was larger than most of the places they'd passed by thus far, but lacked any distinguishing marks, bar perhaps the stone chimney oddly billowing smoke at its top. Aside from that it was as grimy and grey as expected; that Scorpius had even spotted it was impressive.

The interior was along the same lines, though strangely familiar to him. Though set up like the Leaky Cauldron, there was an unmistakable dreariness to the place, most prominently among its patrons. Circular tables adorned the main floor, all of them taken, but very few of them by more than one person. Instead the individuals sat on their own, all of them drinking something smoky that was probably Firewhiskey; Albus noticed, however, that many of them were removing tiny vials from their robes here and there, adding their own, personal drafts to their drinks at their leisure.

"Can I help you?" came a gruff voice near them, and Albus jumped as a man emerged from behind a counter. He had long white hair and scars around his lips, but Albus thought that he would have looked unpleasant anyway.

"Erm- yes, how much to lodge here?" Scorpius took over.

"How many rooms?" the landlord asked him, sounding very unwelcoming.

"Just the one, for the three of us," Scorpius said, turning back to indicate his friends. Albus did nothing, but Morrison gave a sheepish smile, and the landlord curled his lip savagely at it.

But still, he didn't turn them away.

"It'll still be three galleons per night for each of yeh," he told them.

Albus felt his heart sink. He'd been aware all along that he had few things of value on him at this juncture, but had forgotten completely just how imperative money would be for the remainder of his journey. True, he hadn't had much on him back at Eckley's base, but he had had *a little*, and he was regretting leaving it behind now.

He threw a panicked look Scorpius' way, but his friend, in a rather unconcerned manner, had already withdrawn his pouch of money and produced the first night's rent. The innkeeper swiped it from his hands before he could even recount it, then stalked off.

"Gettin' yer keys," he mumbled, disappearing from sight.

"Thanks," Albus said to his friend, the knot in his chest loosening. "I owe you-"

"It's gold, mate," Scorpius said casually. "Not going to be worth much anyhow if Darvy destroys everything, right? Eh?"

These words had an interesting effect on the surrounding gloom. The noises before had been quiet, but steady. Now Albus noticed that those nearest to them had seemed to freeze in time, as though perking their ears to make sure they hadn't misheard. Scorpius flushed, coughed, then turned away, actually pulling up the hood of his cloak now to conceal himself.

"We should probably watch we say around here a little bit better," Albus told him under his breath.

"Yeah I picked up on that, thanks," Scorpius spat in a whisper, looking rather embarrassed.

"Where'd you get all that gold anyway?" Morrison asked him, as though eager to change the subject. "Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful for it and all, just curious..."

"Well I said before that my dad was making steady money now, and he's not really using it...so I took out a loan of sorts. Plus I've got my own savings and all..."

They continued their clandestine talk about expenses, but Albus used the time to better take in his surroundings. The momentary intake of breath that had followed Darvy's name had introduced to Albus the very real idea that there were Dark Alliance members around them—possibly even among this crowd here. Was it possible that they'd already been recognized?

He allowed his eyes to sift over the tables, though he did so as surreptitiously as possible. His first deduction was that the demographics of the Toxic Quarry were not unlike the rest of the Great Britain; he saw people of all color and size there, and ages ranging from young men to an elderly witch who was heating her drink by simply waving her hand over her cup in a circular manner. There were no red masks among them, the one aspect of attire that Albus had learned to identify with Darvy's supporters, but he supposed that this absence wasn't very telling. Even in such a place as this one, there were probably numerous reasons to hide that particular allegiance.

"Why's it a different color then, eh?"

Albus wasn't quite sure why these words caught his attention, but they did. Turning a little bit to his left, he saw that a table near the corner was occupied by two men sitting across from one another, apparently bartering instead of drinking.

"What are you on about?" asked one of them, and Albus noticed that despite his best efforts to hide his face, his long nose was still visible. "It's the same thing as last time."

"Last time it wasn't this blue," answered the prospective buyer, a darker fellow with sharp, bird-like eyes. "I remember. It was closer to green before."

"Huh," the seller said, scratching at his chin in apparent thought. Then he snapped his fingers. "I remember now. Swapped out the Goosegrass. Couldn't get hold of it this time."

"Then I don't want it!" the other said, making to force it back into the seller's hands.

"I just used Knotgrass instead!" he argued. "You'll feel it all the same. Go on, take a sample if you want. It's the same thing."

The customer narrowed his eyes, but uncorked the navy vial all the same, giving the vicinity a quick look before placing a dollop on his littlest finger. Albus watched as the concoction oozed out like syrup; he then touched his finger to his tongue, smacked his lips, and nodded his head.

"Fair enough," he said, digging through his pockets.

"What's going on?" came Morrison's voice in his ear, and Albus turned in time to see both of his friends offering a curious look.

"Nothing," he mumbled. "Just watch some bloke get ripped off, that's all..."

"How do you know?" Morrison asked him.

"Did you see the consistency of that thing? I don't know what's in it, but it can't be Knotgrass..."

Morrison shrugged at this, but Scorpius actually gave a tiniest of smirks. "Don't take this the wrong way mate, but you probably would have been just fine growing up here."

Albus scowled, not quite sure what to do with the statement. He was saved having to answer by the reappearance of the landlord though, who was not only jingling a set of small silver keys, but was holding a pad and quill as well.

"I'll need your last name," he grunted to Scorpius.

"It's uh- Anifur," he said, and Albus, despite being taken aback by the surname of choice, thought that he sold it rather well.

The still nameless landlord jotted it down quickly, then handed over the keys. "Room 8," he said, pointing towards a circular staircase that Albus hadn't even noticed before.

"Thank you," Scorpius said pleasantly, but the man had already turned away. He then shrugged. "Shall we?" he asked, nodding towards the staircase.

Morrison heaved a sigh. "Alright, but one at a time though, I reckon that thing looks like it'll break otherwise..."

Albus silently agreed, again last in line as he followed his friends to the second floor. Each of the steps gave a shriek of frailty as the three of them marched up individually. Once they were all on the same level, it next became the task of navigating the winding corridor that led them to their room. Albus noticed that the moth-eaten carpet underneath their feet was extremely squishy, and he actually gave a sigh of relief when they reached their room, indicated by a faded number "8" painted on it. Scorpius fiddled with the keys for a moment, and at the next second they'd squeezed their way through the door, Morrison in particular struggling due to the luggage on his back.

"Well this looks cozy," Scorpius said, barely able to contain his laughter.

It was an empty room, but for a lone bed and a single, small table in the corner. The floorboard was hardwood, and the first thing that Albus saw upon looking down at it was a trail of spiders scuttling by. He heaved yet another sigh, but said nothing.

"Well we should probably get set up, then," Scorpius continued, removing his own, lighter bag from his shoulders. "Start our search tomorrow, I guess? For whatever it is we're looking for?"

Albus nodded, doing his best to look stoic. Morrison made no such effort though.

"You know mate," he said in a sad tone, clamping him on the back, "I know I said I was behind you unconditionally and all, but I have to go back on that a bit. There's definitely a condition for me being here."

"What's that?" Albus asked, bracing himself for the worst.

Morrison gave a pouty expression. "I want the bed," he said, looking at it fondly.

Chapter 13: Where Death Is Born

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Despite Scorpius' insistence to the contrary, Albus had the shrewd suspicion that he would never possess the attributes necessary to flourish in Kakos. It was not a matter of skill or wit, nor was it a question of resilience or mental toughness. Rather, it was the general mindset that seemed to be shared by each and every individual that he came across; a heuristic of distrust and vigilance, and a firm desire to remain as anonymous as possible. These traits had never been prominent in Albus' view, let alone in his behavior, and indeed, after spending some time in the Quarry, he was certain that his only true chance for survival in such a place was to adapt accordingly.

For the first few days after their arrival, Albus and his friends made it a point to explore the town, soaking in the gothic architecture and taking private notes on areas of interest. They never ventured terribly far from their established base, but on the occasions where they did, finding their way back was simple enough due to the various, make-shift landmarks along the way. The unused bell tower served as a star in the sky, leading them back from a distance, and the street signs were so crudely placed that often they could indicate a location without needing to read the poorly scrawled names on them. The only markers that they couldn't use, truly, were the people.

It seemed as though names were hard to come by in Kakos. Whether this was deliberately done by the people as a means of keeping low key, or a sign of a truly deteriorated society, Albus wasn't sure, but whatever the case, his brief stint in the dwelling had made Ares' words sift sharply through his head on more than one occasion. It truly was a place rooted in anonymity; the only name they'd learned so far was that of their landlord, Colton, and Scorpius had needed to verbally wrestle it from him during their sixth or seventh encounter. This general characteristic of the people was a powerful reminder of why they were there-the town was, after all, supposed to be significant to Darvy, and possibly even his hiding place.

Albus had not explained Darvy's origin to his friends as he'd heard it from Ares, not due to some outrageous respect for the tyrant's privacy, but rather, because he didn't think that they'd understand it. They hadn't dealt with the man in the same capacity that Albus had; hadn't seen him at his most crazed and desperate for attention. However, the knowledge that Kakos was every bit the place that Ares had described it as-a place where men like Darvy could never truly receive the recognition that they longed for-was comforting. And even aside from that, Albus couldn't help but be pleased with the results of their search thus far. For a place where faces and names were hard to come by, he and his friends had gotten quite a lot done in their search, even if the results had yet to manifest themselves completely.

"Okay, so let's go over our options," Scorpius said determinedly, eyes boring into the planner that Morrison had brought along. No longer needed for tracking Albus, it was now their means

of collecting information on Kakos as a whole.

"Start from the middle," Albus said, reclining back in his seat. "No need to go over those blokes by that bakery again."

"Fair enough," Scorpius said, and flipped through a few pages.

They were at Colton's Inn, the three of them gathered together in a cramped manner around a table in the corner. Three untouched plates of tasteless food accompanied them-it was a spoonful of peas and a very unappetizing potato for each of them, this time-but the meal was serving more as an excuse for them to meet up and discuss their ventures. Today had been the first day that they'd gone off individually, as a means of covering more ground.

"Okay, there's that dodgy fellow who hangs out near that blue dumpster-"

"I checked for him this morning," Morrison interrupted. "He wasn't there."

"He could be back though-"

"He's dead mate, let it go," Morrison said sullenly, and Scorpius sighed and made a crossing motion with his quill.

"Okay, well there's also that woman we overheard talking about the *Prophet*," he went on. "And I'm going to follow up on that one tomorrow-"

"Why is that a lead?" Morrison asked, but it was Albus who answered.

"We reckon most of the people around here aren't exactly familiar with all that's been going on," he said. "And the *Prophet* probably doesn't make its way in here unless someone is bringing it to show to someone. We figure that if Darvy or the Dark Alliance is here, they'd be the ones most interested in reading about what's going on."

Scorpius nodded absently in agreement, still making revisions in the planner. Morrison gave them a surly look.

"We', eh? You guys been getting a lot done without me?"

Albus gave an apologetic frown. "It was just something we went over last night," he said. "After you fell asleep-"

"Al," Scorpius cut him off, flipping through pages, "remember that guy you said was trying to sell a whole vat of Polyjuice Potion?"

"Yeah?"

"Did he have any noteworthy articles of clothing?"

Albus thought about it. "Yeah, it was these big red boots, wasn't it?"

"I thought so," Scorpius said at once, and he began scribbling frantically. "I've got a guy here that fits that description-"

"Wait, *what?*" Morrison broke in, actually leaning forward. "Who are we talking about? I didn't hear about this!"

"You were probably busy," Scorpius said lightly. "Following the dumpster guy or something..."

Morrison folded his arms over, though he said nothing. Catching on to this, Albus threw him an appreciative look.

"It doesn't matter who gets what done," he said. "With all of us looking, things go faster...some of us are just going to find things that others aren't. That's all."

"But I haven't found *anything* yet," Morrison said.

Scorpius turned to him, an unusually warm smile on his pointed face. "It's not a big deal mate, we're all trying our best. Maybe- maybe you just suck at this?" he smirked.

Morrison practically went to lunge over the table, but Albus' quick, testy look made him refrain, leaving Scorpius to chortle.

"But seriously, things will turn up; we just have to stay focused..."

"We have to do a little more than that," Albus interjected, an immaterial, yet still daunting clock floating around in his head. "We need a big push. I'm thinking that tomorrow, we get a little bit more direct in our efforts."

Scorpius and Morrison both softened their expressions at this, the former giving Albus a curious look. "Is there a certain suggestion you're trying to lay on us?" he asked, and he actually sounded suspicious.

Albus hesitated, but then blurted it out. "This place is all about the potions trade. We need to be all about it too."

The idea of actually involving themselves in the criminal activities of Kakos was a daunting one, and yet, Albus felt that it was their only true option, especially when considering the increased expedience of their task. Albus had lost track of time somewhat in his travels; he calculated that they were somewhere in April, possibly closer to the middle, but he neither asked his friends nor made any indication of his confusion, fearing that they would mistake it as a sign of reduced sanity. Whatever the case, he knew that he needed to keep his eyes on two separate hourglasses-even if they were somehow sharing sand. On some level, their inability to find Darvy was an indication that he was keeping a low profile, and possibly postponing in the rebuilding of his horrific army; this meant that they had time to stop him. On the other, lack of

activity from the Dragonfang Wand was supposed to correlate with Albus' own mental deterioration, and though he hadn't experienced any major lapses since arriving in the Toxic Quarry, he knew that the higher frequency of his struggles thus far did not bode well.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Albus had united with his friends the following morning, all of them opting to work on the same lead rather than divide their efforts. They were heading to a pub-one that didn't have housing, like their own-and it was a pub that none of them had thus far explored.

"And which one are we meeting again?" Morrison asked, so inattentive that he nearly collided with a coarse looking crone as they walked. "The bloke selling Polyjuice?"

Scorpius shook his head, still flipping through the notes that they'd accumulated, as he now tended to do at all available moments. "Someone different. Al saw some woman buying a Beautification Potion. We're looking for the seller."

Morrison gave an amused look. "Doesn't seem all that worth looking into to be honest..."

"I'm not concerned with what she purchased, or even if she got ripped off," Albus said. "It was what else the guy was offering that perturbed me a bit. Garroting Gas, Veritaserum, Essence of Brutality...these aren't things you just make and hope to sell. Seems to me like he got in with some bad people."

"Bad people that can hopefully lead us to the *worst* person," Scorpius added. "But whatever the case, Albus heard him mention that he'd be at a pub on Broods Road. Now keep your eyes open, should be coming up on our left, somewhere around here..."

Albus did not need to be told to pay attention to his surroundings, as his brief time in Kakos had already inculcated a powerful sense of attentiveness in him. Despite not yet encountering true danger, he had been introduced to some rather suspicious quirks of the place that had unsettled him. First and foremost was how infrequent wands seemed to be. He saw them now and then-typically doing menial tasks-but they were hardly the ubiquitous instruments that he'd come to view them as for the entirety of his adolescence; indeed, that he carried two with him now made him feel somewhat bashful. The lack of (visible) wands was a strong indication-or perhaps explanation-of just how dominant potions were within the communities, as it was one of the few branches of magic that could achieve moderate success without wandwork. Additionally, Albus was reminded of what the lack of wands had done to places like Lambshire; as Fairhart had explained, shortages of such an important commodity were often a primary marker for desperation. True, he'd seen more wands here than there, but there was a larger, more flourishing population here as well, and thus he found it to be a sound comparison.

The other dubious characteristic of the Toxic Quarry was just how savvy nearly everyone seemed to be in their shady dealings. There wasn't a single person that Albus had encountered thus far who didn't seem to possess at least a low level of cunning, and this materialized itself most in the locations that they were encountered. There was no shortage of dark alleys and cramped nooks in Kakos, and yet, every lead that he and his friends had thus far found was

complicated by the fact that the citizens of Kakos seemed to all understand the advantage of blending in. Conversations were held separately, but never alone, and it was not uncommon to see passerby stick together even when they clearly had no relationship with one another. It was as though everyone wanted to give the impression that they had help when they didn't, and indeed, from what Albus had gathered of their next destination, it was set to be the same here; apparently, they were heading to one of the busiest buildings in the town.

"Okay," Scorpius said, snapping the planner shut. "We need a story too; something we can all latch on to, without risk of mixing up the details."

"Please tell me you've prepared something," Albus pleaded, unwilling to test his improvisational skills at such an important juncture.

Scorpius shrugged. "It's coherent. Basically, you and Morrison are cousins, I'm a stranger that overheard you guys needed help and am expecting a finder's fee."

"That could work," Morrison said thoughtfully.

"But what is it we need help with?" Albus asked, slowing somewhat; he could see what seemed to be their target just up ahead. "What are we trying to buy from him?"

"I'm thinking we go the sick family member route," Scorpius said. "Or something along those lines. Maybe you two have a batty aunt? Trying to get some cheap Calming Draughts?"

"Well what's her name?" Albus asked, wanting to refine things first.

Scorpius shrugged. "I dunno, Ruth?"

Morrison threw him a furious look.

"What!? It sounds believable-"

"Okay let's just head in," Albus interrupted, realizing that their attempts to establish coherency were more likely to muddle what they already had. He walked briskly ahead as a sign of this, and though there was some marginal muttering behind him, he knew that his friends were following.

The nameless pub that he sought to enter was, like many of the others that he'd examined thus far, a complete and utter eyesore. There was something of a haunting beauty to the Quarry that he could not deny; the archaic designs of much of the architecture, the patterned roads, the wooden signs that swung gently in the wind. Even the smell-bad as it had first been-was so distinct that it was difficult to consider it a blemish to the locale. But the pubs were always among the least cared for, openly sinister establishments, often sporting boarded up windows and the more obnoxious signs, which tended to overshadow the smaller ones completely. Albus grasped that this was because of the nature of such places; as it seemed as though most bartering was done in such areas, the people probably thrived on having so many to choose

from, especially as they were so open to guests. But his thought did not quell his trepidation as he and his friends pushed open the noisy door and examined their surroundings.

As usual, circular tables adorned the walls, allowing for a small space in the middle where new entrants could meander and find their way to the barman. The actual patrons were as grimy and concealed as in other places that they'd attended, though Albus immediately shuffled his eyes about, knowing that he could identify their target if he saw them.

"I'll get us drinks," Scorpius muttered, and he vanished a moment later.

Albus nodded, still searching while motionless. It was difficult though, with Morrison craning his neck to the side and looking much too eager for their benefit.

"Do you want to tone that down a bit?" Albus asked from the corner of his mouth. "I know what he looks like, I'll find him..."

Morrison gave no response, though he stopped in his gestures at once. Only a few seconds later Scorpius had returned, a small tray of Firewhiskeys in hand, and just in time, too.

"That's him," Albus said, eyeing a hooded man in the very back. He was at a table for two, though no one was across from him. What exactly differentiated him from every other hooded man in the pub, Albus wasn't quite sure, but he suspected that it had something to do with his demeanor. His mouth was visible, revealing a familiar sneer, and the slight movements of his head back and forth were suggestive that he was antsy; willing to give away product.

Scorpius nodded, finding the man as well. He distributed the drinks among them, placed down the tray at an empty table, and then led the way.

The stranger looked up at once as they neared, though he said nothing.

"Mind if we pull up another seat or two?" Scorpius asked coolly, tipping his smoking glass in a most confident matter.

"Not my pub," the stranger replied, without missing a beat. Albus and Morrison took the cue as Scorpius sat down, dragging their seats from a nearby table and situating themselves at Scorpius' sides.

"How can I help you?" the stranger asked in a raspy voice, taking a delicate sip from his own cup, which Albus just now realized did not appear to have come from the barman. The liquid inside was a dark purple, and very bubbly.

It was Scorpius who launched into their charade. "Seen you around before," he said casually. "Saw that you made friends easily."

"You lot trying to be friends or buyers?" the stranger said gruffly, his forwardness taking Albus aback. "Because I've got plenty of friends as is."

"We're not looking for much," Albus cut in, sensing that the subject was about to turn to his area of interest much quicker than anticipated. "Just some Calming Draught, that's all. A few vials."

The stranger finally lifted his head up enough to reveal his face, and Albus saw that he had glossy yellow eyes, with a crooked nose that was scarred at the tip. But when he answered them, it was his continued sneer that seemed most troublesome.

"You three look a little young to be needing those, I reckon."

"In the Quarry?" Scorpius started up, flashing his own leer. "People of all ages need a break sometime."

"Unless you recommend something else," Morrison piped up. "Something different, or stronger-"

There was small thump, and Morrison went quiet. Albus was certain that Scorpius had kicked him from underneath the table, but the scarred man across from them seemed more perturbed by Morrison's words than by his forced silence.

"And what makes you think I carry anything other than simple Calming Draughts, eh? What are you three up to?"

"Nothing," Albus said, though he knew he'd been a little too quick. "Just wanted to know what we could buy, that's all."

"I'm not a trinket shop," the stranger said, his smile evaporating. "I'm not going to put things on display for you to gawk at, I'm out of here-" and he stood to leave.

But Scorpius had delved his hand in his pocket, removing, not his wand, but a small pouch of gold. The light jingling was enough to halt the seller in his tracks-though he remained standing.

"Look," Scorpius started, and he suddenly sounded sincere, "I know you."

"No, you don't-"

"Maybe not directly, but I know *of* you. You sold my sister some Beautification Potion not too long ago. She recommended you."

The seller lowered himself, a shifty look on his face. "And who are these two, then?"

"Friends of mine," Scorpius said, giving them each the slightest of nods. "They're cousins, actually. But they're new to the Quarry, and I know how it is around here; it's hard to come by credible folks; you know that. I know most around here aren't trying to do business with people they're already connected to, but I just wanted to get them in with someone that I knew could deliver, that's all."

It was very convincing, Albus thought, and the seller, despite deliberating on it for a moment,

ultimately did retake his seat. Nevertheless, he remained inquisitive.

"And you're just in it for Calming Draught, is that right?"

"It's for our aunt," Albus dove in. "She's been in a right state since our uncle passed...that's how we ended up down here anyway. We just want to help out."

The seller seemed to contemplate this for a moment, scratching at his smooth chin and continuing to sip from his mauve potion. When he did speak again, his voice sounded somewhat lighter, as though he was prepared to hear propositions.

"How much will it be, then? I try and sell in bulk."

"Maybe half a dozen vials for now?" Scorpius asked. "And maybe we can meet up some other time if need be-"

"We'll have to meet up elsewhere anyway," the scarred vendor cut him off. "I don't have Calming Draught on me right now."

Albus shifted his eyes over to Scorpius, to see what direction he wanted to go in from here. Their goal was to get a stronger lead to the Dark Alliance; were they better off meeting this man at a new place, or changing the conversation around entirely?

Scorpius decided in an instant, it seemed.

"Well that won't do," he said. "We need something now."

"Well I don't have anything now," the seller retorted, showing teeth that had now turned the same purplish color as his drink.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing to help a sobbing hag-"

"Then what do you have?" Scorpius asked, and now his face had turned even colder and pointed than usual. "What *is* for sale?"

Albus watched as their lead twisted and scrunched his face up in annoyance. "What's it matter to you lot-"

"My sister reckoned you were offering her more than just a pretty face," Scorpius said. "Said you mentioned truth potion, some poisons-"

"That wasn't your sister!" the seller spat, a look of dawning emerging on his face.

"So you do have that stuff, then?" Albus asked. "What kind of poisons?"

"I don't know what your-"

"Throatrattle?" Albus continued. "Ashtail, Essence of-"

"Who are you?" the seller finally asked, rising once more. Albus was certain that a few heads had turned at this point, but he held his ground nonetheless; as did Scorpius.

"Just buyers," he said. "But we aim to make it in the Quarry, and that means knowing where the best stuff is. All the stuff you offered that girl, did you brew it yourself?"

"Course I did," the seller sneered, looking almost offended.

"For who?" Albus asked.

The seller eyed him cautiously. "For whoever," he said after a while. "For whoever can pay-"

"No one makes that stuff in bulk, not that much variety, not on their own," Albus declared. "Way too much variation in the components, and to manage it all at once-I mean Veritaserum alone needs to brew-"

"What do you three *want*?"

Morrison cleared his throat as though to speak for the first time since being kicked, but Scorpius rushed to answer instead.

"Information," he admitted, and he actually slid the pouch across the table somewhat. "We want to know who provided you what you needed to brew those potions, and why. There's gold in it for you."

"Just for some words," Albus added darkly.

The seller eyed him warily, wrinkling his fleshy nose as he did so. His eyes darted to the pouch though, and then he sat, his hands folded over.

"Happened about a month ago," he started, his tone less acerbic now. "Group of people came to Kakos, seemed like a few at first but ended up being a whole lot. Started rounding up anyone they could that seemed like they could brew. Weren't interested in people who could sell-just the people who could make it."

"Make what?" Albus asked.

"Like you said, Veritaserum mostly. But poisons too. And rare ones, one's that go back, haven't been made in years around here I don't think. But it was like some web was being spun, all sorts of people working on the same things, kicking it up to people that they didn't know. I've lived in the Quarry ten years, and I've never seen anything like it."

"And you made stuff for them?" Scorpius asked.

"Of course," the seller shrugged. "We were getting gold, and all of the supplies were coming free, so there was no hassle. I got out of it though. Got too risky."

"And what risk is that?" Albus asked, tensing up slightly.

Their informant licked at his lips nervously. "It's always dangerous in the Quarry," he said. "I've known people that got killed over a Pepperup. But whoever was stringing this all together, they had no problem killing for nothing. It's like they thought that anyone doing too good of a job was a threat; I had some people I knew, guys who really knew their stuff, just disappear. Last I heard half the truth potion that was being made was being used *on the potioners*. I didn't get it," he went on, and he truly did look bewildered. "There was so much order, some genius to it...but it was all so hectic. I got out of there and I've been trying to sell off the rest of what I made quick as I can. Hard though. Don't want to bring attention to myself again."

"These people that recruited you," Scorpius asked, "did you catch any of their names?"

Their lead gave a cold laugh. "No names around here, you know that. You don't even know mine. And I don't even have yours."

"But you could tell who they were somehow," Albus stated. "What gave them away?"

"I dunno, nothing really-"

"They didn't wear masks?" Albus asked, now breathless. "Red masks?"

The scarred man before them seemed to freeze at these words, and Albus immediately regretted having pushed too far. He turned and saw that both Scorpius and Morrison were staring adamantly, but it was the awed seller who spoke next.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and when Albus went to rectify the situation, he held up a hand. "But I know this; you say one more word to me, I stand up and tell this whole pub what you just asked. And I know you don't want that," he added menacingly.

Albus gazed at him, soaking in his sour expression and realizing that his threat was real. Scorpius seemed to realize it too, for he stood at once and prepared to leave, and though it pained him to relinquish such a potent prospect, Albus took his friend's lead and stood as well.

Morrison, however, remained seated.

"Come on," Scorpius mumbled to him, pushing his chair in.

But Morrison remained in his spot, still eyeing the now red-faced seller. "I'll catch up," he said firmly.

"What?" Albus asked, not believing his ears.

"I'll catch up," Morrison repeated. "Wanna finish my drink," he added, and he covered Scorpius' pouch of gold with his hand as he did so, preventing the seller-who'd been reaching for it-from acquiring it.

"Whatever, let's just go," Scorpius said, clearly uncomfortable with the state of things, and he strode by Albus without another look.

"Meet us back at the Inn," Albus told his friend, not quite sure what was going on; nevertheless, he stalked off as well, eager to discuss this most recent advancement with his other friend.

He casted Morrison one more furtive look before following Scorpius out the door, and the moment that the now familiar smell of Kakos had flooded his nostrils, he launched into conversation with his pale friend.

"Well that was informative," he said.

"Agreed," Scorpius responded, pushing his way past a warty witch, who didn't even seem to notice. "So we can agree that the Dark-"

"Let's be careful without terminology, eh?" Albus reminded him quickly, and his friend nodded.

"Right, right-so we can agree that the people that we're looking for are here, then?"

"Or at least were," Albus said. "This was definitely the kind of jump that we needed-"

"What's with Morrison?" Scorpius interjected, a quizzical look on his face. "Staying behind and all that, awfully dodgy..."

Albus said nothing, leaving one train of thought for another, more personal one. He had a very good idea why Morrison had opted to stay behind at the pub, though he wasn't going to mention it to his other friend.

Admittedly, they had not been in the Quarry very long, but it had become apparent to all three of them-and probably to Morrison most of all, he realized-that his oldest friend was not cut out for the sort of work that they were undertaking now. Scorpius had raw intelligence and talent to aid him, and that he was familiar with the dark arts and all associated dealings due to his family didn't hurt. Albus, by no means a natural, had received training from Fairhart months ago, skills that had been sharpened and refined over time. However Morrison had always been their moral support; the crutch on which he had leaned at an emotional level. True, he had fought alongside Albus just as Scorpius had, and had been at his side in dangerous times before, as recent as Struckton, but there was no denying that the qualities that Albus enjoyed most in his gangly pal were not serving any great purpose here; and indeed, thus far they'd often held the group back.

Though of course, Albus hadn't considered for a moment the idea of turning him away. Morrison

was his best friend, along with Scorpius, and though he shared different bonds with both of them-Scorpius as the mouth that talked sense into him, and Morrison the ears that received him- he was equally appreciative of both, and he knew that Morrison, above all else, was doing his very best to contribute. The question was whether Scorpius knew it or not.

His two friends had developed a strange form of camaraderie over the years, their banter serving as a strong mask for what Albus knew was a very powerful friendship. But he'd always felt that Scorpius was a little *too* strong in his sarcasm and wit, when it came to their third friend, and that he hadn't relented even in such pressing circumstances was slightly concerning. What with insulting his lack of aid and kicking him underneath tables, Albus couldn't blame Morrison for wanting to stay behind and get a break from it all.

"He just wants to put in overtime, that's all," Albus said cryptically. "He- you know he hasn't really been able to help much since we got here. I reckon he'll be alright, just wants to fish around on his own."

"Well hopefully he doesn't catch anything he can't handle," Scorpius drawled. "And blimey, I left the gold with him too, dammit that's gone..."

Albus sighed, suddenly tempted to go back and retrieve his friend. It had seemed a good idea to leave him there at the time, to sort out whatever it is he wanted to sort out, but it was only minutes later and Albus was already beginning to worry. Despite this, he knew that he would just have to wait for his friend to catch up-going back for him now could harm his confidence immensely.

And so Albus and Scorpius made their way back to Colton's Inn on their own, silently, Albus allowing a very strange mixture of thoughts to swim in his head as they went. Once they were secure in their squalid room on the second floor, though, Albus pushed one friend from his mind in favor of conversing with another.

"Right, so the Dark Alliance was here, and recently," he said, collapsing on their lone bed.

Scorpius leaned up against the grimy wall, arms crossed and a furtive look on his face. "But the bloke reckons they're still here, doesn't he? Worried to talk about them and all."

"True, true..."

"What do you think Darvy is up to?" Scorpius asked suddenly. "I mean, he has an army to rebuild, doesn't he? So what's he doing setting up a system of illegal potions? What does he need poisons and all for?"

Albus sat up; this thought had plagued him for the last few minutes as well. The idea that Darvy was up to something *else*, in addition to his bid to wreak as much havoc on the Wizarding World as possible, was a horrifying one. And yet, Albus had the sense that he was overthinking it all. Since when was Darvy beyond doing something solely for the feeling of power elicited by it?

"I think it was just to show that he could do it," Albus declared after a moment.

Scorpius scoffed. "Come off it, all this? No way..."

"I'm serious," Albus said, shaking his head grimly. "I remember when I was talking to Ares about it. The way he described Darvy...just hungry for attention, for an identity, for a name even. He used to run this place years back, apparently. Rose up pretty high. But couldn't get recognition for it. I feel like he came back here to hide out, wait for the right time to rebuild his army...but I feel like there's too much allure to this place for him to stay completely quiet."

"So you reckon everything he's doing he's doing just...to do it?"

Albus frowned. "I'm sure it helps him overall. Gets him more followers, and he does prefer to use potions, doesn't he? Can't hurt to have Veritaserum and what not. But yeah, I feel like he came back to hide, and decided to flex his fingers, see if he could still take this place over. It means something to him, to come back after all these years, to show himself that he hasn't changed, that he's just gotten stronger..."

Scorpius eyed him warily as he spoke. "You've got a good grasp on this guy, don't you?" he asked, and he sounded almost accusatory.

Albus sighed. "I know him," he admitted. "I've heard him talk. Heard others talk about him, I know how he is, I even used to idolize him, didn't I? Thought he was so unique, so different..."

He trailed off here, realizing just how embarrassing it was to say such things. Scorpius merely gave a shrug though.

"Well hey, it's helping, isn't it? No one else was going to talk to his brother, track him down to here. Learn about what was going on and put two and two together. Don't stress out over knowing him, it's gotten you a lot further than if you'd never dealt with him before."

"Yeah," Albus said, smiling slightly. "You're right."

There was a moment of silence following these words, and then-

"Do you reckon he's still here?"

Albus inhaled sharply. "I dunno. I suppose we'll find out though, won't we?"

No sooner had he said it did their door burst open. The atmosphere in the room was such that Albus immediately reached into his robes, his fingers trailing over Ares' wand in search of his own, but he relaxed himself upon seeing who had entered. It was Morrison, and he was looking exhausted; though also ecstatic.

"You got here fast," Scorpius said at once.

"I ran," Morrison answered, panting heavily.

"Everything okay?" Albus asked hesitantly, and Morrison nodded his head fiercely, apparently unable to speak. He held up a finger as he caught his breath, then threw something at Scorpius; his small pouch of gold.

Scorpius gave a sigh of relief upon catching it, though he then immediately went to peruse its contents. But Albus continued to stare at his sweaty friend, now very curious.

"What happened, what did you-"

"I got it," Morrison said, grinning ear to ear, and he rifled through his jeans, eventually producing a thin sleeve of flimsy paper.

"Is that a napkin?" Albus asked, taken aback.

"Yup."

"They have napkins here!?" Scorpius asked, sounding extremely surprised.

Morrison ignored him though, instead holding the serviette up with glee, dangling it delicately from his fingers. Albus squinted, realizing that the dirty square had more than just the residue from some meal on it.

"There words on there?" Albus asked.

"Not just any words," Morrison said. "Directions. To Darvy."

"*What!?*"

Both Albus and Scorpius had said it, the former rising from the bed and the latter nearly falling over. A moment later they were huddled around their friend, peering at the napkin anxiously.

"Blimey your handwriting is *awful*," Scorpius started, and Albus nodded in agreement.

"I can't make out anything either, what does-"

"Well I had to copy it down quick, okay?" Morrison said, pulling it back.

"I don't get it," Albus said, dumbfounded. "How did you- are you sure...?"

"You said it yourself," Morrison told him, still grinning. "We needed to be more direct. I talked the guy up a bit, told him stuff-not much!" he added hastily, "but just made him realize nothing was going to happen to him for a few names, that's all. And I coughed up a bit of our gold, yeah," he acknowledged, gesturing towards the pouch.

"But how did you-"

"I just asked him about Darvy," Morrison said, and Scorpius' jaw dropped from next to him. "I know, it was risky, I get it," he defended. "But once I dropped the name I knew to look for signs, figured out how to steer things. I can be a smooth talker, you know, when I need to be," he added, smirking.

"And what exactly did he give you?" Albus asked. "I still can't read the damn thing-"

But Morrison had already extended it over, tracing his finger across the untidy scrawling. "Well he wrote it down quickly, but he wasn't letting me keep anything, so I needed to copy. But basically, Darvy is definitely here. And this bloke here," he said, pointing, "knows where he is. Jean St. West," he added.

"Who the hell is Jean St. West?" Scorpius asked, throwing his arms up.

"I dunno, but he's on Cottillard Road. Right there, see?"

Albus squinted, just barely making the words out. Even on multiple rereads they were not entirely discernible, but still, excitement was bubbling up inside of him.

"Mate," he started, clapping Morrison on the shoulder, "this is- this is-"

"Just trying to pull my weight," Morrison said, but at that moment, Scorpius snatched the napkin from his clutches.

"Right," he started, "well this is definitely something to be pleased with, but let's get a little perspective, eh? If this 'Jean St. West' can point us to Darvy, that means that we need to be prepared. Are we all ready to do this?"

Morrison nodded vigorously, though Albus moved his own head only once. Never had he dreamed that he'd be this far, this fast. The hourglasses from before seemed positively frozen now. They needed to capitalize on this. If he could just get to Darvy, stop him now-maybe there would even still be time to work on his other, more sinister problem. The Dragonfang Wand overtaking his mind.

"Then we head out tomorrow," Scorpius said, folding the napkin neatly and tucking it away. "I'll get us some dinner, and then we get to bed early!" And without saying anything further, he hurried from the room.

No sooner had he left did Albus turn to his other friend, prepared to congratulate him once more on his achievement and to profess his confidence in him. But Morrison seemed to know already, for he flashed his toothy grin once, then collapsed on the bed, briefly giving a double-thumbs up as he did so.

Though his friend couldn't see, Albus returned it.

The jubilation at Morrison's discovery seemed to vanish overnight, replaced by the feeling of uneasiness that Albus, despite now being accustomed to, was still rather difficult to shake. The morning started quietly, marred by steely glances and shaky smiles, though through Scorpius' direction it evolved into something more confident.

"Now I already asked around," he said, ignoring the pitiful breakfast that he'd procured for them. "And I'm not going to lie, this whole thing seems a little dodgy."

"What do you mean?" Albus asked, though Morrison-who'd just finished forcing down his toast the moment prior-gave a grunt.

"Just trust me okay-"

"I do trust you!" Scorpius countered quickly, holding his hands up defensively. "But I don't trust that nameless potion dealer. And I think we should be a little wary of where he tells us to go, given that there seems to be some confusion on his directions anyhow."

"Who exactly did you ask, that was so confused?" Albus inquired, and Scorpius immediately jerked his thumb over his shoulder, where the grizzled and cloudy haired innkeeper stood, taking a rag to some dusty mugs.

"Colton," he said, and Morrison rolled his eyes.

"I dunno mate," Albus shared in the sentiment, "that's not a lot to go off of-"

"But it's not like he just flat out rejected it," Scorpius insisted. "Just mentioned that there was a few Cotilard Roads, so I asked him to go a little into detail and I worked out this map," he said, removing a sheet of parchment that had lines messily drawn all over it.

"Blimey, how early did you wake up?" Morrison asked, not even sounding angry anymore.

"I never really slept," Scorpius said pointedly. "But anyway, I reckon we take things one place at a time, just cross them off as we go along. And if we do run into this St. West fellow, we play it cool and scope things out further before we do anything else. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Albus answered at once. "Now are we ready to go?"

Scorpius sighed, looking down at his untouched plate of burnt bread sadly. "I suppose so," he said, still looking jittery.

They were out of the inn only a few minutes later, the three of them adorned as inconspicuously as could be. On one of the first few days in the Quarry, Scorpius had purchased them all a handful of cheap, ragged outfits to help them blend in, and today they wore black jeans under their wizarding robes, bearing the appearance of so many that they'd come across thus far. Scorpius took the lead, steering them around through areas that they were all familiar with, stopping only once to gaze up at the distant bell tower and rework their navigation.

"So which spot are we heading for first?" Albus asked him lowly, accidentally meeting the eye of a hard-faced man with crooked teeth and a murderous expression. He turned away at once.

"That's a good question," Scorpius said, now delving into his pockets for the map. "Just hold on- here hold this-"

He forced the pouch of gold into Morrison's hands, then took to the crudely drawn map.

"Well we're near two spots that Colton mentioned," he said. "Though one is a bit closer than the other, it was actually the first that he pointed out...apparently we take a left up ahead, and keep going until we reach that mausoleum, or whatever it is..."

"Are we running low on gold?" Morrison asked, holding the little black pouch up to his face and pressing an eye into it.

"Of that bag there, yes," Scorpius said inattentively, still eyeing the map. "I have some emergency gold stored at the inn, but I'm holding off as long as I...do you want to be a little more careful with that?" he changed his sentence midway, seeing how open Morrison was being in his antics.

"What? I got it..."

"Put it away mate, this isn't Diagon Alley," Albus reminded his friend, though he too was now eyeing the map, trying to work out just where Scorpius was getting his information from.

"I'm just counting," Morrison told them, now sifting through it with his lanky fingers.

"Alright, looks like we're not *too* far off," Scorpius said. "From the first place anyway...we just head straight for a bit, and I think we turn right on the street with that scrawny guy that tried selling us powdered dragon claw, remember him Al? Then we can probably just cut through an alley-"

"Hey!"

Albus looked up, his first sight a furious Morrison. What he realized next was that his hands were empty.

"What hap-" but he'd already caught sight of the culprit; a young man, somewhere around their age, was barreling through the crowd, looking back only once to reveal a rat like face and beady blue eyes.

"Dammit I told you-" Scorpius started, but Morrison had already bolted away.

"Come back here!" he roared, actually pushing someone down as he tore through the crowd after the thief.

"Wait-" Albus started, but Morrison too had already looked back, revealing a ferocious expression.

"Go on, I'll catch up!" he growled, and a moment later he'd vanished into the throng of passerby.

"Great," Albus said bitterly, tossing his arms. "Do we go after him?"

Scorpius groaned, now stuffing the map away. "We're already nearly there," he contested.

Albus heaved a sigh. He felt it terribly wrong to pursue in this matter without their third friend- especially as it had been Morrison who had attained what was quite possibly their most critical lead thus far. And yet, there was a bigger purpose in it all, something that transcended whatever natural right Morrison had to reaping the rewards of his hard work. This Jean St. West person- despite not even being a factor two days ago- was now the most solid link to Darvy that they possessed. And Albus had started this journey to find and defeat Darvy, whether his friends were there to help or not.

"Do you think he'll be okay without us?" Albus asked.

"Eh that kid was a weasel, Morrison can take him," Scorpius answered.

Albus narrowed his eyes. "I mean in getting back to us," he said.

"He'll be fine, he knows to head back to the Inn if we're ever split up too long. Let's just go- no point in having all three of us squander the day."

Albus nodded in agreement, and together he and Scorpius continued in their venture, Albus slightly behind as Scorpius continued to maneuver them towards their destination.

"I really do hope he gets that gold back though..." Scorpius said a few minutes later, and Albus, for some reason, felt annoyed by the statement. He kept quiet though, not speaking for what felt like another fifteen minutes, when his friend finally started to slow down.

"Are we here?" Albus asked, gazing around and looking for a street sign that might indicate their whereabouts.

"Should be right around here," Scorpius said, still creeping along, his eyes darting back and forth from his makeshift map to the surrounding area. "Blimey, it's creepy around here, isn't it?"

Albus was just thinking the same thing. The usual clogging of Kakos denizens was nowhere to be found where they stood now; it was an entirely abandoned block, with many of the houses looking boarded up beyond repair. There were no sign posts directing them towards shops either; aside from the always lingering smell, they were quite alone.

"Wait," Scorpius said, pointing up diagonally, and Albus darted his eyes to where he was gesturing. There, at the very corner of the street, a sign hung reading **W. Cotillard Rd.**

They both hurried towards it, though Albus, upon looking up and reviewing the sign, felt a nagging in his head.

"That 'W'-"

"Yup," Scorpius said dryly, screeching to a halt. And then, with a shake of his blonde head, he pointed towards a sign hanging above the street adjacent it. "And there's the other half of your new informant."

Jean St.

Albus placed his hands on his hips, a feeling of disappointment coursing through him.

"Jean Street and West Cottillard Road," Scorpius announced unnecessarily, mock triumph in his voice. "I mean, really, could this have happened to anyone *other* than Morrison?"

Albus tried tuning him out, still gazing around. Despite his frustration, he knew that there was still something of importance about this place. He tried evaluating their options...

"I knew it didn't add up," Scorpius continued from behind him. "'Jean St. West', nobody has names in this place, and if they did, they damn sure wouldn't be named that! Should have known something was off the moment he walked in-"

"Do you want to stop that!?" Albus spat, turning on his heel. Scorpius looked bemused.

"Stop what-"

"*That*," Albus told him. "Attacking Morrison all of the time. I didn't exactly invite you guys to a picnic you know, this was supposed to be difficult. And he's really trying-"

"Hey, I didn't mean-"

"And besides," Albus cut him off, "this doesn't mean anything. So he got his streets mixed up, he still mentioned Darvy, and all that means is that Darvy might even be here-"

"Is that him, at the end of the block?" Scorpius interjected smugly, pointing.

Albus turned, squinting his eyes. There was no one in sight, but there was another sign, sitting overhead a long, twisted street that seemed to coil itself off into the distance.

Darvy St.

"You were saying?" Scorpius said, and Albus actually balled his fingers into fists. It wasn't Scorpius he was angry at, though; it was himself.

"To be fair," Scorpius started, "I'm not going to fault Morrison for that one, there's no way he

could have known-

"I could have known," Albus said darkly. "I knew."

"Knew what?"

"The street name," Albus said flatly, not even bothering to turn and face his friend. "Ares told me. That street, that's where Darvy was born. Where his mother left him."

Silence followed this factoid, which was a good thing, as Albus wasn't in the mood to say anything else. Instead he stood there, gazing off in the distance at the sign, something akin to defeat overtaking him. It wasn't until he felt Scorpius' hand on his shoulder that he looked away.

"Al," his friend said softly, looking at him. "I don't mean anything by it, you know that, right?"

Albus shifted his mouth into a sour shape, and Scorpius continued in the same tone. "I haven't got any siblings. You and Morrison are as close to brothers as I'll ever know. I love him, you know? That's why I say those things. Because I know they don't matter. You know what I mean?"

Albus said nothing at first, only nodding. But when he did answer, it was in an equally subdued manner.

"I get it," he answered. "But still...this isn't like most times. Take it down a notch."

Scorpius gave a shrug, but the look on his face was sufficient in telling that he understood. "You're right," he said. "You're right. You ready to head back now?"

Albus turned away, thinking about it. "Not just yet," he said, and without knowing why, he began walking towards the sign; towards Darvy Street.

Scorpius followed along after him, but it wasn't a very long walk. Albus stopped right as he reached the tip of the serpentine lane, and there he looked on in wonder.

This was where Darvy had been born. Where he'd been left to die, on this cobblestone pathway, squished in between the homes that had probably housed the most sinister of tenants, one of whom had first taken the wailing babe in, for any number of reasons, unquestionably unaware of what the infant would one day become. This was where a child named Sebastian had fought for his survival, had earned his keep, and had shaped himself into Sebastian Darvy, the identity he would retain for so many years, before finally shedding it all in favor of something more grandiose, the moniker that he took to now, either to distance himself from this place or prove himself to it; the cold and crazed being that was Death's Right Hand.

Was it Darvy's fault? He'd so seldom considered such things, especially as of late. But Darvy existed in his current state only because he had needed to do so. Anything less, it seemed, would have resulted in his death.

And yet, he found it difficult to pity him. Because no matter what the situation, choices had been made. Darvy had escaped this place, hadn't he? There had been an opportunity for him to change, to take on a new identity, a new life. Ares had offered his brother the same thing that he had offered to Fango Wilde; and Darvy had rejected it. Whatever this horrible place had done to shape him, however comfortable he'd grown with it all, there had to have been *some* struggle, some conflict, and yet it seemed as though the battle had not been a long one. Darvy had lost himself to that primal, savage, brutal portion of his own mind, the same one that Albus was on the cusp of succumbing to now. Only Darvy's personhood hadn't been hijacked by some magical object and forced into contention; it had been a natural process, the gradual eradication of whatever good had existed within him by an addiction to power and recognition. Albus wasn't sure if that made his descent more or less forgivable.

And for the first time since beginning in his mission, he felt like he didn't belong where he was. Because standing here, where Darvy had grown up, and had been forced to do such horrible things, made Albus *feel* like the madman. Because just now he was starting to count the things that he had done, the things that had brought him here, and however right it had felt when he'd been scouring Wilde's home, and breaking into the Brennan household, and betraying Eckley, now it all felt wrong. And he knew that such thoughts were too simple, too black and white, and yet he was beginning to prefer things this way. Because no matter how much Fairhart's words had made sense to him, he couldn't live by them, couldn't do the things that his scarred friend had done; he wasn't strong enough. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be endangering Morrison and Scorpius, and seeking out a tyrant. He wanted to be with his family. He wanted to be with Mirra again, he wanted-

He lurched.

"Mate? Al-"

But Albus had already sunk to his knees. A terrible pain had shot through him, starting in his spine and working its way to his head, and then his very thoughts had turned to ash, disintegrating within him and giving rise to new feelings, angrier feelings, a sense of paranoia and disorientation. And then everything was gold.

He stood, the pain subsiding, along with everything else that made his body feel like a body. He turned, the scene whirling about, shaded in a dark, musty yellow, and somewhere-at the edge of consciousness-he knew that there was supposed to be a person, somebody, behind him. And yet there wasn't. Instead there was a slimy skeleton, tall and menacing, its hollow eyes boring into his own, and Albus reacted instinctively, whipping his wand out and aiming it at the beast, preparing to blow it to bits-

But the Silhouette produced its own wand then, staggering and aiming it right back at him. But that didn't make sense-

"Al! *Albus!*"

Albus blinked furiously, the shading of the world disappearing. Where the Silhouette had been

standing, Scorpius now stood again, looking frightened. His wand was outstretched, but his arm was shaking.

"Wh- what happened-" Albus started to asked, but Scorpius had already started to answer.

"You pulled your wand on me!"

Albus swallowed, suddenly feeling sick. "My- my eyes- were they- were they gold?"

"Your eyes were fine," Scorpius said, lowering his wand an inch or two. "As green as always. Everything was fine, it was just you. You were looking right at me. You looked...panicked."

Albus wasn't sure if it was his body reacting to the ordeal or to these words, but whatever the case, he hurled.

"Ughk-" Scorpius cringed, watching as he doubled over, spitting up whatever little was in his stomach.

"I'm sorry-" Albus started, not sure of what it was in particular he was apologizing for-perhaps just everything.

"It's fine," Scorpius said, kneeling at his side. "But was that- was that what you were talking about...?"

Albus heaved a sigh, then nodded, the physical aspect of his sickness over with. "I saw something," he said. "Something that- that wasn't real. Ares said it would happen next."

Scorpius cursed under his breath, though he reached down and slung Albus' arm over his shoulder regardless. "Alright, let's get you out of here mate," he said, supporting him as he walked. "This street is evil..."

"It's not the street," Albus lamented. "It's me."

Scorpius said nothing, only leading him away. For several minutes they walked in this way, Albus somehow growing more exhausted despite having Scorpius to lean on. They were just getting back to West Cotillard Road when Albus spoke.

"Don't- don't tell Morrison," he said.

"About the puke?"

"No," Albus said, shaking his head. "Well-that too. But I mean what I just did, all of it. Just don't want to have to talk about it."

Scorpius nodded. "That's your choice," he said. "But I'm definitely telling him about his little mix up. If we're going to get Darvy, we're going to have to do better than just taking down street

names-

"I don't think he's here," Albus interjected, now straightening his posture and trying to move on his own.

"Say what?"

"Darvy," he explained. "I don't think he's here."

"Why not?" Scorpius asked, sounding somewhat perturbed.

"I just feel like he wouldn't want to stay," Albus divulged. "I'm sure he came back here for a bit, I'm sure he did stuff, but I just don't think he'd bother staying here long. He wouldn't want to be reminded of when he was a nobody."

"Huh," Scorpius grunted. "Well...like I said before. You've got a good grasp on him. So what do we do from here?"

"I'm not sure yet," Albus said, now walking on his own, though still clutching at his side. "Let's just get back to Morrison-

He stopped there though, suddenly becoming aware of the fact that they were no longer alone. Up ahead two people were walking, one slightly behind the other. The man at the front was old and stooping, moving slightly and carrying a large bag, apparently with difficulty. Albus could see the light reflecting from his bald, tan head, though this didn't distract him from the man behind him, who was taller and completely covered. He was walking only a few paces behind, but looked as though he was speeding up...

Scorpius saw it too. "Hey!" he yelled out, and both men turned. A moment later, the larger one had spun about, grabbing at the elderly man and throwing him to the ground.

"Hey!" Scorpius called out again, and he gave Albus a look of consideration, as though asking if he could temporarily leave him unattended.

"Go!" Albus confirmed, watching now as the assailant grabbed at the large brown bag and made to run off.

"Get back here!" Scorpius yelled, and he removed his wand. There was a banging noise just as the thief made to turn the corner, followed by a yelp. The man was blown backwards, dropping the bag to the ground, slightly spilling some of the contents. Albus could just make out a lone apple rolling on the road.

Scorpius continued to jog towards the scene, though the thief, apparently deciding to cut his losses, abandoned the bag completely and hurried off out of sight. Albus watched as his friend retrieved the bag, though he himself inched his way towards the old man, who was still struggling to his feet.

"You okay?" he asked.

The stranger stood, revealing a wrinkly, olive face and a look of gratitude. When he answered, though, it was in a hurried tone, and a language that Albus couldn't understand as well.

"Is he hurt?" Scorpius asked, nearing the two of them.

"I don't think so," Albus answered, still trying to make something out of the man's frantic thanks.

"It's okay, we get it," Scorpius told the victim, handing the bag over. He bowed to them courteously, still uttering words that they couldn't understand, then continued along on his way, cutting through an alleyway and out of sight.

"Hate this place," Scorpius said, once he was out of sight. "Thieves everywhere."

"Hopefully he's okay to get wherever it is he's going," Albus commented, for some reason feeling a little stronger; it was as though the brief ordeal had energized him.

"He's fine...come on, let's go see what Morrison has gotten himself up to."

They resumed in their walking, neither of them speaking any further of what had just happened. Albus walked himself, however, and together the two of them worked their way back to familiar territory without any need for Scorpius' now useless map. For what may have been twenty minutes they wordlessly steered one another through the streets, the appearances of more and more people strong signs of how near they were getting to their destination. Albus had just caught sight of Colton's Inn when Scorpius had pointed to it.

"Look who showed up," he said flatly.

Morrison was standing by the Inn, looking antsy. When he caught sight of them approaching he opened his mouth, but it was Scorpius who spoke first.

"Get the gold?" he asked.

"No," Morrison said quickly. "But-"

"Figures. Well anyway, your Jean West pal didn't give us much. Guy doesn't exist."

Albus gave his friend a look, and he changed his tone at once.

"Not that it means anything, was a good lead, just have to cross it off-"

"Right," Morrison said, and Albus noticed that his friend, oddly enough, wasn't even listening. "Well look-"

"Al reckons-"

"*Let me talk!*" Morrison snapped, as Albus and Scorpius finally stopped just short of him.

"What's going on mate?" Albus asked, suddenly worried.

Morrison started playing with his fingers, looking oddly conflicted. "I sort of- I sort of did something without you guys," he said.

Scorpius tilted his head to the side, looking disbelieving. "We were gone for an hour, maybe a bit more. What did you get up to in an hour-"

"I went to a Dark Alliance meeting," he responded, looking around as he said it.

"*What!?*" Albus asked, though Scorpius couldn't even muster that. His jaw dropped.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

Morrison nodded, grinning widely now. "And that's not all," he said, bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet. "I've got the time and place for the next one, too."

Chapter 14: The Descent

Chapter 14: The Descent

Seldom could Albus remember a stretch of time in which so much planning had been developed so quickly. True, his time with Fairhart had involved quite a bit of preparation, though that was more so instruction than actual devising, a general form of training that happened to be focused around a single, overarching mission. The priming that he was doing now was not nearly as vague, but instead meticulous, established once and then added to in detail every available moment. He and his friends had somewhere to be; an appointment that they needed to catch, really.

The days following his aimless venture to Darvy Street seemed to slip by unnaturally fast, though there was at once both a desire for them to halt as well as to accelerate. Of all of the clocks that Albus had set in his head—all of the hourglasses he'd overturned—the most recent to be set was also the most precise. To the very hour.

Morrison had managed a truly incredible feat, securing both the location and exact time of the next Dark Alliance meeting. Albus had devoured this information hungrily moments after learning it existed, but the details as to just how his friend had stumbled upon such information were rather jumbled; it seemed even he wasn't entirely sure.

"Let's do this one more time," Scorpius said, waving his wand casually over his cloak, altering the color to a rather specific shade. "From the top."

The three of them were sitting in their room, Morrison on the bed, Albus and Scorpius working from floor level. Albus gave his taller friend a kind smile, as a means of abating him; it was the fifth time that Scorpius was having him go over it.

Morrison sighed. "Well obviously, it starts with me chasing that little rat. He cut through that alley where all those cats are, and I followed him, but lost him for a second, so I leapt over—"

"Just skip to the meat of it," Albus encouraged him, but Scorpius gave him a patronizing look.

"I want the *whole* thing," he said sharply, and Morrison groaned.

"Why don't you *ever* believe me?" he whined.

"Well because your last tip got me and Al almost robbed, that's why—"

"Hey, that guy wasn't even after us—"

"Whatever!" Scorpius snapped, and he then gave Morrison a steely gaze. "Fine, skip the chase."

But leave everything else."

Morrison nodded professionally, then placed the tips of his fingers together, as though preparing to dramatize the situation. Albus caught an annoyed look from Scorpius, but said nothing; so long as Morrison could provide accurate details, he didn't care in how it was presented.

"After that wretched bandit had eluded me, I decided to regroup in an area that I thought would be familiar. I hadn't made up my mind on if I wanted to continue in my chase, or return to you guys-

"Fine, fine, out with it-" Scorpius barked, and Morrison sighed, his voice turning flat.

"I ended up at the bell tower. A block or so from it, maybe. And I saw some blokes walk into it."

"And just to clarify this once more," Scorpius started slowly, as though speaking to a child, "they didn't go through a door of any kind-

"Right through the wall mate, right at the side of the tower."

"I told you guys already," Albus interrupted, "I've seen that before. Eckley's crowd, they were held up in some place, it was the same way. Only they needed ties to get through."

"It's some kind of barrier magic," Scorpius said, rubbing at his chin. "But what could you need to get through?"

"I told you already," Morrison insisted, "nothing. I got in okay, and I've got nothing on me."

"That doesn't make any sense-

"It sort of does," Albus commented. "I doubt that these guys are being that strict with getting in and out, seeing as no one is supposed to know anyway, right? And there's not much they can have on them here, plus it seems like they're recruiting often...it may just be a secret place, somewhere to gather."

"You sure they're not using masks or anything, like the ties were being used?" Scorpius asked. "Morrison said that they all had masks-

"But *I didn't*," Morrison reminded him.

"Damn, that's right-

"And I doubt it's a secret-keeper either," Albus told them both, "like what Waddlesworth was using for WAR. That involves too much, and it's way too chaotic for what they're doing. They're just relying on how shady this place is to keep them secret. We can get in."

He said this last part affirmatively, as if to assure himself even further. Scorpius gave a

begrudging sigh at these words, then returned his attention to Morrison.

"If you say so," he said. "Anyone, once we're *in*, what are we dealing with again? What's the first thing you did?"

"Well I followed them in," Morrison said simply. "Not too long after they went, I went. 'Course, I didn't know then that they were part of Darvy's lot-I suspected it a bit, but didn't know it-but I went in, figured it might be a lead. Did some wandering around on my own; place is really big, creepy looking on the inside too, definitely expanded magically. But handsome," he added, as though it had only come to him now, upon further retrospection.

"And when you finally walked into the meeting room," Scorpius said testily, "there was-"

"Probably a good fifty of them," Morrison told him, and Albus raised his eyebrows in panic. Scorpius scowled though.

"*Fifty!*? The first time you said twenty-"

"I dunno, twenty to fifty! Somewhere in that range-"

"Well there's a big difference, mate!" Scorpius said, throwing his arms out. "The same difference between zero and thirty, actually, so try and remember-"

"Say maybe thirty-five?" Albus asked his friend. "Too many to count, but they all fit?"

"Yeah, that's about right," Morrison said, turning away from Scorpius completely, who was now seething. "Everyone definitely had a seat, we were at this big, long, marble table. That's when I noticed that some of them had their masks on."

"And the same masks-"

"I've seen the Dark Alliance loads of times," Morrison defended prematurely. "Crashed my sister's wedding and all, didn't they? They were the same masks, trust me on this."

"Okay, fine, so you took a seat and then...just kept your mouth shut?"

"I was in a daze mate, didn't know what to do," Morrison told him. "Had half a mind to run out of there," he added, sounding slightly embarrassed at the thought. "But no one asked me any questions, so I sat there, between some witch with red hair and some bloke with a fat nose, and I listened. No one recognized me, I guess."

"Well admittedly, you haven't be on their immediate to-kill list before," Albus said, feeling his heart sink. "Me just sitting there might be a different story."

"And same here," Scorpius said sourly, looking down and focusing on his work. "My family's probably had some of them over for supper before. We're definitely going to need to be hidden."

"Well that's why we're hard at work," Albus said, now discarding his cloak-which he thought he'd crafted sufficiently-and picking up one of the blank, solid masks that Scorpius had purchased for the three of them from a shifty clothing outlet the day prior. "Now let's get you all touched up," he said to it, now waving his wand in a different pattern.

The idea to have them dress as Dark Alliance members had come naturally, but the actual manner in which the task was met had been a point of contention. Morrison had placed no real stake in anything, but Albus had put forth the idea of ambushing real members and taking their clothing, for the most efficient accuracy conceivable. Scorpius had point-blank refused this, insisting it was an unnecessary risk, and had instead had the idea to assemble their attire and simply alter it magically as needed. As usual, his friend's doggedness-coupled with his verbosity-had won out, and the result was that they now sat with only two nights left to craft their disguises and ensure that they were as ready as they were ever going to be.

"You know, this would have been a lot easier if you'd just brought your Cloak along with you," Morrison said, apparently unwilling to let silence take over. He had all but given up on his outfit for the night, however-Albus had the shrewd suspicion that Scorpius would end up finishing it with moments to spare.

"Yeah, that's occurred to me a few times now," Albus responded sullenly, not wanting to think about it.

Scorpius seemed to catch on to his indignation at the remark, for he once more launched them into discussion about the meeting that Morrison had miraculously managed to attend in full.

"And for the very last time," he started out of nowhere, looking up at his friend expectantly, "let's go over just what it is you heard."

Morrison went quiet for a moment, as though to sort his thoughts, but Albus squirmed inwardly. Scorpius may have been attempting to steer them into more comfortable territory, but this was hardly the question to ask, considering that everything Morrison had told them before had been nauseating for him. And it seemed that this time, there was no debate in his memory of what he'd heard.

"Well...just that Darvy was ready to start rebuilding his army," he said, and Albus felt a chill go through his spine. No matter how many times it was uttered, it always had the same effect.

"But no word on where? Where he was?"

Albus knew that Scorpius' reasoning behind this question was largely inspired by hope that they could skip their current plan entirely. It was all about finding Darvy, after all, and if they could learn of his location, there wouldn't be much benefit to the drastic lengths that they were approaching. But as before, Morrison couldn't offer anything of the sort.

"Sorry," he said. "No word on it. Even seemed like they didn't know. Though it sounded like he wasn't here; like he'd left them behind to do things."

Albus gave the tiniest of nods; he'd come to this conclusion previously, after all, and these words now had done just as they'd done before-served as horrible confirmation of the matter. But Morrison still had more to offer.

"Also mentioned tons of stuff about storing the potions they'd been making, something about a portrait, a bunch of talk on some bloke named Markson-"

"Markson," Scorpius repeated, "I've heard that name before..."

"Same here," Albus told him. "Couldn't point him out, but he's been part of that lot for a while, I'm sure of it."

"Yeah, well just stuff like that," Morrison said. "But like I mentioned before...they just seemed...I dunno. Like they were really unsure of themselves. Like whatever was going on, they weren't actually *in on it*. I remember being there and having the feeling that *they* felt a little left out of the loop."

Albus caught a nervous look on Scorpius' face following these words, and could only assume that his friend was thinking over the same thing that he was; there was a chance-a small one, but a chance nonetheless-that the Dark Alliance meeting they'd be attending was actually going to push them in the wrong direction. Especially if these red-masked wizards and witches were actually more similar to the Dark Defectors than to the collection of dark wizards that Darvy had amassed.

"What are you guys thinking?" Morrison said after a moment, eyeing the both of them suspiciously. Albus made to speak, but Scorpius, predictably, made the very suggestion that he was going to make; bar a slight twist.

"I think I'm going to scout out the bell tower tomorrow," he said.

"Alone?" Albus asked testily, and Scorpius gave him a firm, defiant nod.

"If any of them are hanging around there, you're most likely to be identified," he argued. "And you," he added to Morrison, "may be recognized just because you were there before-that could lead to some awkward questions. Now I may have a Malfoy look to me, but at least I haven't been seen there before. Besides, I'm best at fitting in around here."

Albus groaned, wishing that he could provide a reasonable counterargument, but he simply couldn't muster one. So instead he returned to coloring his mask, which was already too bright in its redness, and kept to his own thoughts. Until Morrison sighed and collapsed on the bed, that is.

"So much easier with the Cloak," he lamented.

By the time that Albus had awoken the next day, Scorpius had already left for his bout of reconnaissance, leaving he and Morrison to ensure that all of their other affairs were in order.

Apart from finishing the uniforms, they were also tasked with ensuring that they would have a smooth departure available in the event that their time in Kakos was coming to a close. This meant that Morrison was forced to haggle with Colton over items of a monetary nature, while Albus tended to their room upstairs, gathering their belongings for what might well need to be a quick exit.

The mats that he and Scorpius had been sleeping on could be rolled up come morning, but the tent needed to be packed away, as did the supplies that now littered their humble dwelling. There were cans and jars of food that needed sorting, clothes that needed to be packed up, and, perhaps most importantly, slips of parchment that needed to be organized; Scorpius had been quite diligent in his accumulation of notes, and they were keen on leaving none of it behind.

And then, there came his own belongings. Just as when he'd left Struckton, there was little for him to consider bringing along-only two wands and a blank sheet of parchment.

Fairhart's letter remained wiped, and yet Albus was certain that even if he never removed the enchantment, he would still consider the sheet invaluable. It was the words of his friend and mentor that had guided him through much of his journey thus far, but moreover, he felt as though it were his responsibility to keep Fairhart's views close. The last thing that the scarred man had ever written had been of encouragement towards him, and Albus wanted to ensure that these words did not go to waste. Of all that Fairhart had done for him, from teaching him complex magic, to training him to track and gather information, to pushing his plans of stopping Darvy into the direction that they were now, it was his words of kindness that Albus appreciated most.

The sleeve of parchment would thus remain on him, stowed away even within his disguise, nestled next to another item that wasn't truly his; Ares' wand.

Fango Wilde's peace offering had been beneficial back in Struckton, effectively aiding him in his escape from the Dark Defectors and, consequently, leading him here. The wand that Reginald Ares had once used bared no emotional significance to him, not in the way Fairhart's letter did anyway, and yet, Albus could not help but feel drawn to it, as though it were something more than simply another tool at his disposal. However little he'd known of Ares-whatever his thoughts on his father's once friend may be or may have been-there was a connection of sorts between them. Both of them had been elected by the Dragonfang Wand after all, and both of them had ultimately been destined to succumb to its devices in exchange for the power that it offered. But at the time of Ares' death, he'd still valued his own wand more; this was evident in that it had served to activate the Foulest Book. And that meant that Ares had still clung to his identity, had still, at that time at least, been himself; had died as himself.

Albus removed his own wand, examining it next to Ares'. It was slightly shorter, and not quite as pointed, and his handle was crafted in a slightly smoother way, allowing for more comfortable swishing. He held it under his gaze sadly, recalling all that it had done for him. This wand did not evoke that sense of control in him that the Dragonfang Wand did, that awesome surge of power that had frustrated, yet amused him for so long. And yet, he was very happy to say to himself

that he preferred his own. Perhaps that itself was the reason why; because it was his own, had had no other owners. It was part of his identity.

I hope I die how Ares did, he thought inwardly, and bizarre though the thought was, he felt no desire to take it back. His wish was not for the betrayal that Ares had endured, nor the pain or the suffering, but rather, for his state of being; for, despite the temptations of the Dragonfang Wand, remaining true to himself.

"Everything alright, mate?"

Albus hastily stowed both wands away, turning abruptly as he did so. Morrison was standing in their room, looking flustered, in the act of closing the door behind him.

"Yeah, I- can I ask you something?"

He wasn't sure why he was suddenly in the mood to discuss it; especially as it had only been days ago that he'd asked Scorpius to refrain from even mentioning it. But somehow, having Morrison enter the room and kindly initiate conversation had taken him back to his years at Hogwarts, when such things had been so commonplace. Morrison capitalized on his nostalgia immediately.

"Sure thing, what's going on?"

Albus sat down on the bed, sinking into it uncomfortably. Looking up, he tried to choose his words carefully.

"You- you've seen me...when I'm all messed up," he said. "Like when the Hogwarts Express got attacked, like that. And you were there the first time, too-"

"I remember," Morrison cut him off, shifting his eyes about as though he wasn't quite sure where the conversation could be turning. "Why?"

Albus scratched at the back of his neck, voicing a thought that had been creeping about in his head for quite some time, even if it had never been organized into words.

"If that's how I- how I end up. Like if that's the last thing you see me as, as that- that monster. Is that how you...is that how you would remember me?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you Al," Morrison said, sounding almost annoyed. He then took a seat next to him. "Honestly, you act like everything's done and over with, there's plenty that can happen-"

"I know," Albus interjected, feeling his stomach churn. "I know-I'm sure I'll be fine," he lied. "But if- if that were the case..."

He trailed off here, hoping that Morrison was going to take his question seriously. And to Albus'

very great surprise, he did.

"Of course not," his friend said. "I couldn't remember you like that, because I know that's not you. It's not like you just get angry, or sad, and have little mood swings now and then, is it? It's a different thing entirely. I know you, Al. Scorpius does too. And so does your mum, your dad, your brother and sister, Mirra-we all know you. We know you can be a git, we know you can be a hasty little bugger, and we know-probably more than anything else-that you're not the type of person that lobs trains at people. So stop worrying about it, okay?"

Albus said nothing, only giving his friend a wry smile. Morrison's words had calmed and reassured him, but at the same time, he could not escape that his friend had been wrong on a fundamental level. The ominous Albus with glowing eyes and a sadistic sneer was him. It was triggered by the Dragonfang Wand, yes, but it had existed inside of him already, simply requiring the Wand to take form. Morrison and others close to him were not aware of this fact, and despite his recent policy of providing truth to his friends, Albus thought it an overall better decision to refrain from putting forth such ideas.

Morrison seemed to be content with his own answer, though, as at the next moment he'd risen, stretching his lanky body wide and giving a yawn.

"Well now that that's sorted," he started, "I've got some more errands to run. Cleared things up with Colton, but I sort of lost us our meal for the night, so going to go and scrounge something up. Should be back around when Scorpius is. You should get to bed early though," he added, giving him a shrewd look.

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Because you look a little anxious," Morrison told him. "We've got a big day tomorrow, and it seems like you've got everything put together here, so turn in early, eh? Quiet down that head of yours. Take the bed," he added, giving him a grin.

Albus answered with a grin of his own, prepared to combat this suggestion, but the temptation to rest his back after more than a week of sleeping on a hard floor was too great. And so, he gave a reluctant nod, followed by a mild wave as his friend exited.

How long he lay there in bed he wasn't quite sure, but the stillness of being alone proved to be both haunting and refreshing. Darkness encroached him slowly as he blinked his eyes in a tired pattern; he had not realized it before, but taking part in such mundane activities had exhausted him, even with the day only half over. Voices were swimming about in his ears as he buried his head in his arms, audible but indistinct, until a low whimper made his skin crawl.

"Don't..."

Albus perked his ears up, feeling feverish. At first there was nothing, and then...

"Please..."

He tore the thin, moth-eaten blanket off of him, standing up and surveying the cramped room. No sooner had his feet touched the cold floor did he hear the piteous moan again, this time accompanied by what might have been sniffing.

"*Why? Why?*"

Albus spun on the spot, expecting to see the source of the noise, but there was nothing. There was nothing anywhere in the darkness, nothing beside himself, the bed, and the things that he'd packed. And yet, the room seemed larger. More barren.

And then he heard another voice, a more fragile, cracking one, one mixed with a desperate sob.

"*Al!*"

He saw it. In the corner, someone was huddled, knees to chin, tangled black hair masking her face. But he knew who it was; he'd known from the first word.

"Mirra!" he breathed, hurrying over to her, but the room seemed to stretch on unusually long—he was out of breath when he reached her.

"What are you- what are you doing here?" he demanded of her, cold sweat accumulating on his skin. He knelt at her side, just as she looked up at him, her deep grey eyes blotchy.

"*Why?*" she repeated, and when he went to touch her, she recoiled. Albus stared, not understanding anything. How had she gotten here? What had happened? Why was she crying?

And then he saw it. She slid her legs out, showing that she was in her night gown, and somehow-impossibly-two other figures appeared, visible in the crevice formed by her upright body. Both had flaming red hair, and one was holding on to the other.

Hugo looked at him, Lily's head cradled on his shoulder. Her eyes were widened, but blank; she was dead.

"No!"

Albus grabbed at her, actually pushing Mirra aside; she felt solid and weighty as she collapsed next to him. But he didn't register it, he'd already removed Lily from his cousin's arms, sinking to his knees, cradling her-

"*Al!*"

He turned, only to see a light shining in his face.

"What the hell are you doing, mate?"

Albus stared through the darkness in confusion, holding an arm up to shield his eyes. At the

next moment it become unnecessary, however, as the entire room had become illuminated.

It was Scorpius who had his wand pointed, the tip of which had extinguished itself just as light had flooded the room. Morrison stood by the door, eyeing him warily.

Albus looked down, then all around them. There was no one there.

"What's going on?" Scorpius asked him.

"I- I was asleep," he said, and he wasn't even sure if he was lying or not. That could not have been a dream; it had been so real...he had *felt* her...

"You weren't asleep," Morrison informed him. "Your eyes were open, you were just like that there, cryi-"

Scorpius cleared his throat, which served as a signal of sorts; Morrison cut himself off swiftly. Albus felt his face burn red though. Part of it was embarrassment, but yet, Scorpius had seen this behavior before, and he'd just spoken to Morrison about his troubles. The true reason behind the queasiness that he felt now, he realized, was that the hallucination that he'd just endured had been his most realistic yet.

"What time is it?" he asked, wondering if he'd even slept. It certainly didn't feel like it.

"It's late," Scorpius said cryptically, before casting a look over his shoulder at Morrison.

Albus winced at this somewhat, though felt that it was a justifiable exchange. Unwilling to argue, he pulled himself to his feet, only to find that Scorpius remained unmoving.

"Anything you want to talk about?" he asked, sounding concerned.

Albus frowned. "Nothing you guys don't already know about," he admitted.

"Well let's just get some sleep in," Morrison said, approaching one of the mats on the floor-it seemed as though his gesture from earlier still stood.

"Yeah," Albus agreed, rubbing at the back of his neck. Without helping it, he cast a sideways glance at the corner where he'd been though. He wasn't sure if Scorpius caught it or not, but if he did, he didn't press the point.

"Try not to worry," his friend told him, and Albus nearly laughed as he crawled back into the bed. "I'm serious," Scorpius went on. "I scoped the place out, and we're in as good a shape as can be. I think we've really got a shot at this tomorrow. We just need our rest."

The lights went off after this-presumably due to Morrison-and a stretch of silence followed. Albus simply lay there, back in the bed, listening as his friends settled themselves into their respective places on the floor, and it wasn't until he was certain that they were not going to get

up and address him that he spoke aloud.

"I feel like it all comes down to tomorrow," he croaked.

"We'll just have to see-" Morrison's voice pierced the darkness, but Albus fought it off.

"Not just the meeting, not just the Dark Alliance. I just- I have this feeling. Like once we start, it has to end. And I think- and I think you guys should know that-"

"We know mate," Scorpius said. "And I feel it too," he added.

There was a moment of waiting-

"Fine," Morrison sighed. "I feel it too, okay? But can we *please* just hold off on it tonight? I spent all damn day dealing with that old coot, I'm exhausted."

Albus smiled. "Yeah. Night, guys."

"Night..."

"Night, mate..."

Albus had the sudden urge to pull bed hangings together, but his fingers seemed to die before they could even begin moving. Instead he rolled on his side, trying desperately to clear his thoughts, only to have them erupt in his head mercilessly.

He remembered the potion that he'd brewed. Just weeks ago, in Fairhart's cabin, he'd set the whole plan in motion. That concoction that seemed to have successfully destroyed the Foulest Book was now gone...and that meant that he had virtually no options on how to solve the second of his two, accompanying problems. Tomorrow was his chance to gather Darvy's complete whereabouts. To learn where Death's Right Hand was hiding, that he might meet him, and finish what they started on the island that had housed Azkaban. But where Darvy was, the Dragonfang Wand would be too. Ares had casted doubt on the *Mortem Necavero*, but then, at least it had been *something*. What existed now, that he could obtain in such a short amount of time? Ares had researched the Wand better than anyone, better than Fairhart even, and he seemed to acknowledge it as a living thing, or as close to such a thing as something nonliving could be. Complete destruction would be insufficient, according to him. But what then, could Albus do?

He felt a tear slide down his cheek at the prospect, for the first time since the night where he'd learned of his fate. That hallucination that he'd just suffered had been so twisted, so real-his mind truly was going. What frightened him most now was that the indications he'd always had of his slipping were soon going to cease completely, but then, wasn't that what the issue actually was? Could someone insane realize when they were acting as such? Could someone who'd lost their mind know that it was missing?

It doesn't matter, he told himself, and he knew, somehow, that it was really him who was speaking in his head. That sinister aspect of his consciousness was done tormenting him for the night. *It doesn't matter what happens to me, as long as I stop him. As long as they're safe.*

This thought burned itself into him, more clear than any other he could remember having. He allowed that feeling of inspiration to course through him as he lay there, blocking out the snores that Morrison had already brought to his ears, waiting for sleep to come to him so that the agonizing night prior to their action in the morning could pass, so that he could make his desires a reality.

"Al?"

Albus felt his heartbeat quicken, before realizing that it was just Scorpius speaking, his voice slightly lower.

"Hmm?" he grunted back.

"Do you- do you remember how nervous we would get, the night before a Quidditch game?"

Albus thought about it for only a moment before grinning. "Yeah," he whispered. "I do. Why?"

Scorpius took a few seconds to respond, but when he did, it sounded as though he'd rolled himself over. "No reason," he said. "Just wondering."

Albus said nothing, and after a time, he too rolled back over.

Chapter 15: The Meeting

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It was a strange thing how his body worked. Albus had been certain when falling asleep the previous night that he was going to awake to aches and pains, his eyes burning and his legs unusually heavy. He'd spent so much time twisting and turning, his mind churning out fears and expectations, that it had often seemed as though sleep were going to elude him completely; that his morning would never truly begin, and that the day would serve as a mere continuation of the one before it.

But that wasn't the case. He felt lively and energetic when awaking, brimming with something that resembled excitement-though of course, in much drearier terms. It was a familiar feeling, and it took him most of the morning to remember just when he'd had it before. The same mixture of fear and keenness that accompanied him now had been the same with him back when he'd be on the boat with Fairhart those months ago, speeding towards Azkaban.

Surprisingly, his friends seemed to share in his unique avidity, so much so that they were even compelled to voice it.

"I really can't wait to do this," Morrison said, chomping down on the bits of toast that Scorpius had procured them for breakfast. They were sitting in Colton's Inn for what Albus had quickly realized might well be their last morning there.

"Plenty of time, you can chew," Scorpius said, wiping away the flecks of bread that had accumulated on his robes; a product of Morrison's vigorous eating.

Albus said nothing, picking at his own plate. He eyed the surly, grizzled barman as he did so, wondering vaguely if he would see him again. It wasn't that he'd developed any real bond with the man-he'd never even spoken to him-but the leering figure represented stability in this very chaotic place, a place that Albus had the shrewd suspicion was only going to get more out of hand soon enough.

"Can we *just go*," Morrison whined, pushing his now empty plate away. "I need to get up; I need to do something."

"Meeting doesn't start for another hour," Scorpius said dryly, not even touching his own food. "And it's best we not look *too eager*. Our disguises are meant to help us blend into a large crowd. We're not going to fare well if we're the first ones there."

He looked to Albus following these words, as if waiting for him to confirm, but Albus himself was already too lost in his own thoughts to do much more than give a half-nod. At the mere mention of their disguises, the red mask tucked away in his robes seemed to gain more weight to it.

Even the robes around him—robes identical to what his friends were wearing—seemed to become thicker, as he found himself suddenly worrying about possible blemishes or inconsistencies. In fact, he was realizing just now that it may have been an error to tatter and dirty their clothing. What if everyone else was pristine? Would they be asked to explain the state of themselves? Or was he just being ridiculous, the nerves that he'd been fighting finally getting to him?

"On second thought, maybe we should stretch our legs a bit," said Scorpius, and Albus looked up to see that his friend was giving him an uneasy look. It was as though he'd watched the panic that Albus had just felt unfold on his face.

He was spared explaining by Morrison, however, who'd stood and slid his chair in clumsily, stretching his body as though preparing for a jog. Albus and Scorpius followed suit, and a moment later, they were out in the sunlight.

Kakos greeted them as it always did, which was essentially no greeting at all. Albus had grown so used to it all by now—the odor, the archaic infrastructure, the suspicious leers of passerby. He'd spent so much time peering around every corner and following every minor lead that a map was no longer required for the more general areas, and given the confidence with which his friends navigated the town, he was sure that they no longer needed formal directions as well. The only additional point of interest was the bell tower that they'd been using as a positional reference point; now, it also served as a destination.

"We can wander a bit," Scorpius said lowly as they walked. "Again, better to be a little tardy than too early..."

Albus nodded, strolling along the promenade and taking interest of the Quarry's various markets for the first time in a while. The place still unsettled him on the whole, but he'd grown accustomed enough to it all that he'd started to ignore much of the superfluous. Now, however, with time to kill, he found himself eyeing rancid meat and shoddily crafted articles of clothing. There were trinkets abound as well; he saw a lone, partially destroyed stand where a weedy looking fellow was calling out that he had amulets bewitched to ward off thieves and liars. And there, just a few paces down from him, was a much older man, this one insisting that he could repair wands.

And then, a carriage went by, pulled by two frail looking horses.

"Blimey, I'm not going to get used to that, am I?" Morrison chortled, standing still as the steeds trotted by.

"Hopefully you won't have to," Albus heard Scorpius mutter under his breath, and it sounded very much like the comment was directed more at himself than Morrison.

The more that they walked around the cobblestone roads, the more Albus realized just how little he wanted their venture to remain in this place. As badly as he wanted to find and stop Darvy, and to possibly cure himself of his looming madness, he thought that the most crushing blow that this meeting could have over them was some indication that they had more time to spend

here. True, they had not been victims of any truly terrible crimes, and they had not bared witness to many either, but in some ways these facts were the most unnerving aspects of their time here. There was simply no denying that the people of Kakos were not just criminals, but were *efficient* criminals, with a system set up to prevent things from getting too out of hand, while allowing the society to deteriorate slowly all the same. Somehow-and he wasn't quite sure why he thought such a thing, but it just seemed correct-he was certain that the town was more dangerous now than it was when they'd first arrived.

It's because we're here.

Albus frowned, realizing at once that the plurality of the thought had nothing to do with his two friends. He practically had to bat the statement away though, as a moment later, Scorpius had heaved a sigh and gazed towards the bell tower.

"Okay," he started weakly, sounding as though he was trying a little too hard to mask the anxiety in his voice, "I think we can go now. If we walk *real slow*."

Albus and Morrison obliged wordlessly, making the necessary turn and finding themselves heading in the general direction of the bell tower. Cutting through a series of musty alleys and approaching the structure from its front, they walked cautiously, suddenly much more aware of who might be throwing glances their way. They'd already discussed the appropriate time to don their masks, and given the likelihood that they'd be running into Dark Alliance members as early as outside of the tower, Albus knew that proper execution was going to be paramount.

They exchanged no words for the duration of their walk, though Albus was certain that he was the only one soaking in the intricacies of the tower that they were nearing. Now that it had become a focus rather than an object for navigation, the details of its architecture were becoming more prominent; it was tall and thin, stone grey and with a pattern of dark black squares climbing it at the corners. The actual belfry was arched, revealing a single, rusted bell at the top, looking as though it hadn't moved in decades. It was difficult to determine its exact size from so far beneath it, but Albus hazarded a guess that he could just barely fit inside of it.

He felt his insides writhe as they collectively stopped, all reaching into their robes for their masks. Albus was the slowest to do so, though, still gazing upward at the monument. He knew that it wasn't an apt comparison, but he simply could not ignore that the sense of foreboding radiating from the structure was similar to that which he'd felt from Azkaban. It wasn't quite as powerful, but it served the same purpose; there was a distinct feeling that exiting was going to be more difficult than entering.

At this mere thought Albus peered at the entrance. There was a solid oak door that led to an interior that was obviously magically expanded; as Morrison had already revealed, though, entering was in itself a magical task, involving a method similar to the Lion's Den and the barrier that he'd so often phased through at King's Cross.

"You're going to want to put that on now," Scorpius reminded him testily, and Albus felt his face go red. Sheepishly, he fashioned the demonic mask on his face, then turned to his friends. Two

Dark Alliance members were staring back at him. Now seeing the complete picture in the appropriate setting, he felt his fears alleviate somewhat. They actually *had* done a decent job.

The three of them stood there then, sizing themselves up for what Albus realized was an unusually uncomfortable moment. Scorpius made a gesture, as though to corral them together for some last-minute advice, but at that same moment Morrison had given a muffled expression of enthusiasm.

"Now or never!" he blurted through his mask, tearing off towards the antiquated edifice with haste.

Albus watched as his other friend gave a sigh and shrug, then followed after him, Albus trailing along last. He watched as Morrison practically threw himself into the thick, yellow door, but as they'd hoped, there was no crash or sound of conflict; only the sight of Morrison disappearing through it. Scorpius followed after him, vanishing into the tower, and Albus then clenched his fists, his body tensing at the fear that for some reason it wouldn't work for him-

But he passed through it, turning back a moment later to see a pewter wall, solid and plain and much wider than the entrance to the tower had been.

The three of them were now standing in a long corridor, the floor of which was hardwood and had a sheen to it that he found vaguely familiar. Scorpius seemed to notice it too, as he made a low noise that Albus couldn't quite discern, but before he could engage his friend, Morrison had already continued ahead of them.

"Down this way," he said, sounding very pleased with himself.

Albus and Scorpius hurried along after him, their brisk strolls matching and never quite evolving into a jog. There was something very quiet about the handsome hall; an air of mystique to it that seemed to radiate from its eggshell colored walls. Morrison led them towards a door at the end of the passage, but Albus realized quickly that there were alternate routes to take. There was another door next to this, on the side of the wall, a handle coiled in the shape of a serpent. And across from it, the corridor turned, winding, leading to a set of polished stairs that descended downward.

"Think we should scope the place out a bit first?" Scorpius asked him, catching on to these things as well.

"No need," Morrison said from ahead of them, "meeting place is right through here-"

"Hey!"

They all turned. Albus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up; heading their way was a tall, burly man, his thick black beard and bald head combining to form a rather supercilious countenance.

"W- what?" Albus stammered, exchanging the most fleeting of stares with his two friends, who'd turned in unison. Though their expressions could not be determined due to their masks, their body language informed him that they were as wary he was.

The bald man caught up to them, looking between them with interest. "What's going on?" he asked, and curiously, Albus thought that he sounded as worried as they felt.

"Erm, not much," Morrison commented, "what's going on with y-"

Scorpius held up a hand though, and the bald man leered suspiciously.

"Why are you wearing your masks?" he asked, sounding dumbfounded, and at the next moment he'd bullied his way through them, pushing the door at the end of the corridor open lightly and peering inside.

Albus caught sight of its contents; Morrison had been correct in that it was indeed a place of assembly. It was a large drawing room of sorts, marble and sparkling, a heavy chandelier hanging overhead in a most pompous manner. It was full of people too, though the congregation didn't seem to have initiated itself formally yet, as people were taking seats and chatting amiably. Before the door swung closed, though, Albus realized something; he hadn't seen any of them wearing their red masks.

The bald man turned back to them, still looking confused. His dark, oval shaped eyes traced themselves over their figures for a moment, but before he could say anything, Scorpius had engaged him angrily.

"Why are we wearing our masks!?" he repeated. "Why *aren't* you wearing yours! Show some tact, there could be spies at this meeting!"

The Dark Alliance member widened his eyes in shock, as though he hadn't considered it before. Morrison followed up perfectly.

"Seriously, this isn't the time to be cavalier! There's big things going on!"

"I- I hadn't realized," the man said, looking as though he'd been slapped in the face. "I'll go tell the others-who- and you are...?"

"They'll know who said it," Scorpius replied acidly, and when the man's look of subservience faltered, he added with a sigh, "does the surname *Rosier* ring a bell? Honestly..."

"Right, sorry!" the man said, and he then turned and opened the door briskly, disappearing behind it at once.

"Who's Rosier?" Albus asked.

"Don't worry about it," his friend responded, but Morrison was already chortling.

"Blimey, where does Darvy find these guys?"

"Well what's with you insisting people were wearing masks, eh? Nearly got us killed-"

"What!? They were last time. I swear, a handful of them-"

Even with his mask on, Albus could tell that Scorpius was staring daggers at him, but he used the brief pause as a point of intervention.

"Whatever the case, we've got to head in now, before we have to do that again," he told them both, throwing a hasty look over his shoulder at the entrance as he did so.

Both of his friends nodded in agreement, and it was Morrison who pushed the door open, leading the three of them into the drawing room.

The effects of Scorpius' words only a minute prior were demonstrated immediately, as quite a few Dark Alliance members were now wearing the brick red, malevolent masks that Albus had always associated them with. True, some still weren't-either word hadn't reached them, or the name that Scorpius had dropped hadn't done the trick-but there was an equal amount of individuals wearing them that weren't, and Albus breathed a mild sigh of relief at this as he counted heads.

Morrison's numbers had been surprisingly accurate-he counted thirty four of them, not including he and his companions. Albus turned to his friends, prepared to ask if they'd come to the same number, but found that only one of them was at his side.

"Where's Morrison?" he asked quietly, realizing that his taller friend was missing from his side.

"I thought you were Morrison!" came Scorpius' biting voice, and he then began revolving on the spot.

"I- I'm not *that much taller than you*-"

"Alright, seems like everyone's here," came a deep, slow voice. "Take your seats."

Albus stared and saw that a man-he wasn't wearing a mask-was sitting at the head of the table. He had a curled lip and glittering, light eyes, though he appeared somewhat older, his long black hair streaked lightly and thinning. Albus continued to glance around the room as chairs were pulled out around him, realizing that it was going to be impossible to find his friend unless he spoke up.

He and Scorpius found seats together though, in a middle section of one of the sides, and only a moment later, when all nearly-forty of them were seated, the Dark Alliance member at the head of the table started in an official tone.

"Good to see we could all make it," he drawled, folding his hands carefully on the long, ornate

table. "First item of business; is there any indication that the raid is close to occurring?"

"None," spoke up a woman from his right, from only two seats down. She also was not wearing a mask, showing off a fox-like face complete with pointy teeth. "But I'm willing to bet that's deliberate. They could be here *today*, with how quiet they've been."

"And who is this 'they'?" voice a masked figure across from her, which Albus was thankful for, as he was already lost. "The closest thing to a Ministry that was left was Waddlesworth's pack of buffoons, and he's finished. Given what we're dangling here, I think we need to know a little bit more about what it is we're trying to catch!"

A streak of agreement shot around the table at this, and Albus was nodding his head along with the rest of them. A moment later, the older man at the head of the table had cleared his throat, leering about at them all.

"Harry Potter is on the loose," he said smoothly, and Albus felt a lump rise in his throat. "And whatever events may have transpired prior to and during his stint in Azkaban, he and his brood remain the closest thing to a Ministry left."

"They're not a Ministry," someone piped up from just two seats away from Albus. "They're not even like the ol' Order, I reckon. They're as broken as Waddlesworth, just living off old fame-"

"Potter completely worked his way through Mottley, last we'd heard," spoke a woman's voice, though her face was covered. "He's definitely active, and if he picks up on our scent here, then he'll be here, that's all that there is to it."

There was more muttering and nodding following this, but Albus didn't partake in it this time; he was too confused. Why would his father be coming to Kakos? The Dark Alliance obviously were not aware that his father was more preoccupied with finding his son than anything, hence his activities in Mottley, and he was also fairly sure that they weren't aware of *his* presence here, either. So why were they so confident that he would be showing up?

"Next order of business, then," came a familiar voice, and Albus recognized it as Morrison's. Scorpius gave a jolt from next to him as well, but when Albus looked around, he found it impossible to locate the source. Maybe somewhere on his left...

"Very well then," the head of the table concurred, "Markson insists that we're near the point of distribution. Apparently the Hand told him specifically that we have enough Veritaserum to move at the storage site, but he wants Felix next."

"We don't have the means for it, Bozen," someone uttered from near the first woman who'd spoken. "We've looked and looked, even when we get the necessary ingredients, no one can brew it-"

"The Toxic Quarry is home to the most skilled and notorious potioners in the world," the man known as Bozen interjected swiftly, "work harder-there are people here who will bring it. The

next time the Hand shows up, he'll be expecting liquid luck."

The Dark Alliance member who'd been spurned fell silent at once, then nodded grimly. Albus glossed over the details of the exchange though, his mind buzzing from a simple fact that he'd derived. Someone-this man Markson-was meeting with Darvy. *Someone knew where he was.*

He was certain that Scorpius had picked up on it, and probably Morrison too, wherever he was, but he couldn't count on one of them steering the conversation in the direction that he needed it to go. He braced himself, just as the head Dark Alliance member went to continue-

"Now, we've heard reports that-"

"And where is Markson, exactly?" Albus spoke up, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. Scorpius gave him the tiniest of kicks underneath the table, but he ignored it.

Bozen was surveying him blankly, however, apparently unsure as how to respond. Finally, he leaned forward and said, in a sarcastic manner, "he's *at the storage site.*"

Many at the table chortled, giving him bemused looks. Albus could feel Scorpius shaking with worry next to him, but he didn't back down; they'd been through too much to let this this information slip away.

"I meant-"

"I think he wants the *exact* location," came Morrison's voice again, and Albus raised his eyebrows upon realizing just where his friend was sitting; he was at the right hand side of the apparent leader. "I mean, it is easy to get lost, isn't it? I have-"

"What the hell are you doing near Markson's site-" someone started up, but the leader of the group had already held up a hand to silence him. He was still eyeing Albus with interest, as though trying to peer through his mask.

"I know what this is about," he said, softly, and Albus clenched his wand through his robes. "And I don't take kindly to those kind of accusations. The potions are being stored two miles southeast of here, just outside the town, the old cabin by the well, if you're so keen on counting the product yourself."

Albus said nothing at this, though he did relinquish his grip. Realizing that he'd dodged one hex to land in front of another, though, he tried to ameliorate the situation as soon as he could.

"Didn't mean anything by it-"

"And I'll have you know," Bozen said, his teeth bared, "that I've been with the Hand since before the Hogsmeade Massacre, I was one of the first he came to talk to about killing that self-righteous fool, and I was the first person he asked to organize this task going on here!"

Albus raised his hands up, not wanting this to go any further. He'd already acquired the information that he needed-what was most important now was getting he and his friends out of there alive. But the tenacious head of the meeting was eyeing him angrily, looking as though he wasn't very inclined to let the apparent slight be dismissed so easily.

Perhaps sensing this just as Albus did, Scorpius came to his defense, his voice placating and his words enunciated clearly.

"I don't think that anyone here is suggesting anything of the sort," he told the table at large. "But there's no denying that the tasks dealt to us here are of too great importance to not seek confirmation of their success, especially given the area that we're working in."

There were murmurs of approval at this statement, and Albus thought that he'd never been so pleased to hear the Dark Alliance agree on something in his life. Even Bozen was looking quelled, and was just starting to recline somewhat when Scorpius-a tremor in his voice that Albus was positive only he could detect-continued in his attempt to lighten the tension.

"Remember, we're all here because we chose to be here; there's no reason to feel that this doesn't apply for our associates the same. I've no doubt that my friend here, like all of you, only wants to do what he thinks is best for Darvy and his-

He stopped, for the eyes of all of those unmasked had widened. The room went completely quiet, and it took Albus a moment to realize just why this was the case, before going over Scorpius' words in his head more carefully; he'd called him Darvy, rather than his accepted moniker among these people here.

"I- I mean-" he started, but someone from only a few seats away had risen to their feet, spitting his words out so ferociously that flecks of saliva scattered across the table.

"Who is that!?"

Scorpius had no time to react. Already someone from next to him had grabbed at his face, ripping the mask off and exposing his pointed features, which Albus saw were etched with terror.

"Isn't that Lucius' boy?" someone asked aloud.

"It's his grandson!" came a wheeze from just next to Albus, and before he himself could do anything, his mask had been pulled off too. There was a collective gasp around the table, and Albus slid his chair out, prepared to stand and grab for his wand-

But the encircling of Dark Alliance members was collectively faster. They'd all stood, wands raised high, and Albus-somehow-foolishly registered most of all that Morrison was among them, next to Bozen, whose lips were curled savagely.

"Potter," he said, as though welcoming him.

Albus could only hold up his hands in defeat, his mind racing. He could try and fight his way out of this situation, as he had so many others, but he thought that his chances of success had never been lower. Instead he gave the most inconspicuous look to his left, where Scorpius hadn't even bothered to stand. He was still sitting, now unmasked and looking bright red. Albus could see that he was both frightened and embarrassed, but more than anything else, angry. He knew why; his friend had probably never regretting a sentence more in his life than the one that he'd just uttered.

Bozen eyed the both of them carefully, and Albus could tell that the others were waiting for his say-so. That would be the moment, he knew, where reaching for his wand would be the only option left, though he wasn't quite sure why that didn't feel like the case now...

Until Bozen made his next statement. "Kill them," he said, simply.

Albus immediately plunged into his robes, but the sound of Morrison's voice made his wrist snap back so fast he was certain no one had seen it.

"Wait!" he barked, and the others at the table turned to him. Bozen in particular raised an eyebrow, but Morrison held his ground. "Wait just a second!" he insisted, ogling them all from behind his mask. "You mean to tell me that we have Harry Potter's son here, at this meeting-the person who the Hand wants most-and you want to *kill him*? Just like that!?"

"What the hell else are we going to do with him?" Bozen asked acidly, and Albus watched the exchange with a feeling like his heart was going to explode.

"Find out what he's doing here, first of all!" Morrison argued. "Find out how he and his little weasel friend even found out about this place, let alone found this place *here*. There could be a traitor among us! Or the Hand may even want him here for some reason!"

"And just who are *you*?" Bozen asked, now turning his wand to Morrison, and Albus felt his wrist prepare itself once more.

But Morrison instead lifted his mask, only halfway, in a most theatrical manner, a dark look materializing on his otherwise goofy features. "I'll have you know," he started menacingly, "that the Rosier name goes back as far any other name here!" he finished, actually waving his finger at all of them.

A masked figure just a few seats to Morrison's right made to speak, possibly to dispute this claim, but Morrison aimed his shaking finger right at him. "You shut your damn mouth!" he belted, before the man could even speak, and he lowered his wand in fear.

Morrison then turned back to Bozen, looking as though he was prepared to state his case more evenly. He pulled his mask back down for added effect, then started tapping at his head in an almost mocking fashion.

"Let's think about this, eh? We've got something pretty valuable here-something maybe more

valuable than we currently know. No reason to get rid of it, eh? Not until we get the official order."

There was more muttering at this, and though the consensus didn't seem as powerful as it had been in prior cases, Albus was certain that *these* were now his favorite indiscernible Dark Alliance words.

Bozen was the only one saying nothing, his eyes still glinting with distrust, and possibly now agitation at being mocked. Eventually, though, he lowered his wand, shifting his attention to the two teenagers at the other end of the table.

"We'll lock them up for now," he said crisply, striding towards them. Morrison accompanied him, and Albus watched as he dug his hands into Scorpius' robes, procuring his wand and stuffing it away. Scorpius gave his friend the blankest look imaginable, but said nothing; he'd already learned his lesson about overacting.

Albus practically offered himself to Morrison, keen on keeping the charade as potentially beneficial as they could, but Bozen, as though sensing that something was askew, rifled through his robes instead, pulling out his wand and pocketing it.

Or at least, he'd thought it was his wand. The momentary glimpse that Albus had gotten of it told him that it was Ares', and that his own was those still on his person; Bozen's thoroughness didn't match his haste in efficacy.

"Move," his aggressor then said, pushing him roughly, and Albus, not even knowing where it was he was supposed to be going, could only line up behind Scorpius.

The rest of the Dark Alliance members had swarmed them as well, though Bozen held out a thin arm as though to block half of them. "You lot stay here, make sure we have no one else coming," he ordered, and roughly half of them fell back. Those who hadn't continued forward though were mumbling quite animatedly, as though they couldn't be more pleased that they were going to witness what became of Harry Potter's son.

Albus tried to keep track of the scenario as the bodies shuffled around him, realizing that the key to any escape was going to be keeping track of his friends. They hadn't planned for this; had rehearsed nothing to account for the situation in which two of them would be discovered, but the third would maintain their very copasetic position.

He tried not to panic as the group marched him forward, toward the exit of the room. He still had his wand on him, and Morrison's brilliant acting had allowed them to retain the element of surprise, for now. But there could be no missteps from here; somehow, they were going to need to execute something simultaneously, and without any overt signs of communication between them.

And yet, despite the dire circumstances and overall gravity of the situation, Albus found himself only half paying attention as he was marched forward and out the door. He knew that it was a

foolish, immature thing, to have any semblance of excitement at such a moment, but the idea of having a direct lead on Darvy-knowing the whereabouts of someone who frequently met with him-was too great a triumph for him to not consider their temporary permeation of the Dark Alliance ranks a success. If only they could pull one more thing off...

Initially unaware of where it was he was going, Albus deduced only moments later that their destination was further underground. They were now walking on stone-cut descending stairs that he'd seen earlier, entering a passageway that was adorned with serpentine figures on the wall, some of them protruding as though to hold torches in their coiled bodies. Albus absorbed these details only in passing, returning his attention to the actual state of his affairs. Bozen was directly behind him, a wand jammed between his shoulder blades-Albus was so used to the position now that he hardly felt it, though. He knew that there was an array of Dark Alliance members behind him as well, undoubtedly single file due to the narrow nature of the passage.

He focused his efforts ahead of him though, where Scorpius seemed to be leading the way, albeit it with several Dark Alliance members at his side. Albus couldn't determine which one was Morrison though-at least three of them shared his height within centimeters.

The deeper that they progressed into the tunnel, the more convoluted it became, with the twisting and interweaving of the stone walls uncannily similar to the labyrinth that he'd so often navigated in the bowels of Hogwarts. Despite this familiarity, though, he got lost quite easily, and he realized-without knowing if his friends were as aware-they were going to have to make a move soon. The underbelly of the bell tower wasn't likely to be *that* magically expanded, and that meant that soon, they'd either be in cells or shackled to the walls. They needed to initiate something quick...

But the surrounding silence was making it extremely difficult. Unlike on the other occasions where Albus had been captured and led, there was no conversing going on, meaning no way to drop clues when answering questions or otherwise making pleas. But he could not hope to initiate, not without knowing if his friends ahead were aware. He was certain that Morrison would be doing his best to slip Scorpius his wand back, but how would he know when this had occurred?

They were starting to slow a bit, making yet another turn in a corridor that wasn't nearly as illuminated as some of the previous ones. Despite his view being blocked, Albus saw Scorpius make a sudden movement, and he felt adrenaline course through him-but it was for naught. Scorpius had only stumbled, or possibly even been pushed, and had fallen to the ground.

"Get up!" came a rough voice from the masked figure on his right, and with a sinking feeling, Albus acknowledged that it hadn't been Morrison's voice. "Walk faster!"

"Alright, alright," Scorpius practically moaned, and his voice was overwhelmingly juvenile that Albus had cringed, realizing for the first time, that there was a chance that they *weren't* on the same page, and that Scorpius really had conceded-

"Honestly," his friend continued irritably, "I feel like you're sending me to my room..."

"Shut it!" another Dark Alliance member called, but Albus barely registered it. He was soaking in Scorpius' last comment, and it had only just clicked for him when he saw the masked figure on Scorpius' left slow, as though preparing to turn-

Albus did the same. Spinning about, he withdrew his wand from his robes and pointed it square at Bozen's chest-the fracturing curse hit him square in the ribs, sending him crumbling downwards, gasping for air.

"He's got a wand!" someone barked unnecessarily, but Albus was already swirling his wand about in circular fashion, deflecting whatever curses were thrown at him. They ricocheted around the enclosed space, bouncing about at sharp angles and randomly striking their unsuspecting casters. None of them, Albus realized quickly, were firing Killing Curses-it seemed as though they were already aware of this property of the walls, and were thus unwilling to risk having such a lethal spell rebound upon themselves.

Their current work wasn't faring much better, however, as Albus' smooth, graceful strokes were sending them to the ground all the same, their own aggression mounting against them. He could hear a struggle behind him, but even amidst the chaos he managed to deduce that his friends were performing admirably, as at the very least he hadn't been struck from behind yet.

The streaks of light dissipating in their rapidity, Albus found himself taking the offensive when he only had two challengers remaining, blasting one of them into the other with a ferociously cast Reductor curse, his follow up stunners rendering them both unconscious. He looked upon his work with satisfaction afterwards, memories of his battles in the cramped corridors of Azkaban surfacing. He'd been successful then, but his work had been quicker and more efficient here; unable to fight the urge, he wondered to himself what words of pride Fairhart would have had for him.

He then turned to find his friends both standing, albeit looking winded. They hadn't had as much opposition, as evidenced by the relatively few bodies on the ground, but Albus noted that Scorpius' robes were ripped at the shoulder, a shiny patch of blood materializing at the wound.

"Here, let me-" Albus started, but Scorpius took a step backwards.

"It's fine, really-just grazed. Let's get out of here."

Morrison nodded alongside him, interestingly enough having no overt injuries of his own. It appeared as though maintaining his disguise had bought him the precious seconds that Scorpius hadn't had.

Albus stared at his friend, something similar to pride swelling in his heart. "Mate," he started, "what you just pulled off-"

But Morrison had already given one of his wide grins, making a move with his arms as though to brush it off. "Save it for when we're in the clear, eh?"

Albus nodded, then turned, prepared to lead his friends out of the labyrinth.

"They'll have heard, I'm sure," he warned.

"We should lure them down here," Scorpius suggested. "Use the closed space to our advantage-"

"I don't think we can risk getting clogged in here," Albus acknowledged grimly. "We're better off just fighting through."

Scorpius gave a look of contemplation, still clinging to his shoulder. After a moment, though, he seemed to come around, as he started a brisk, almost loping walk by him, Morrison at his side.

Albus made to follow his two friends, but before doing so, he remembered something. Stepping over the bodies of the defeated Dark Alliance members, he found the one he was looking for.

Bozen was still moaning lowly, clinging to his ribs and rolling slightly. Albus knelt at his side and rummaged through his robes, causing him to wince in pain. Extracting Ares wand and pocketing it, he aimed his own at the man's face.

"That doesn't belong to you," he said, and his stunner silenced the man completely.

"Alright," Albus said, rising and facing his friends. "Let's stick together now-"

No sooner had he said these words did a most peculiar noise enter his ears. It was a low, dull humming, sounding as though it were greatly muffled by distance. And yet, it seemed to make the very walls vibrate.

He stared at his friends, perplexed, and while Morrison shared in his confusion, Scorpius provided the answer.

"I think the bell is ringing," he said, looking tense.

Albus swallowed, wondering what such a thing could mean. Had the Dark Alliance members upstairs called for reinforcements, upon possibly hearing the disorder below them? Or was the bell operated separately from its role as a hideout for the Dark Alliance, instead serving to alert the town of Kakos of something?

"We should leave *now*," Morrison said after a moment, and Albus nodded in agreement. The three of them tore off then, not speaking, the reverberations of the chiming still punctuating every half a dozen steps that they took.

"Whatever's going on in this place," Albus told his friends as they ran, all turning the same corner, "it's none of our business. We've got to get to that Markson bloke, he knows-"

"We heard it too, Al," Scorpius interjected. "But let's focus on finding our way out of here first-"

This statement couldn't have been made at a more appropriate time, for they'd just reached a fork in the passageways, the three of them screeching to a halt.

"D- do we split up?" Morrison asked.

"No," Scorpius said defiantly, and he stated his next words as though he was trying to atone for his earlier blunder. "I remember the way, completely. We go right."

Albus didn't argue the matter, having no clue himself. So instead he fell back behind with Morrison, watching as Scorpius hurried along, making his decisions wordlessly. Thrice he came to a halt mid-way through a passage though, only to turn them around and lead them down the other one. Albus was just about to voice his skepticism when he felt his heart flutter. There, just up ahead, was an ascending aisle of stairs. Scorpius had steered them correctly.

"Wands out," Albus reminded his friends, anticipating that there would be Dark Alliance members waiting for them upon climbing. Scorpius was still in the lead when he launched himself up two steps at a time, but when Albus joined him at the top, he saw that his friend was wearing a confused look, one that he adorned himself.

"Where is everyone?" Morrison asked, last to catch up.

Despite its bluntness, there was no denying that it was the only real question to be asked. The meeting room was completely vacant but for the table and chairs, many of which, Albus realized, were pulled out rather far, some of them even knocked aside. It was though many of those sitting in them had leapt in surprise, rushing away without another thought.

The bell was still chiming, louder than ever, and Albus was sure that the two were connected. Something had occurred that demanded their attention, and the tolling of the bell had been an alert for them...

He remembered something from earlier, but before he could even bring it up, Morrison and Scorpius had both shot by him, towards the door leading to the main hall. Albus followed after them, trying to voice what was on his mind, but was too busy focusing on it instead, what it could mean to his current plans...

He followed his friends through the door and finally to the stretch of wall that would take them to the outside. One after another they burst through it without speaking, Albus going last, and once the town of Kakos was before him, Albus registered that the bell was now accompanied by other noises; the yells of panic and the slamming of doors.

He stood in between his two friends, gazing at what was quickly becoming a barren burg. He watched as two children-already a strange sight-ran by, barefooted, looking as though they were desperately trying to get home. Near where they ran a shopkeeper was covering his items with a long, brown cloth, as though to conceal them until he could return later. And down the road, he could see the shadows of many others disappearing into their homes.

Albus exchanged a brief glance with Scorpius and Morrison both, though they still said nothing. The three of them instead stood there quietly, the bell just above them still churning out its monotonous dirge, and it wasn't until something far down the road caught his eye that Albus even moved.

Walking forward, he held his hand high to block the sunlight impeding him, staring down the empty, dusty cobblestone road and trying to make out the shimmery figure moving towards him. He recognized it at once, though. He'd seen this done before, seen these apparitions used for delivering personalized messages. But this time, he knew, the ghastly figure was delivering a much broader one, showing itself to the entirety of the town, that they might prepare themselves for the oncoming conflict.

Swiftly, the silver stag galloped towards him, his father's patronus ignoring he and his friends completely as it sprinted down the road.

Chapter 16: The Siege of the Stag

Chapter 16: The Siege Of The Stag

Albus felt his knees weaken slightly, his eyes following the ghastly image for another moment before it disappeared around the nearest corner and out of sight. A thousand thoughts seemed to race through his head in the lone second that followed, but one more so than the others rang out clear, dwarfing their companions in size.

His father was here.

And that wasn't all. While he was certain that his father was still looking for him, he was also sure that the reputation of Kakos was going to play very heavily into his methods. A battle was about to occur, a large one, and Albus knew it was very unlikely that his father would be accompanied by only four people this time. He'd come here expected a full fight-that he was warning the citizens of the town of the impending destruction beforehand demonstrated as much.

"Is he here for you or for the Dark Alliance?" Scorpius asked him.

"I think it's both," Albus admitted.

"But how?" Morrison asked, turning to him with a chalky face. "How would he even know about this place-"

"The Ministry's known about the Toxic Quarry for years," Albus told him. "Ares said so, anyway. But they've mostly left it alone-"

"But this isn't the Ministry laying this place under siege," Scorpius told him darkly. "It's your dad."

Albus nodded, wishing that he had more to offer his friends than this mere gesture. He recalled one of the topics discussed during the meeting that they'd just attended-his father had been brought up, and it had been specifically mentioned that they were planning for him. But what hadn't been identified was just *why* this expectation was there, if they were simply aware that he'd found them out, or if they were luring him here intentionally.

And if they were, was Albus the bait? Ice seemed to shower over him as the question arose in his head, a potentially sickening realization materializing itself. Had the Dark Alliance known all along that he'd been in their territory? Had Darvy possibly deduced that Albus was endeavoring to find him, and predicted the path that he would take?

But that was absurd, and moreover, how would having his father raid Kakos play into it all? No, they couldn't have known that Albus was here among them. There must have been another

reason to want his father here. The real question now was if his father was even aware that *he* was here.

"We need to get moving," Scorpius said, snapping him from his thoughts, and Albus gave another brisk nod.

"Right," he said, "let's find somewhere to bar ourselves up, there's the inn still-"

"Mate I don't think you get what's going on here," Scorpius said, and Morrison cringed from next to him. "Your dad is going to kick down every door in this place at one point or another. We need to leave here. *Now.*"

"Do you think we can make it to where that Markson bloke is supposed to be?" Morrison chirped up from his side.

"We can try," Scorpius started, though he then gave Albus a worried look. "I mean- un-unless you don't feel up to it..."

He left his sentence hanging, and Albus realized the implication at once. Their plans had accelerated greatly. With his father approaching, probably even within the Quarry, they weren't going to have the chance to go after Markson and, consequently, Darvy, at a later point. It was now or never, and the burden was on him to direct them-he was their leader after all, at least this time.

"I'm ready if you guys are-"

His sentence was cut short by a clatter however, a noise that finally managed to pierce the rhythmic sobbing of the bell above them. The crash seemed distant, but elicited at least one stifled shriek, and Albus, suddenly remembering the sight of cars being tossed about the streets of Mottley, started to lead his friends in the other direction.

"Do you think we can Apparate?" Albus asked them, as they all hurried down the road. "To the edge of the town, at least? That's how we got in-"

"I hate to break it to you Al," Morrison said while jogging alongside him, "but I've been trying to do it since we saw that deer, and if I can't do it, then you guys can't either-"

"We're not going to be able to break any of your dad's Anti-Disapparition charms," Scorpius said from his other side, though lagging behind slowly. "We'll have to sneak out, and stick to the corners. They said the place was south or something, rig-"

He stopped mid-sentence though, for at that moment a cloaked figure had dawdled from around the corner, their wand held high.

"*Stupefy!*" Albus cried, and the wizard deflecting it upwards; he wasn't able to stop Morrison's though, which hit him square in the chest just as he was trying to dodge.

It wasn't until he fell over, completely unconscious, that Albus recognized him, giving a groan as he did so.

"Oh f-"

"Did you just stun Professor Longbottom!?" Scorpius shot at his tallest friend, looking immensely dissatisfied with him.

"What did you want me to do!?" Morrison blurted out, looking panic stricken. "He had a wand and he was aimi- Albus shot one too!"

Albus ignored these remarks, instead kneeling over his slightly rotund professor. Neville was easily identified by his familiar, boyish face, but was looking as though he was going to be out of commission for quite some time. He was distracted at once by far off noises of struggle though, and somehow, he managed to extract two truths from his current situation; one, his father had definitely brought more reinforcements this time, probably his oldest and most trusted companions, and two, they didn't have time to lag behind.

"Let's go," he said, standing and starting his quick pace once again.

Morrison and Scorpius stopped in their bickering at once, the latter starting a new argument. "Go? We can't just leave him here-"

"Yes we can, and we have to," Albus said, though the words felt sour on his tongue. It was as though he hadn't really meant them, yet didn't regret saying them either.

Morrison made to speak, but Scorpius continued, his tone volatile now. "What the hell are you- *this is our Herbology pro-*"

"I know who he is!" Albus snapped, and the whispers of contempt in his head had just barely started when he succumbed to them. "Fine, stay behind, we don't need you anyway!"

And he stalked of, not even looking back at the pair of surely confused faces.

One of his friends called after him as he ran, but their voice was drowned out by both distance and the now more noticeable conflict.

Though the citizens of Kakos had retreated to their homes, the Dark Alliance members had not. Albus saw a dozen of them primed for combat in the street, waving their wands and issuing jets of light-mostly green-down the road. Albus crouched low, hoping to remain inconspicuous, but still managed to grasp sight of who was on the receiving end as they emerged from behind a corner.

Two of them he didn't recognize, but he immediately designated them as former Aurors, for they were accompanied by a face nearly as familiar as Neville's. Tall, dark skinned, and with a look of ferocity that Albus had never seen him wear before, Kingsley Shacklebolt was leading the

charge against this particular section of the Dark Alliance.

His style of combat was unusually rigid, standing in an upright, almost classical position as he fired streaks of dark silver into the crowd of masked figures. The jets of light seemed to detonate, scattering them all and even knocking others to the ground, and the former Minister of Magic led his two companions into the fray soon after; Albus caught sight of one of them, an elderly woman with graying hair, blasting one of them into the other with a streak of deep purple.

Albus turned, aiming to avoid the confrontation entirely. It was only after seeing this exchange that he realized how extremely defenseless he felt without Morrison and Scorpius at his side. Why had he left them behind like that? What had he been thinking?

You were realizing that they were slowing us down, a voice purred in his head-his own.

Albus made to argue with himself foolishly, but the hairs on the back of his neck had stood up at that very moment, and he jumped to the side just in time to see a ray of orange whiz by his head. He turned, seeing that from an adjacent street a handful of Dark Alliance members were encroaching, wands drawn.

He leapt away as the next curse-this one a frightening bolt of emerald, crashed through the window of a nearby home, setting something inside it ablaze. Albus paid no mind to the noise coming from within the home, already swirling his wand about to deflect the barrage of hexes coming his way. A canary yellow rebounded from his slick movements and caught one of his opponents in the leg, knocking them down and forcing those around him to stagger as well.

"Killing curses!" screeched the Dark Alliance member in the lead, a woman whose face was covered. "He can't deflect those!"

Albus was prepared for this adjustment, however. Taking in his surroundings abruptly, he flung his wand towards one of the battered sign posts, banishing it directly into the first streak of green that he saw. The curse reduced *Louberry Rd.* to splinters, but the resulting distraction allowed him to duck underneath the next one and unleash a Sciatica Hex on the woman who'd taken charge.

She gave a yell, reaching at her back and bouncing around between her associates, another temporary distraction that allowed him to alter his position, bounding to the sides of the group and unleashing a torrent of stunners too powerful for them to deflect. Only a lone wizard managed to volley it, but Albus sidestepped it and blasted him backwards, knocking him into an abandoned trinket stand that collapsed around him, amidst a smattering of *tinks* and *tanks*.

His adversaries all incapacitated, he allowed himself the smallest of breathers before continuing on ahead, still trying to stay clear of where Kingsley was.

What were his options now? He had a destination-perhaps the last lead necessary for taking down Darvy-but he would need to escape the Toxic Quarry to do it. Was his best bet to hide

out, and hope for a less chaotic opportunity, or to find his friends and make a break for it? He would have to act quick, for if he was found by his father or any of his companions-

"Albus?"

Albus turned slowly, unable to identify the voice at first. It came to him just as he saw the speaker, though.

Draco Malfoy was looking back at him, his wand drawn. He had an extremely abstruse expression on his face, though the ambiguity disappeared somewhat when he spoke once more.

"Albus wh- what are you *doing here!?*"

"I'm looking for Darvy!" Albus blurted out, sure to keep his own wand held high. Then again, he wasn't sure if he'd need it. Draco Malfoy had been on his side the last time they'd met, but things could have changed in the interim.

His most recent Potions professor lowered his wand slightly, looking panicked. "Is- is *Scorpius here with you-*"

"He said you supported this!" Albus insisted, his eyes flickering for a moment; a loud rumbling had occurred, and over the tops of other buildings he could see a large structure-probably one of the larger inns they'd come across-crumble in a heap of dust. "You were the one who sent them after me, weren't-"

"But not to bring you *here!*" Mr. Malfoy shot. "This place is danger-"

"More dangerous than Darvy!?" Albus asked incredulously, but Scorpius' father only rolled his eyes, an irritated expression playing on his pale face.

"Perhaps not, but I was trusting that you would know what was best if it came to that-not that you lead my son here, to the most corrupt place in the Wizarding World!"

"Then what are you doing here!?" Albus demanded, the noises of his father's siege intensifying still, pounding into his ears. He was sure that there was a fight going on only a block over.

"I helped convince your father to abandon his search of you in favor of finding Darvy-of stopping him before you could even get to him. We received a tremendous amount of intelligence that this place was in use by the Dark Alliance for Darvy's bidding-"

"Draco!"

Albus turned in time with his friend's father, and felt his insides burst into flames as he did so.

His own father was standing off to the side, looking as though he'd just cut through an alley and

stumbled upon them. He looked battle hardened, the hems of his robes singed, his always untidy hair even more tangled than usual, his spectacles lopsided. But it was the look of utter confusion-turning to betrayal-that showed most on his face.

"*Draco*," he repeated, staring back and forth between the two of them, his own wand raised.

Albus meant to say something-he wasn't even sure what-but to his immense surprise, Mr. Malfoy stepped in front of him, arms out wide.

"Harry-" he started, but Albus knew that there was nothing to be said. His father was looking murderous, and Albus was sure that he was just now piecing together Mr. Malfoy's treachery, including his role in Mottley, and possibly-now that Albus thought about it-going as far back as Fairhart's cabin.

His father wasted no time, sending a streak of gold Draco Malfoy's way. Scorpius' father conjured a shield which shattered, knocking them both back.

"Harry, my son is-"

But Albus' father wasn't listening. He'd already struck his wand through the air, and this time, Mr. Malfoy actually pushed him down before leaping away himself.

"Albus go!" he cried. "Find Scorpius, find Morrison, and get out of here-"

Albus didn't need to be told twice. He'd already sped off, though from the corner of his eye he saw his father take aim at him instead. Albus prepared to dodge or possibly deflect, but Scorpius' father had already fired a disarming spell. Albus watched as his father stumbled backwards, his wand soaring from his hand, but at the next moment he seemed to pull at the very air like he was wielding a lasso, and his wand flew back to his clutches loyally, now aimed back at his new opponent.

He didn't look back to see the fight resume, but he knew that, skilled though Mr. Malfoy was, it wasn't likely that he was going to buy him much time. Albus tore off through the cobblestone streets with this thought plaguing him, making up his mind at once; already identified, there was no hope for hiding. He needed to find his friends and go-

He collided with someone as he turned a corner, for a wild moment considering from the man's size that it may have been Morrison, but seeing instead that it was a lanky man with crooked teeth and a square jaw, his red mask hanging halfway off of his face. He gave a dazed look as he absorbed the blow, but Albus, having already recovered, slashed his wand upwards and sent him to the ground, unconscious.

There's going to be more nearby.

Albus wasn't sure if the voice in his head was saying it to him or vice-versa; all that he knew was that it was correct. He continued in his burst from the scene, trying to put as much distance

between himself and his father as he could, but already there was another blockage up ahead. Albus caught sight of more Dark Alliance members, fiercely involved in a contest with a small group of adults, a handful of whom he vaguely recognized. Most prominent among them was the surly, bushy eye-browed Mr. Krum, who was firing spells with lightning speed, though to little effect. His ilk were swarmed, fighting while encircled, and Albus watched as just next to him one of his allies was struck by a Killing Curse, falling over immediately.

Albus took cover behind the nearest wall, catching his breath.

Shame we don't have our wand, we could help them...they could use some of that power you love so much...

"I don't love it," Albus shot back, to nobody. "And why can't we help without it!? Just give me the damn power!"

Now now, can't have you abusing it...get our wand first...

Albus gave no response, but just as he cast a glance down the block at the conflict, he felt his heart sink. A young girl with red hair was running by, her eldest brother on her tail. James and Lily ran into the cluster of curses and hexes, the former looking as though he were trying to scoop his sister up and lead her to safety, but a stray jet of green had collided with him-

"Stop it," Albus snapped, and the hallucination subsided, revealing the battle as it actually was- still with Mr. Krum's side losing, but none of his family involved. "Stop showing me stuff like that!"

And here I thought it was you showing me...

Albus stood, his anger somehow energizing him. He leapt out from behind his cover, firing stunners at random into a crowd that now overwhelmingly consisted of Dark Alliance members. He hung around long enough to see at least three of his spells hit their marks, but then darted off, keeping in mind his ultimate goal.

Had Scorpius and Morrison went for shelter, or had they decided to enter the fray? Or perhaps, had they went after him, now tailing him in an endless circle? Whatever the case, he would have to continue in his movement to have any chance of tracking them down. He skidded by an alley for a moment, then tore through it, emerging on a street that had been utterly dismantled. The stony road had craters in it; moreover, one home seemed to be uplifted from its very base, merging with the one next to it in a sight of mangled wood and metal. He saw a Dark Alliance member lying face down a few feet away, what looked like a light pool of blood underneath his belly, and by his side, an unconscious women tangled in what must have been a stray clothesline-turned-weapon; the greying garments were wrapped around her so firmly that he couldn't make out which party she belonged to, and could only assume that they'd been used to bind her before unleashing whatever hex had taken her out of commission.

Down the block he saw a few more contestants, though it looked to be a more even battle than

the one he'd seen previously. Standing still and surveying the scene, he wondered just how many Dark Alliance members were in Kakos. He and his friends had cleared a sizeable patch of those that had been at the meeting, but undoubtedly, the lower members hadn't attended the gathering. But with such a focus here on the Toxic Quarry, did that mean that Darvy, wherever he was, had little support with him? If so, then the time to find him and strike could even be today, if all things went well...

He heard a series of bangs, and realized that the fight up ahead was making its way down to him. With a lurch he saw that his Aunt Hermione was involved, fighting alongside a sandy haired man that he didn't recognize. The man was holding his own, but mostly defending as his aunt fired her jinxes with rapidity, even downing two Dark Alliance members with a single, blue spell.

Sensing that she would be fine, Albus turned and ran the other way, trying to use the brief recess to get a handle of where he was. He'd learned the town of Kakos well in the weeks that he'd spent there, but had never been able to navigate it as well as Scorpius could, and the task was only going to be more difficult now with the majority of his landmarks probably demolished.

But there was still the bell tower. Albus looked skyward instinctively, finding that though the bell atop had stopped in its chiming, the structure was still well and vertical. It was northeast of him, probably half a mile or so away, and Albus recalled that it had been around there where he'd left his friends. Hoping that they hadn't went too far, he had just made for that direction when a sharp explosion temporarily deafened him, the stony wall at his side bursting open and sending pieces of rock everywhere.

The force was such that Albus fell over, his shoulder taking the brunt of the blast and harboring a dull, throbbing pain as a result. Still, he wasn't nearly as injured as the man who'd been knocked through it; Albus rose to his feet and stared down at the Dark Alliance member, who was clearly unconscious but looked as though, given the burns on his arms and the gash on his leg, that he'd been beaten quite a bit before his trip through the wall.

Albus looked up next at the culprit, somehow not surprised at who it was.

"You're coming home," his father said, wand stretched ahead of him. "*Now.*"

There wasn't even an inkling of compromise in his voice, a far cry from the more amiable tone he'd had the last time they'd spoken. Albus supposed that the gap in time was partly responsible for this, but then, the danger that they were both currently in was also probably a factor; Albus could see that his father was tired, from having faced foe and friend alike, and though he appeared in reasonable straits, he was still sporting a bloody lip and a graze on his neck.

But Albus held his ground. He raised his wand, and when he spoke, it was in the most innocuous tone he could use. "Dad...I can't...not yet, not now, I still-"

His father struck his wand through the air, the stream of golden light emerging so fast that Albus barely had time to wave his wand in the circular pattern that comprised his defense. It failed to deflect the spell away though, only absorbing the force of it, and Albus was blown from his feet,

miniature lights dancing before his eyes as he skidded across the stony road.

Just how the spell had affected him, he wasn't sure, though his legs seemed incredibly weak as he pulled himself to his feet, unsure of what would have happened if not for his split second reaction. His father was already advancing though, leaping through the shattered wall and over his victim from before, now snapping his wand through the air like a whip; and sure enough, a trail of fire coiled from it, the orange embers dancing in place as they slithered across the ground with his movements.

Albus fired a stunner, not sure what else to do, but his father dodged it effortlessly, waving his wand so that the fiery whip crackled into a line of flames-Albus barely managed to sidestep it, realizing, for the first time, that his father was prepared to do anything short of killing him to bring him home.

The fiery lariat seemed to follow after him as he dodged it, and Albus did his best to relieve the pressure by aiming a Fracturing Curse down at his father's legs. There was a resounding *bang*, but the familiar crunching noise never came, for his father seemingly leapt over the invisible curse, still brandishing his blazing instrument. He went to whip it once more-

"*Aguamenti!*" Albus cried, and the stream of clear water met the fiery whip in the air. This seemed to extinguish it, but the resulting steam obscured him from the scene, and it was with his reflexes alone that he managed to deflect his father's next hex away-a pale one that collided with a nearby home and seemed to coat a large portion of it in ice.

"Don't make me hurt you, Albus!" his father roared through the cloud, and Albus held back what surely would have been a sarcastic retort in favor of firing a spell of his own. This one he aimed at the ground though, the mossy green sphere of light colliding with the road underneath his father's feet. The following quake actually managed to knock him off balance, and Albus, keen on capitalizing, sent a follow up stunner-

But his father had whirled his wand while tumbling down, and his own red spell had met Albus', knocking it away completely. The very next moment he was stable again, albeit slightly further away than he'd been, and the bombardment of spells following his return to balance was severe enough that Albus took the defensive once more, concentrating fiercely as he whirled his wand about, sending the red and blue and yellow and orange spells off to his sides into the sky, where they did everything from explode on impact to encase one of the somehow untouched sign posts in solid gold.

His father was relentless though, continuing his assault through gritted teeth, and though Albus was staying put as he maneuvered his wand about, he could see that his father was advancing on him. He was maybe fifteen feet away when he fired his next spell, a moss colored one identical to what Albus had produced a moment ago-

He caught on to it too late, though, unable to counter it as the ground heaved beneath his feet, throwing him to the side. On one wobbling foot he managed to catch sight of his father's triumphant face as he fired an enormous stunner, one that Albus certainly wouldn't be able to

deflect by conventional means.

He scanned the environment for something to banish into it, but with only a second to spare and acting on something beyond even instinct, he thrust his wand out in front of him and upwards. The ground in front of him rumbled just as it had been, but rather than disorienting him, the very gravel spiraled upwards into a solid pillar, a temporary stalagmite that absorbed the blow completely, allowing him to regain his footing.

Albus looked up expectantly following this, surprised at himself and even, foolishly, expecting his father to be impressed as well. He was looking positively furious though, his face red and his green eyes bulging through the circles that covered them. At the next moment he'd made a complicated, zigzagging movement with his wand, and the burst of golden light seemed to freeze Albus completely for a moment as it neared him, again giving him barely any time at all to defend-

This time no such burst of skill saved him, as his poorly conjured magical barrier dissolved uselessly in front of him, the blast sending him backwards and, once more, off of his feet completely. Before he could even land he'd heard a whistling noise, followed by a crackling, and in mid-air he felt something hot coil itself around his right foot, tugging at him the moment his sore body hit the ground.

Dazed, Albus stared down and saw that the fiery whip was back, and though it was definitely emanating heat, he felt no burning. The smoldering fetter seemed designed more for stability than pain, a conclusion reinforced once he'd tried using the Severing Charm on it to no avail.

Unable to fight the pulling motion, Albus tried to aim his wand while being dragged, but his father's heaves were outrageously strong, and as Albus slid across the stone road he could only flail, hoping that his arm aligned with his father as he got closer-

It did, and Albus took advantage of the fleeting moment by sending one more Stunning Spell at his father. He dodged it with quick jerk of his head though, a look of relief overtaking his hardened face.

"Not this time, Albus," he said, his son now close enough that he was actually able to kneel, and grab at him with his free hand-

But Albus was still keeping track of his stunner as it soared skyward, well past his father's head. He gave the subtlest of flicks with his wand, concentrating as hard as he could given his current position, and watched as the bolt of red curved itself in the air, slightly at first, but eventually turning completely and falling downward, right on target-

His father seemed to sense it coming, but not soon enough to do defend it properly. A look of surprise overtook his face as he turned, rather unprepared for the spell that Albus had honed in on him, and when he conjured his shield it was done so awkwardly that the blast knocked him away completely, rolling him along the road with a groan that only served to indicate that he was still conscious.

The fire gone and his foot now untethered, Albus did his best to heave himself into a position that would allow him to defend once more, but a searing pain shot through his ribs, no doubt a complication of the spell that had preceded his capture. He managed to turn though, just in time for his father sit up as well, and it seemed as though he'd become more accustomed to pain in his lifetime than Albus had, for a moment later, he was on his feet, clutching at one of his knobby knees with one hand, but his wand aimed with the other.

"All out of surprises now," he said, sounding winded. "Now just...stay...still-"

He made to fire yet another spell, and despite Albus' ardent refusal to go down, the pain in his sides was just too much for him to raise his wand to the level needed, and he actually laid back down, unwilling to see whatever blast of light it was that would put an end to his hopes of stopping Darvy before his mind was gone-

"AAAARGGGHHHH!"

He wasn't sure if the yell was his father's or from whoever had tackled him, but when Albus picked his head up as little as he could, he saw his father on the ground, head pressed into the stone by his assailant-

"I'm sorry Mr. Potter, I'm so sorry!"

"Gert...-orf...me- Morrison-"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Albus watched as his gangly friend used his long body to press his father into the ground, doing his best to wrestle his wand away from him. Morrison's own wand lay a few inches away-it seemed as though, upon arriving at the scene, he'd reasoned that he was better off using brute strength than magic.

"Don't...make...me-"

"Go Al, go!" Morrison cried, his arms still wrapped around his victim's torso, their knees banging together as he tried to pin the tired wizard's arms to his sides.

Fueled by the sight, Albus lifted himself to his feet, fighting through his interior pain and trying to reclaim his balance. At the next moment, though, there was a loud banging noise, and his friend had been thrown into the air, whimpering like a dog as he did so.

"Morrison!" Albus gasped, watching as his friend slammed into an unfortunately placed stand of fruits, rotten apples and oranges toppling over his head as he moaned in discomfort.

"Hang on!" he said, ready to dart towards him, but his father was already back on his feet, his hair so swept upwards from the tussle that his lightning bolt scar was finally prominent, one of the lenses on his face cracked. He said nothing this time, merely gritting his teeth and aiming

his wand, yet he was foiled again-this time by a successful stunner from behind.

Albus watched as his father toppled over, finally no longer a threat. Behind him stood Scorpius, who had somehow crept into the battle like a ghost, his wand outstretched and a horrified look on his face.

"Are you alright?" Albus asked him, though his body was moving towards Morrison.

Scorpius swallowed, his own hair a mess and his face bright red. "I- I just stunned Harry Potter," he squeaked.

"You'll get over it," Albus said off-handedly, now kneeling beside Morrison, who was stirring.

"You okay?" he asked his friend, and Morrison gave a weak thumbs up. Albus turned back to Scorpius, but before he could even ask the same question, his friend had nodded.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said. "Shoulder still killing me though...what's with you running away from us like that, you git!" he added, apparently unable to contain his indignation any longer.

Albus heaved a sigh, not even sure what to tell him. "I- I dunno. I feel like I'm losing control," he finally admitted, realizing that it wouldn't help to hide the fact. From next to him, Morrison had risen to his feet, wiping his robes of whatever juices had accumulated on him from the avalanche of fruit.

Scorpius seemed to mellow after this honest answer, as he next ran his hands through his hair, his body going lax. "Right...well we're all together now, but we need to move."

"We can't just leave him here," Albus said, indicating his father, though a terrible wave of guilt washed over him as he said it, given his mentality towards Neville earlier.

"We're not," Scorpius answered him boldly, bending over to grab Morrison's wand off the ground and hand it to him. "I bumped into my dad a few minutes ago, he's on his way down here now."

"You spoke to your dad-" Albus started, but his friend batted the question away.

"Not now, let's just focus on getting out of here. There's definitely still fighting going on."

Albus could hear the noises of struggle as well, and though they were now more punctuated than ever before, he still joined his friend in his desire to get moving before something else turned up. And yet, he couldn't take his eyes from his father, who remained motionless, eyes closed as though sleeping peacefully, though his thoughts-if he even was having any-were undoubtedly more volatile.

"He'll be fine," Scorpius insisted. "*My dad*, on the other hand, I'm not so sure, but we can worry about that later..."

Albus nodded, then started to turn about, eager to regain the sense of direction that he'd had prior to his most difficult confrontation of the day. The sharp movements bit into his sides though, and to add to it, he felt a twinge near his ankle from where his father's fiery coil had snared him-perhaps it had been burning, after all.

"Where are we going?" Morrison asked the both of them, apparently managing his own pain much better.

Scorpius looked to Albus, as though to signify that he was still in charge, and Albus responded dutifully.

"We're still going to that storage spot, and still going after Darvy," he said. "And I feel like we'll never have a better chance than today...so...yeah."

He wasn't sure if there was anything else that could be said on the matter, but if there was, his friends weren't going to force it out of him. Instead they took to his side, and together, the three of them began to jog at a heavy pace, though none of them seemed capable of moving at their desired speed. Albus felt a pang of pain in his sides with every step, Morrison seemed as though he might have injured his foot during his crash landing, and Scorpius was swinging one arm along with the other, nursing a wound that had stopped in its bleeding but now looked raw.

"So what did you guys do with Neville?" Albus asked, feeling as though it would be rude not to.

"Dragged him into an alley, hid him behind this huge pile of rubbish," Scorpius said.

"He'll smell awful, but he'll be fine, we concealed him pretty well," Morrison went on.

"Did you guys happen to come across anyone that you recognized?" Albus asked, gazing at houses as they went and peering through the windows. The insides were all completely darkened, looking masterfully inconspicuous; it was though the residents of Kakos had a great deal of experience in hiding themselves away when things got violent.

"Saw your Uncle Ron," Morrison said, "but he didn't see us. We split up after that-"

"Ran into some Dark Alliance members," Scorpius continued, "they came from both sides, but we got caught up with some of your dad's lot and fought them off, just going in different directions. I think your pal Teddy was with them, actually, but a little hard to tell given what he can do..."

Albus nodded, trying to keep track of just how many people were involved in his father's operation. The entire crew from the search through Mottley had returned, but as Mr. Malfoy had said, the ongoing siege was focused more on finding Darvy, and that meant that his father might have pulled every line of help to get the job done. If this was the case, it wouldn't be long before the entire town was on lockdown. There was no doubt that the Dark Alliance were putting up a fight, but if all of the companions that his father had accumulated over the years were on the midst of it all, he didn't expect things to last much longer...

No sooner had this thought occurred did he come screeching to a halt though, for just up ahead, another battle had broken out. Half a dozen Dark Alliance members had engaged a duo that Albus didn't recognize, but even as he looked on, one of the two—a middle-aged woman—was struck by a Killing Curse, leaving her weedy looking companion to fend for himself.

Albus threw a hasty glance at his friends before taking aim with his wand, but Scorpius and Morrison were quicker, already firing identical streaks of red into the crowd. Both hit targets, diverting the attention of the masked figures. Albus stepped in front of his friends to deflect the incoming jinxes while they attacked, but then he caught sight of the weedy man falling to a flash of green light, cringing as more Dark Alliance members emerged from around the corner.

"Go back!" Albus yelled, sensing that he and his friends were in no condition now to take them all on. Scorpius gave a rough growl of disappointment at their fruitless attack, but stepped away all the same, Morrison mirroring the movement. A deluge of multi-colored hexes followed them, and Albus, who'd spotted the slimmest of alleyways at their side, grabbed at his friends to pull them through.

"Through here!" he yelled, leading the two of them onto the next block over, which was quite vacant, bar a handful of unmoving victims. The three of them continued to run as fast as their ailing bodies could take them, yet Albus, despite focusing entirely on the clear path ahead, could have sworn that he saw a face in one of the windows across the street.

"Wait!" he said, holding out an arm for his friends to stop.

"They're still after us—" Scorpius made to argue, but Albus shushed him, squinting to better make out the shrouded visage.

"What are you looking at—"

"Who is that?" he asked, still peering. It was an elderly face, wrinkled and weathered, the skin tone just a few shades darker than Albus' own. From a distance the man continued to stare, as though he himself were doing some identification of his own, and then after a moment, he made a motion with his finger, pointing over his shoulder, as though telling him to go around.

"Do you— do you see him...?" Albus asked, fearing that it might be another hallucination. Scorpius disconfirmed this, though.

"Wait...he *does* look familiar. Didn't we— come on," he changed his sentence in the middle, now taking the lead himself.

"What's going on?" Morrison asked, sounding oblivious. The man had disappeared from the window though, and Albus wasn't sure if his other friend had even seen him or not. Either way, the pressure to move was still on them, and following Scorpius' lead, they crossed the road and stepped through a broken fence, sliding along past the corner of the home and emerging on the other side of it, where sure enough, an elderly man stood, the battered back door of his home ajar.

He was stooped and frail looking, though wearing a polite expression along with his greying robes, and a brief flash of sunlight from off his bald head jogged something in Albus' memory.

"We met him before!" he breathed to Scorpius. "He was being robbed, rememb-"

Now it was Scorpius' turn to hush him. Looking over his shoulder to make sure that no one was coming, he made to aim a question at the old man, but seemed to remember that speaking to him was going to be difficult.

"Do you- who- can you-"

He stopped there though, making poor gestures with his fingers that were obviously meant to indicate friendliness, but little more.

"What's going on?" Morrison repeated, so close to Albus that he could hear him breathing. "Who is this guy-"

But the old man was already responding, tapping on his chest lightly. "*Soy un amigo*," he said, and when none of them answered, he turned, again gesturing with his finger over his shoulder. And then, he started in his brisk walk away from them.

"I think he wants us to go with him," Albus said hurriedly, and Scorpius gave a shrug that seemed to indicate compliance, stepping forward a moment later. Albus made to follow as well, though Morrison remained stationary for a moment, looking thoroughly bewildered.

"Al I don't know- I don't know about this- Al- Al- *I don't even like soy!*"

But Albus and Scorpius were now practically jogging once more to keep up, and Albus listened as his other friend trailed along behind him reluctantly, apparently unable to muster a better idea.

Despite their most recent encounter having only been two blocks away, the sound of the town-wide quarreling seemed to diminish incrementally as they followed after their nameless guide, though Albus was hardly abated by this. It was not that he didn't trust the old fellow; on the contrary, he was fearful the man was going to get hurt in his attempts to aid them.

He navigated the roads expertly though, even at his moderate pace, and Albus had the shrewd sense that the man had a very specific destination in mind for them, rather than just a general area of safety. He kept his eyes on Scorpius and Morrison both as they trotted along-they looked keen and puzzled, respectively-hoping that his most recent decision didn't lead them too far astray as a unit.

Their docent gave no indication that he was even aware that they were following after him, apparently unwilling to waste so much as a second in looking behind him. The four of them moved quietly, unspeaking and treading softly over the broken stretches of ground and past the dead or otherwise indisposed bodies littering the roads. The distinct lack of communication gave

Albus the time to soak it all in, and he realized that the siege had been even bigger than he had initially thought. The worst sights that he came across, though, were those of the Kakos citizens who hadn't made it home in time. However vile they were as a community, Albus had come to understand quite some time ago that it was a poor exercise in logic to judge the individuals based on the activities of the whole, and indeed, the apparent benevolence of the man leading them now was a reminder to keep true to this outlook.

They started to slow after several more minutes of walking, and Albus registered that not only had they put significant distance between themselves and their aggressors, but that the reduced activity was an indication of the siege perhaps nearing its last stages. He found himself wondering back to his father, hoping that he'd been recovered, but wishing furthermore that he wasn't prepared to resume in his actions any time soon.

"I think we're here," Scorpius whispered to him, breaking whatever unspoken vow of silence the three of them had shared for the last ten minutes or so.

"Yeah, but *where*?" Morrison insisted, looking expectantly at the old man, who'd finally turned back to them. He raised a finger, telling them to wait, then marched up to the nearest home, a dinky thing no more unusual than any other, the wooden door of which had a heavy metal lock on it. He produced a key from within his robes, opened the door, and then disappeared within the house, closing the door firmly behind them, the lock clicking shut once more.

The three of them stood waiting afterwards, looking between themselves but saying nothing at first. After a full minute though, Morrison threw his hands up.

"He just wanted us to walk him here!" he bemoaned, and Albus was just about to counter this point, to explain how he and Scorpius knew the man, when the sound of the lock went off once more. Before any of them could even turn to it, there came a rapid tapping noise, and Albus, raising his hand over his eyes to block the sunlight, saw that the old man was now in a window just above and to the right of the door, rapping fiercely on the pane as a gesture for them to enter.

Albus swallowed, looking back at his friends. They both gave half-shrugs, as though insisting that it was still his call, and Albus, not sure what he was waiting for, pulled the door open and entered the row home, his friends following after him.

Chapter 17: Smugglers

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It took Albus a moment to distinguish the interior of the house from the area outside. The room in which he'd entered was comprised of the same drab colors, giving off the same rustic, dated feeling of a simpler, albeit more sinister time, and it was upon his light perusing of it that he realized that it was his first occasion in a Kakos residence.

He'd been to inns, yes, and shops, and other, larger structures throughout the town, but in his several weeks within the Quarry, this was his first true glimpse of standard living for the general public. Albus wasn't quite sure what he'd been expecting in terms of details, but whatever the case, he wasn't surprised by what he was seeing. The room was cramped and grey, dimly lit and with broken furniture ranging from a rickety chair to a small table that looked as though every inch of it had been burned by hot liquid at some point-probably, Albus realized, as a result of potionry. There was a withering hearth in the corner as well, right by the indent that led to the next room, and hanging over the fireplace he caught sight of small squares of cloth that gave the room the little color it had, stitched and patterned well enough that it might have been done by magic.

He felt Scorpius and Morrison lean into him from behind, apparently unwilling to go much further without an invitation. Both of them were quiet, no doubt from doing their own scanning, but a moment later someone had emerged from the next room over, and their appearance was enough to distract them.

"Come in, come in-find a seat."

It was a woman, and by the looks of her, she was around Albus' age, maybe two years his senior at the most. She was quite thin, made clear by her simple, tattered robes the color of slate, but with a full face and rather attractive features-to Albus anyway, who'd developed a taste for darker hair, of which she had plenty of. She was quite tall too, possibly having a full inch over Scorpius, and her skin was the same olive tone as the old man who'd led them there. Albus hazarded a guess that she was probably his granddaughter.

"Erm- just- just over here-"

"Anywhere you can," she said, sounding somewhat flustered, and Albus picked up on a lightly masked accent, highlighted most by a slight rolling of some of her consonants.

She vanished the next moment, yet continued to speak, only this time in a language that he couldn't understand; predictably, he heard the muffled retorts of the elderly man immediately after, equally indiscernible.

Already feeling uncomfortable, but pleased with the break from the outside, Albus settled himself on the very unsupportive chair; Morrison pulled a stool away from the corner for use, while Scorpius merely leaned himself up against the back wall, looking somewhat dazed at their current predicament.

The woman reentered a moment later, brushing her thick hair from in front of her eyes to reveal a tired expression.

"I- I'm sorry if we're intruding," Albus said quickly, "I'm Albus, by the way-"

"Carmen," she responded, briefly taking his hand. "And it's no trouble-you shouldn't be outside now, not with what's going on out there. And your names?" she added, looking over at his friends.

Morrison extended his own hand, giving his name, but Scorpius practically mumbled his own. The woman known as Carmen seemed to have heard it though, for she didn't ask for it again.

"I'm sorry again for us being here," Albus started once more, and he truly felt it-he had not expected the destination to be so personal. "We just- we were following your...erm-"

"Grandfather," she confirmed. "I know, he told me; again, it's no trouble. You can wait out the siege here, all of you," she added, and when they all raised their eyebrows in surprise, she continued, "my grandfather told me what you did for him; it's the least we can do, truly."

Albus exchanged a brief glance with his friends, the looks on their faces telling him that they were having the same thoughts. While the offer of shelter was a most generous one, they had followed this woman's grandfather in the hopes it would have a more pragmatic conclusion; their goal was to leave Kakos, after all, not increase the duration of their stay further.

He was just considering the best way to word this when Carmen strolled by him, and curiously, over to Scorpius.

"Your arm," she said, nodding towards the splotch of blood that he'd been nursing for the better part of the day.

Scorpius gave an alarmed look as she neared. "It's nothing-"

"I can help," she said, and much to Albus' surprise, she produced a wand from within her robes. "Here, let me-"

"It's a small thing, just a scratch-"

"Then it's not a small thing to help," she interjected swiftly, already pulling at the sleeve of his arm.

Albus caught Morrison's eye, able to tell at once that Scorpius' discomfort was a tremendous

source of amusement for him. He was clearly suppressing a grin, but both he and Albus remained quiet as their new friend tended to the injury.

"It will still be raw," she informed him, tracing her wand over the gash. "But I have a soothing potion in the kitchen-give me a moment-"

And she hurried off. Scorpius watched her go, then turned to his friends wearing a vexed expression. "What!?" he snapped. "I don't like strangers touching me, okay-"

"Oh I think you do mate," Morrison said, smirking, "I think you do-"

"We can talk about this later," Albus said, unwilling to cause unnecessary strife between their group. "For now we need to focus on what to do next-I'm glad for the offer, but we can't stay here for too much longer. This siege isn't about the Dark Alliance anymore; people know I'm here now too-"

"It's going to sting for a second, but then you'll have some nice numbness."

Carmen had returned, carrying a small cup with her. Albus identified at once from the swirling blue smoke over it that it was correctly brewed, but said nothing as the kind-if not somewhat brazen-woman rolled up Scorpius' sleeve and began to dollop it on, gently rubbing it into the swelled flesh with waves of her wand.

Albus stood, preparing to state his case, and felt an ache tear through his innards, the effects of his father's spell still quite prominent. He said nothing of it though, unwilling to have himself tended to as his friend was, and instead opted to get straight to the point.

"Listen," he started, as she continued to busy herself with Scorpius, who now resembled a statue, "I- we really appreciate this, all of it-really-but- is there...is there anyone else that we can maybe talk to?" he finished somewhat lamely. "There's just a bit more going on, that's all-"

"No one else," she said simply, rolling down Scorpius' sleeve and pocketing her wand, her work finished. "Just me and my grandfather."

Albus felt a twinge of regret at having even asked; he couldn't imagine what had happened to her parents. Sympathetic though he was, though, there was a matter of great urgency that needed to be addressed, and he was just formulating a response in his head when Morrison blurted it out rather succinctly.

"We need to get out this place, really soon. Can you help?"

She turned, eyeing them both with interest. Scorpius was checking the site of his wound, apparently intrigued by the efficiency of the treatment, and thus it was up to Albus to grin apologetically at his friend's abruptness. Nevertheless, he said nothing to detract from the request.

Carmen sifted her dark eyes over the pair of them, a look of suspicion crossing her features. "Why would you want to leave in the middle of a siege? It's dangerous-"

"It's dangerous a lot of other places too," Albus countered. "And that's what we're trying to fix. We have to get away from here, but we're not going to be able to, they're going to lock this place down-"

"The men who are here," Carmen started, "they're Ministry men, right?"

"Not exact- sort of-"

"It's always Ministry men," she said. "They've been coming every few years or so for as long as I can remember, but they've never prevented anyone from leaving-they never really did much at all. Why would they...?"

She stopped there, as though to parse her own words for meaning. After a moment of forced eye contact, she finally asked, "Are they after you?"

"No," Albus told her, truthfully. "Not after me, no, they came here for a different reason-but they know that I'm here now, and they're not going to let us leave."

Carmen continued to ogle him for a moment, then asked a question that seemed to be, for her, quite pertinent.

"Who are you?"

As he'd already provided her a name, Albus inferred that she was more interested in his identity; the identity that made him wanted by the fragmented Ministry occupying her town.

"My name is Albus," he repeated. "Albus Potter."

He realized that it was the first time he'd purposefully disclosed such information in Kakos; he'd considered it risky before, and that hadn't changed now. But he was not going to lie, or try to deflect, not when they so desperately needed to make a move.

Morrison was silent behind him, but he saw Scorpius change his look and give him an uneasy glance. Carmen didn't avert her eyes either.

"As in, related to Harry Potter?" she asked.

Albus had predicted that the name would resonate; no matter how cut off from the rest of the world this town was, Harry Potter was a name that all knew in the Wizarding World. As Albus recalled, the residents of Lambshire had known him too.

"His son," Albus answered her. "And he's looking for me, and there's a good chance that when he- when's he's able, he's going to go door to door. We need to be out of here by then."

Before she could even answer, Scorpius had tossed in a brave interjection, finally removing himself from the wall.

"If you can't help, that's fine," he said. "But we need to know now-"

"I can help," Carmen cut him off, turning, then eyeing all three of them in turn. "Like I said before...it's the least I can do."

Albus felt warmth swirl through him. He counted that this was the second time in his journey that a stranger had offered help to him, though the situations-in particular the locations-were quite far removed in terms of content. For a single, uncontrollable moment, he wondered if Fairhart would have found himself amidst the same aid.

"Thank you," he said, "thank-"

"I don't know how much I'll be able to do," she told him quickly, as though determined to impress upon him the likelihood of failure with her tone. "But I will try-"

"If you can just get us out of the town, we can't Apparate here-" Morrison started, though Albus interrupted, wanting to detail the request a little bit more.

"Are there any exits southwest-?"

"No," spoke up Scorpius, stepping between them. For a moment Albus wondered why, but when his friend began speaking, he identified his error.

"We're looking for southwest of the bell tower-that's north of here, I think."

Albus contemplated this, trying to draw a map in his head. He turned to see if Morrison might be any help, as he'd started mumbling directions to himself as well, but given that he was counting his fingers as he did so, Albus doubted he'd be able to provide much.

"I have a map," Carmen spoke up. "An old thing, but the town doesn't change much. If you can point out where you need to go, I can do my best to get you there."

"That would be great-" Albus started, but he fell silent a moment later. He'd heard shouting from outside the home.

Wordlessly, Carmen strode by him, pressing her face to the window and peering just as her grandfather had. She then turned, her expression stony.

"The siege is over," she announced.

"How do you know?" Scorpius asked.

"Because the Ministry men are patrolling now. Some of them don't look too good, though."

Albus joined her at the shoulder, chancing a brief scan himself. He could indeed see people walking about in an orderly, official manner, though how Carmen had identified them as being those in his father's camp he wasn't sure; perhaps she knew because she recognized everyone else.

He saw no one that he knew personally though, then retreated back to the center of the room. But Carmen stayed for a moment, still looking, before striking her wand across the window. At once it turned cloudy; impossible to peer in or out of.

"You're pretty good with magic," Scorpius commented. "Not that- not that you wouldn't be-"

"Thank you," she answered, leaving the window. "I'm still learning-this wand was my mother's-*vuelve a la cama!*"

Albus spun around, unsure of the reason for the random outburst, then saw Carmen's grandfather standing in the frame of the next room over. He raised his hands as though to complain, but then simply muttered and turned away.

"Sorry," she said, after he'd gone. "He has a bad back, and walking here didn't make it any better. Anyway, I'll go get that map now."

And she left the room without any further ado. Albus traded a look with his friends, and the moment she was out of ear-shot completely, Morrison gave a chortle.

"Blimey, she's feisty, isn't she?"

"Well that's what we'll need to get out of here," Albus said, for some reason gravitating towards the window. Though obscured by the charm, he was still able to distinguish shapes and movements, however poorly, and he took into account the many that he was seeing as he dwelled on the situation.

As expected, his father's collection of friends and former Ministry personnel had been victorious in Kakos. While this was a positive in that it meant that no one else that he knew was being attacked by the Dark Alliance, the complications were more apparent.

Surely, his father had been recovered by now, and indeed, was almost certainly the one organizing the patrolling outside. Albus knew that escaping a town seized by his father's men was going to be much more difficult than it would have been to abscond from the Dark Alliance members, and given that it had taken the combined might of he and his friends to match his father before, the prospect of encountering a similar situation was extremely undesirable.

They would need to take a stealthy approach, though just how exactly, he wasn't sure. It would depend on the resources their new ally could provide for them...

As if on cue, he overheard her once more from the other room, again speaking to her grandfather. It was considerably calmer this time though-a discussion more than a command-

and upon returning to the sitting room, Albus saw that she was holding a flimsy sheet of parchment so tattered and dirty that it may have at one point been used to clean with.

She looked around the cramped space for a place to smooth the article, and Scorpius, with an almost lazy flick of his wand, conjured a rather sleek table from mid-air, as high as the knees and fitting perfectly into the center of the area.

Carmen gave a mild gesture of appreciation as she knelt, smoothing the map out for all of them to crowd around. Albus was forced to crane his neck over Morrison as he viewed it upside-down, realizing from a single glance at it that it probably didn't matter. It was horribly drawn, with little to indicate any major structures or pathways, and the array of smudges and stains didn't help. Albus couldn't help but wonder how many of them had been there at the time of its purchase-given what he'd seen of Kakos, he was sure that whatever vendor she'd obtained it from hadn't put much effort into their product from the beginning.

Nevertheless, Scorpius had immediately swooped down at her side, his eyes scanning the sleeve of parchment expertly as he traced his fingers along it. And yet, it was Morrison who spoke first.

"I think we're here," he said assuredly, stamping his index finger on a spot near the corner. "Near this big-

"Those are the docks, and that is water," Scorpius told him shrewdly. "And we want to be heading away from that direction-we're closer to here, actually," he added, pointing at a spot closer to the middle.

"There's an exit not far at all," Carmen spoke up. "And north too! That's what direction you were looking for, right?"

"Ideally," Albus said, a little annoyed that he was physically limited from taking part in the search. "You wouldn't happen to know what's around that area, would you? Outside of this place?"

"Mostly woodland, if I recall. I don't leave often. But there's another town not far past there too!" she added excitedly, pointing out the edge of the map, which did indeed indicate the beginning of another territory.

"We're not looking for some other town, though," Albus told her, but she shook her head.

"But it's still there, it still exists, and I was thinking-these people, are they nice?" she changed her sentence unexpectedly.

Albus said nothing at first, unsure of how to respond. Scorpius then gave a shrug indicating his own confusion, and so he gave it a shot.

"Erm- is- is who what?"

"The people here, the ones that you know, who are with your father," she explained. "Are they polite?"

It took him another few seconds to really grasp what she was asking, if only because he wasn't sure how it would apply. After a moment of thought though, he responded.

"Yeah, they are," he told her, and it was the truth. Whatever they'd done to the Quarry, Albus knew that his father and his companions-and that included the other members of his family-were very kind people, and that their actions in such instances were not in any way indicative of their general demeanors.

"Then they might let me pass," Carmen said. "And that means I can bring you with me."

Albus was right about to voice one of his many concerns with this general outline of a plan, but Sorpius spoke first.

"You're going to smuggle us!" he declared, and she nodded.

"How?" Morrison asked, sounding more than just concerned-it was as though the idea of being contraband excited him.

"Many in this town use carriages to move themselves and their belongings around. My grandfather is one of them, though since his injuries, I've taken to doing it."

"So you hide us in one of these carriages and just...leave?" Albus asked, still anxious.

"If I have a destination in mind and tell them that it's part of my livelihood, they might just let me," she said.

"We could conceal ourselves magically too," Scorpius said. "If we're not moving, it could be effective."

"I'm for it," Morrison announced at once, and suddenly, all three of them were looking at him expectantly.

Albus frowned, considering the idea. On one end, it was better than he could have hoped for-but on the other, it seemed ill-conceived, even pedestrian. Though then again, they *were* trying to be clandestine, and usually it was the unremarkable acts that succeeded in that regard.

"I don't know," he said after a moment. "I don't think my dad would fall for that-"

"But what are the odds we bump into him again, eh?" Morrison said.

"We really can't afford to wait for something better either," Scorpius spoke up.

Carmen said nothing, though given that it was her idea, he was sure that she was more

confident as well. Perhaps there really was no better way...

"Okay," he finally said, "let's go for it."

"Excellent!" Morrison piped up, now rising. "When do we leave-"

"It'll have to be now," Carmen said, standing as well.

"Now?" Albus gawked; on one end he was pleased for the expedience, but surely, some sort of preparations were needed?

It was Scorpius who answered though, apparently sharing the sentiment with their new friend. "Now is really the best time. It's still somewhat chaotic; people might still be returning to their houses, we'll have an excuse for being out. Once everything is locked down and they're knocking on doors though, we'll stick out like a sore thumb..."

"I've already told my grandfather," Carmen insisted. "We have the carriage out back, and the horses are ready-we were actually supposed to be doing a delivery today, before this all happened."

"What is it you guys deliver?" Morrison asked, his curiosity sounding sincere.

"Whatever we can pluck from the streams," she said. "On us now, some cherries, apricots...we deliver them to various stands around the town. Rarely, we deliver to some of the surrounding villages, but we're not very welcome. Your Ministry men won't know that, though..."

Albus exchanged a tense look with his two friends, but again, they showed themselves to be more confident than he was. He then gave an agreeable nod, and was the last one to rise.

"Right, let's go then."

Carmen led them away wordlessly, through the small room that was their musty yellow kitchen and past a flight of stairs that looked to only be five or six steps high. Albus could have sworn that his ears started to buzz as they marched their way through the home, a feeling of restlessness taking over. If this worked...no, there was nothing else. It *had* to work.

"You sew these?" Morrison asked suddenly, and Albus saw that he was indicating more hanging handkerchiefs, each of them woven with a different, colorful design.

"We all need hobbies," she replied absently, taking them to a door that may have once been solid white; now though, it was coated in dirt and grime, looking as though it were either unused or used far too much. It appeared slightly jammed as well, though Carmen gave it a ferocious kick to help dislodge it, and at the next moment, they were outside once more.

Albus immediately surveyed his surroundings, paranoia overtaking him. They were in a back alleyway, gravelly and decadent, though apparently virtually untouched from the conflict that

had just swept through the area. A slight chill accompanied their reemergence as well, as Albus doing some rough calculations in his head-determined that the siege had encompassed a good part of the afternoon. With a surge of unease that's source he couldn't quite pinpoint, he wondered where-or even if-he would sleep tonight.

He looked across from them, seeing that rather than another row of homes, they were actually at the end of a neighborhood, something of a makeshift stable situated there instead. Albus could see two horses waiting inside, one jet black and the other smoky grey. They were both massive-larger than Hippogriffs, for sure-but they seemed rather gentle from a distance, or perhaps just bored.

"Percherons," Carmen told him, striding towards them.

"I'll take your word for it," Albus told her, though she then beckoned for the three of them to follow.

"Come on, you'll need to help me load this up too."

Albus and his friends followed after her, all three of them looking both ways before doing so. There was still no sign of anyone else, but he was sure that once they hit the roads, they weren't going to be so fortunate.

"The carriage is in the shed," Carmen said, indicating a rundown square of brittle wood next to the stable. "If you could just load the boxes in, then climb in yourselves- I'll get the horses-"

They all obliged wordlessly, Scorpius being the first to pull open the door of the shed, which nearly flew from their makeshift hinges as he did so. Inside was a dusty, decaying region occupied almost entirely by the carriage in question-Albus saw that it was quite small, but was pleased to see that he wouldn't have to do much in concealing it, for there was already a dark green covering on top of it.

"I don't know if I'm going to fit in here," Morrison said as he opened the back doors of the coach, frowning.

"We. Are. *Wizards!*" Scorpius reminded him, and he removed his wand accordingly, already swishing it about at the interior.

"Don't overdo it," Albus insisted. "Last thing we want is someone detecting there's been magic done on this thing..."

Scorpius ignored him though, still mumbling incantations, and Albus was certain that he was adding what additional protections he could to it as well. The tasking of loading it thus fell to he and Morrison, the latter of whom had started lifting the boxes in the corner with ease, heaving them into the empty space as he did so. Albus noticed that however many he seemed to load, they never seemed to take up more than a specific sliver of allocated space.

He himself didn't feel like lifting manually though-the pain in his ribs had not subsided entirely yet-and so he resorted to lazy flicks of his wand, lifting the cardboard containers and carefully lowering them within the cart. His was forced to shift his feet about as he did so though, trying to keep balance, and was just wandering a little too far out of the shed when he almost bumped into Carmen as she led the horses over.

"Whoa!" he said suddenly, as one of them neighed.

"It's okay," she said. "You just startled him."

"Yeah, sorry about that," he answered her, feeling startled himself.

She gave a smile as she brandished her wand, using sharp, small flicks to attach the harnesses, starting with the securement of the horse collars.

It was just then that Albus noticed that his two friends were out of earshot, and with this mind, he decided to engage her.

"Hey, th- thanks again, really," he said, lowly. "I know this got sprung on you out of n-"

"As I've already said," she interjected, not removing her eyes from the carriage apparatuses, "it's no trouble at all."

Albus frowned, doubting this very much. She herself seemed to realize how overtly false the statement was as well, as at the next moment, she'd turned, a frown on her face.

"I don't mean it like that," she told him. "What I meant to say it...we want to, me and my grandfather, that is. We know what people say about the Quarry," she added, and Albus fidgeted. "And people are right," she went on. "But they don't have to be. There are good people here too, they just don't get a chance to show it often. I want to show it."

Albus nodded, saying nothing else. He gave another smile though-one of the few genuine ones he'd been able to produce as of late-and then returned to within the shed, where the loading had finished, but, typically, a petty row had started.

"Look at my shoulders," Morrison was saying, doing a slow spin, like a model. "How was I supposed to-"

"Width isn't even the issue," Scorpius bickered back. "Look at the boxes! It's a matter of height, we'll just crouch, you know how to crouch, right-"

"Hey I'm not saying you did a bad job, I'm just saying-"

"Are we ready to go?" Albus interrupted, giving a tiniest of glances down the alleyway again, checking to see that the coast was still clear.

"Not quite," Scorpius said, tossing his hands, "Morrison needs his bottle and nap-"

"We're ready to go!" Albus called back to Carmen, and though he couldn't hear her reply over the argument before him, he was still the first to climb into the back of the vehicle. He heard a loud creak as he did so, feeling the bottom of it sink slightly as well, though it held despite this, and Albus could only assume that Scorpius had charmed it in preparation for the excess weight. The sight of him entering managed to capture the attention of his friends as well, and their squabble ceased as they too climbed inside, the three of them hunched together on the side opposite the boxes of fruit, which Albus now realized were giving off a somewhat unpleasant odor-he said nothing, though.

There wasn't quite enough room for them to all press themselves against the one side, and thus Scorpius was forced to lean into the portion of the carriage directly behind the driver's seat, a flimsy, cloth barrier separating him from Carmen and the horses. They were all forced to crouch low though, even while already on their knees, and Albus-despite his eagerness to get going and leave the town of Kakos behind him-felt a sliver of regret at having not stretched his body out first before climbing in. Morrison had already closed the double doors though, and a moment later, Carmen had called back to them to be quiet. And then they felt a rumbling underneath them, and he knew that they were mobile.

Riding in the carriage was so physically uncomfortable that Albus needed to remind himself that he'd once slept in a cave just to endure it. Only by making such a comparison could he cope with his body slamming into Morrison's every other moment, or the fact that one of the wheels of the cart seemed dangerously close to rolling off every few seconds; the entire area was prone to slanting downward as well, often sending his face into the hard wooden doors. Adding in how taxing it was to stay in such a position-plus that he needed to refrain from making any noise-and it was the most that Albus could do to bite down on his lips and consider his good fortune that for the first few minutes, they weren't stopped once.

That wasn't to say that the roads seemed to be clear, though. The carriage itself was so lightly built that the sounds of their surroundings were quite apparent, and Albus heard everything from voices to the wheels of other carriages as they travelled. Carmen said nothing to them as she drove them about-which was good, as it probably would have looked quite suspicious to onlookers-but yet, the lack of communication between the four of them was harrowing in its own right.

What if she had forgotten where they were going? Or what if she was leading them towards someone who definitely knew that he was within the town, and who might be on the lookout for such skullduggery-someone like his father? The lack of planning beforehand weighed on him heavily as they travelled in silence, and the worried glances of his friends made him realize that they too were having their doubts on the ultimate efficiency of the ordeal.

And then of course, there was the worst thought of all, the thought that had been creeping in the back of his head since they'd entered that home, but which had never manifested itself coherently. What if this woman wasn't to be trusted? He'd already seen firsthand how much the reputation of Kakos preceded it. How far did this extend?

We can't trust anyone but us, he whispered in his head, and Albus nearly retorted aloud, though he somehow managed to remind himself that speaking audibly was not in his best interest.

For the next several minutes he continued to battle this ardent nagging within his mind, looking to his friends for whatever nonverbal support they could give him. They seemed lost in their own heads though, and their private periods of isolation didn't end until the carriage started to slow, causing all three of them to trade a grim look. Then they heard a voice.

"Where are you going?" came a curt, womanly tone that seemed to exude stringency. Albus was sure that he'd heard it before, but wasn't able to identify it until he saw looks of horror on his friends' faces.

"Home," Carmen replied, perhaps slightly too quickly, though it wasn't caught.

"And where do you live?" asked Headmistress McGonagall; Albus reminded himself, however, that for the time being this title didn't quite apply.

"By Penton Avenue," she answered. "North of here, not terribly far; I was down by the docks when it all-"

"Very well then," McGonagall answered, somewhat dismissively. "On your way-but be quick about it, and be on the lookout!"

"Of course-thank you-"

And a moment later, they'd resumed moving. Albus was nearly tempted to give off a gasp of relief, for he'd been holding his breath without realizing it, but again managed to keep it in. Scorpius and Morrison were looking equally reassured, and Albus, for the first time since they'd first heard of their next destination, felt a unique mixture of confidence and gall within him. Their plan, however rudimentary, was enough to fool one of the most intelligent witches that he'd ever known, and with any luck, they'd be out of Kakos soon, ready perhaps to take on that last, inevitable challenge-stopping Darvy.

He felt his breathing quicken against his will at the thought. Just as it had dawned on him the previous night, when preparing themselves to infiltrate the Dark Alliance meeting, it was dawning on him now just how close he might be to a resolution, how little might now be in his way. Things had accelerated exponentially in only so many hours, with a lead on Darvy's whereabouts-a contact of his even-having been disclosed. Would he see another former member of the Hogwarts staff tonight?

The mere thought of it was enough to make him lurch, but just as impactful was the realization that of the two hour glasses perpetually running in his head, only one of them seemed possible to beat. Though he could feel his own mind fragmenting, could sense the steady severance of his identity, one part of himself soon to annihilate the only part that he'd known, he was confident that there was still time to stop Darvy before he could rise to power again. Saving himself, however, didn't seem as viable. The memories of the vials of *Mortem Necavero*

continued to plague him as the carriage rumbled against the cobblestone, the images simply too disheartening for him to ignore.

For several more minutes they continued on without any stoppages, and Albus had the sense from the lesser amount of surrounding noises that they might be nearing an exit. The bleak square in which the three of them sat was beginning to feel like a prison more than a means of escape, and cursory glances at his friends told him that they were as eager to leave it as he was. Scorpius at least was looking calm, though his pale face looked sunken, his blonde hair a sweaty mess rather than of its usual sleekness. Morrison, on the other hand, was like an animal desperate to escape its cage, his body contorted in such a manner that he resembled a marionette, discarded into the back of the carriage and left unattended to completely.

"*Nearly there.*"

Albus perked his head up, for a moment considering that it was his nefarious imagination at work, but Morrison and Scorpius had widened their eyes as well. Carmen had given them a whisper of their whereabouts, and it was among the best indications that she could have given. The carriage then started to slow again, though, and Albus heard footsteps along with it, followed by a voice.

"Hey! Hey!"

The carriage came to a complete halt, and Albus realized what had happened at once; with an actual end in sight, Carmen had done something out of the ordinary, possibly even speeding up. And now, someone was coming to investigate.

"Sorry, miss, can't let you leave," came a rather laid back, yet bossy voice, and Albus felt his heart sink. *Uncle Ron.*

"I'm sorry, I just really need to-"

"Whole town is closed up right now, we're looking for someone. If you need to be escorted back-"

"I have a delivery to make," Carmen protested, and Albus thought she sounded a little too aggressive-perhaps she couldn't help it.

His uncle seemed to catch on to the tone as well, for he waited a moment before speaking, his own tone slightly more combative.

"Oh yeah? Where to?"

"Duskin," she replied confidently, and Albus wasn't sure if she'd just made the name up or not-it sounded real, though.

It seemed to convince his uncle too, for he'd already moved on to his next question.

"And what is it you're selling, then?"

"Produce," replied Carmen simply, and after a moment, she delineated. "Fruit and-"

"I know what produce is," he heard Uncle Ron answer flatly, and before he could say anything else, Carmen had already launched into another sentence.

"I know I shouldn't be leaving, I'm sorry, it's just- normally it's my grandfather who does this, but I don't know the people around here. I need to go elsewhere- I just- could you...?"

Albus braced himself, and he saw that his friends were doing the same-

"Ah, I suppose I can let you through," his uncle relented, and Albus gave an indiscreet exhale, though it was premature. "I just need to open up the back real quick, just to check-protocol and all."

"Erm- well-" Carmen started, sounding panicked, a tone that was showing on Albus' face. It had shown on Scorpius' too, and at that very moment he saw his friend twist his body expectantly, brandishing his wand-

Albus lunged to stop him, but was too late. His friend had already emerged from behind the flimsy barrier, Albus' head following through, and he caught sight of the scene in its entirety- Carmen looking flustered, clinging to the reigns, Scorpius with his wand pointed squarely at Uncle Ron's face, which was wrought with surprise-

"*Confundo!*" he uttered, and Albus then watched as his uncle gave a shudder, a blank expression twisting itself on his face, his long nose crinkling and his orange hair looking slightly windswept.

Unsure of the severity or of the effect, Albus grabbed at Scorpius and roughly pulled him back through the curtain and into the belly of the carriage.

Morrison gave them both a look of utter surprise, but Albus said nothing as he still clung to his friend, unwilling to move an inch and hoping that Carmen knew what to do from here...

"Everything okay?" they heard her ask politely. Albus waited-

"Erm- yeah- I just...what...what were talking...?"

"You just checked the back? The fruit?"

"Right!" Uncle Ron exclaimed, sounding dazed, and Albus, though he couldn't see him, was certain that he was blinking furiously. "Right, yeah- go- go on ahead. But you may want to stay there the night!" he added hotly, as though trying to regain his composure. "Whole big mess over here..."

"Oh yes, of course-thank you so much!"

"Uh-huh. Get going then..."

And the carriage resumed moving. Albus didn't release his hand from around Scorpius' collar until nearly a full minute later though, and the moment that he did so he registered more movement from his friend; Morrison had made a silent high five motion, which Scorpius mimicked, grinning.

Albus could only recline back in his position from before though, pleased with the outcome of Scorpius' impromptu spellwork, but a sudden, gut-wrenching thought accompanying it.

Would that be the last time that he saw his uncle? And on the reverse end of that, had that been the last time a member of his family would see him? Only to have it tampered with and made incomplete, the reality of their encounter lost forever?

And if this was the case...then the implications extended beyond just his uncle. That would mean that the last time his father had seen him, they'd been dueling, aiming to harm one another; hardly a proper good-bye...

He swallowed, a lump rising in his throat. His brother and sister, Mirra, his cousins, since his departure from the Potter Mansion that day he'd seen them only in hallucinations, fleeting delusions that he'd fought against vigorously, without realizing just how important it was that he still hang on to them, to still remember them. The finality of his journey was weighing on him now, clinging to him as the carriage came to yet another stop, and this time, he heard softer footsteps, and then the double doors at the back of the carriage had been opened, revealing a flustered, but smiling Carmen.

"This is as far as I can take you," she told them.

Morrison practically leapt from his spot, falling on the grass and spreading himself wide as though to make a bed of it. Albus and Scorpius crawled out together though, a bit more maturely, though the moment that he'd stretched his legs he felt the urge to join Morrison in his lavish laying.

Before doing anything, though, he took in the scene, coming to the conclusion that Carmen's description from before had been most apt. It definitely was a woodland area, with rich green grass and patches of shrubbery, and tall, formidable trees punctuating every few yards, their tops touching to grant them shade. He thought that he heard a stream nearby as well, and was suddenly reminded of the island that housed Azkaban, but the feeling of terror passed as quickly as it came.

"You were excellent," Scorpius told her. "Really-just brilliant-"

"You did pretty well yourself," she said, looking at all three of them. "I'm glad I could help," she added, mostly to Albus.

He nodded, his dreary thoughts from before fleeing him as he breathed in the fresh air, suddenly aware of how wonderful it smelled; he'd gotten so used to the odor of the Quarry that he'd forgotten just how refreshing natural air was.

"You wouldn't happen to know how far in you took us, would you?" Albus asked her, and she gave a shrug.

"The entrance to the town is maybe ten minutes away; the road ended maybe five minutes ago. I can't move the cart around here though, too much in the way-"

"It's fine, really-you've done so much-"

"I'm glad," she answered him, but she then turned to head back to her horses. "But I should probably get back to my grandfather now."

"What, are you just going to head back?" Morrison asked, leaping to his feet. "What if you get caught again?"

She gave a shrug. "I'll say I got lost. It's hardly a lie," she added with a smile, and then, most surprisingly, she leaned in and hugged each of them in turn.

"Thanks again," Albus told her seriously, and Scorpius nodded at his side.

She gave no answer at first, only smiling, then said, "You're welcome. And remember what I said, Albus."

It was his turn to smile. Both of his friends gave him a curious look, but they then turned their attention to their new friend one more time as she waved, climbing back into the driver's seat and giving the slightest of tugs, forcing the horses to turn.

Albus gave the grey one an affectionate pat as it went by, though they all said nothing as she drove off, watching as she slowly shrunk into the foliage, until she was finally out of sight.

"What a nice girl," Morrison commented at once. "And how do we know her, again? I think I missed something..."

"Attractive, too," Scorpius piped up, ignoring Morrison's questions completely, and they both looked at him. "What?" he asked, almost contentiously. "I'm the only single one here, I can say it-"

The three of them laughed, though Albus found himself still eyeing the spot where Carmen had last been seen, still dwelling on what had just transpired.

Again he found himself wondering if Fairhart would have ended up in such a position, would have been as trusting or have found himself benefitting from such a strange sequence of circumstances. He didn't think so. Perhaps he wouldn't even have needed it either, but Albus

had, and he'd found success in it. For some reason, he derived pride from this fact. Fairhart-for all that he'd taught him, all the good that he'd done-had done things in a very specific way, a way that distanced himself from others. That Albus was able to make similar strides by doing just the opposite made his heart lighten, if only slightly; a sharp contrast to how he'd just been feeling. What was going on with him? Was this part of the process of his mind splitting, or was it deeper than even that?

"You okay, mate?" Scorpius asked, after he'd fallen silent for a moment.

Snapped away from his inward struggles, Albus turned to them both, rubbing at his eyes as he did so. "Yeah, I am- I..."

He stared at them, realizing that they were really here with him. Not hallucinations, as his family and Mirra had been, but actually here, at his side-having just emerged alive from a siege in the Toxic Quarry, and ready to continue as though nothing had happened.

"I am," he repeated. "And I- and thank you," he said to both of them. "For everything. I know I've said it already but...this is for everything I don't say, too."

His friends exchanged their all too familiar look, then gawked at him, Scorpius' mouth twisted into a sneer.

"Stop being so dramatic-"

"Seriously, that's that little girl stuff, Al-"

Albus chortled, but then started to walk. "Come on," he said, not even bothering to look back at them. "Let's find these blokes and finish this."

His friends followed after him, laughing themselves, though only a minute into their walk, Albus had already started a conversation.

"Hey," he said, looking back at Scorpius, "you mentioned that you bumped into your dad? What went on there?"

"Right!" Scorpius said, as though astonished that he'd forgotten. "Yeah, I saw him-didn't look too good, but he could stand and everything. Not sure what happened to him."

Albus thought that he knew exactly how Scorpius' father had ended up in poor straits, but declined to comment, instead allowing his friend to continue seamlessly.

"Either way though, he seemed a little irate at what I'd gotten myself into, but I point blank refused to back out of it, and he wasn't in any condition to do much about it. Actually offered to help us still, but I was moving a bit faster, he said he was going to follow after me-pretty sure he ended up getting to your dad."

"Seemed like it," Albus commented, reflecting that if Harry Potter had been found as anything worse than unconscious, the subsequent shutting down of the town would have been quite different.

"Blimey there were a lot of them there though, wasn't there?" Morrison brought up. "Went all in, your dad did-"

"Is that a well?"

Albus stopped dead in his tracks, taking notice of where Scorpius was pointing. After only a few minutes of walking, they'd already hit a clearing of sorts, the most prominent sight of which was the stone circle in the middle, looking as though it were quite old and equally unused. But still...

Just outside the town, the old cabin by the well.

Albus continued to stare at the watering hole, then traded a look with both of his friends, whose pensive expressions indicated that they remembered Bozen's words as well.

"Wands out, d'you reckon?" Morrison asked, and Albus nodded, removing his own at once, though also positioning Ares' instrument in his pocket strategically, in case a second was needed.

He waited until Scorpius had withdrawn his own too, and then, slowly, the three of them crept together through the encircling and into the verdure, each crackling leaf underfoot sounding magnified in volume as they did so.

They moved like this through the dense pockets of green for a full minute, Albus at the helm but his friends just behind him, and they came to a collective stop just as an aberration of the environment came into view.

There, just a few yards away, was a large cabin, looking little cared for, but given the kindled fire next to it, still in use. Albus quickly surveyed their surroundings, checking for movement-

"Just give me a minute!" someone yelled, and he almost jumped. He then watched as a curly haired man emerged from the side of the structure, which Albus now noted was only slightly larger than Fairhart's hideout had been. The man was wearing all black, yet no mask, but Albus could tell at once that he was part of Darvy's lot by what was in his arms-a large crate, revealing enough that he could see vials of clear potion in it.

The Dark Alliance member then disappeared from them for a moment, apparently to drop the crate off somewhere, for when he emerged again into view, his hands were empty. He then disappeared back into the cabin, and Albus registered that there was an entrance on the side.

"Do you think that was him?" Morrison whispered from his left. "That Markson fellow?"

"I don't know," Albus admitted, shifting his position slightly for a better look, hoping for a window

view.

"How many do you think are in there?" Scorpius asked quietly, so close that Albus could feel his breath on the back of his neck.

"I don't know," he said again. "But I don't think that Darvy's here," he added with confidence.

"Maybe not, but *someone's* here who knows where he is," Scorpius insisted, and Albus saw Morrison nod along.

Albus nodded too, gauging their options. His chest was still not completely painless, but it felt loads better than it had an hour ago, and a slight darkness was starting to creep up on them as evening approached. All that they'd been through today-what was a little more?

"Are you guys ready?" he asked, shifting his head to view each of them in turn.

"Right behind you," Morrison said.

"On your count," Scorpius added. "How do you want to do this?"

Albus continued to peer about for more details of the location, but adrenaline was now coursing through him. "The fast way," he said, brandishing his wand, and he then burst from their cover and ran towards the cabin, his friends right behind him.

Chapter 18: Unbreakable Bonds

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Albus practically skidded across the grass, each near slip propelling him forward with momentum that he knew would take him right to the door. The padded steps of his friends echoed behind him as he went, his eyes darting both ways to ensure that they would retain the element of surprise when attacking.

While the idea of initiating violence typically weighed heavily on him, there was a thrill to it this time that he couldn't quite comprehend—a primal, predatory surge of glee at the prospect of storming the Dark Alliance and unleashing upon them without warning, as they'd done to him so many times before. His wand held high, Albus nearly slid off of his feet as he halted in front of the door on the side of the cabin, which he saw now was slightly propped open, almost as though to welcome him.

He blasted it off with his wand, reveling in the subsequent gasping and shrieking that signified the start of a battle.

Before he could register even the size of the room, he'd already taken the offense, pointing his wand at the first person he saw—the Dark Alliance member who'd just reentered the cabin. A Blasting Curse later and he'd been blown backwards off of his feet, soaring by a streak of orange light that one of his companions had fired—

Which was deflected by Scorpius, who'd appeared at his side. Albus caught it from his peripherals as his friend made a complicated swirling motion, and the next two aggressors that they saw collided into one another forcefully, as though magnetized.

"Wait for me!" he heard Morrison say from just outside the cabin, but Albus spared no moment in seeing how his other friend would contribute, instead sizing up the competition, and whatever advantages they'd procured.

Aside from the three already indisposed, four—no, five, for he could see one taking cover behind the flimsy door leading to the next room—remained. The cabin itself was nearly as unfilled as Fairhart's had been, the only visible furniture the long wooden table in the center of the room. Albus caught sight of crates however; stacked in the corners in a most organized fashion, all of them sporting vials of different colored liquids. He flicked his wand towards the crate of purple potion and sent it streaking into the next Dark Alliance member that he saw, who was mid-incantation when the crates collided with him, the glass containers smashing over him as he fell to the ground; he screamed immediately, his body smoking as the skin on his face and neck morphed to something resembling leather.

Albus paid it no mind though, already flinging his wand upwards to deflect the most recent hex

sent his way-the caster was hit square in the face by one of Morrison's stunners a moment later. Two of their opponents flipped the large table over for makeshift cover, one of them charming it to rebound whatever hex Scorpius had fired right back at him, though Albus sent a stunner to collide with it; the mixture of light soared instead into the wall of the cabin and blew a hole in it.

"Outside, outside!" one of the Dark Alliance members called, upon seeing the cavity form, and he dove for it.

Albus detected at once they were aiming to Apparate-the cabin probably had charms around it-and he acted accordingly, aiming his wand at the aperture and concentrating on the Mending Charm. While not perfectly cast, it had the desired effect, the recently formulated debris launching upwards and reassembling well enough to cause a blockage. The man gave a whelp as his escape was foiled, and a moment later, Scorpius snared him with thick ropes around his middle, pulling him to the floor and dragging him forward, leaving his wand behind.

Morrison had gotten himself involved now with the wizard and witch who'd overturned the table, practically tap-dancing as they awkwardly aimed curses his way, all of them so poorly fired from their position that the streaks were exploding at his feet. Albus took advantage of the distraction and hurried around the obstruction to capitalize; a moment later he'd caught the two of them from behind, and after consecutive stunners, they posed no more threat.

This left only the wizard hiding behind the door, who'd emerged from his position upon seeing Albus occupied, his wand raised-

He was disarmed by Morrison, and a well-placed Trip-Jinx from Scorpius a moment later caught him as he tried to scramble back through the door, his acceleration resulting in a front-flip that made his thin hair flop over his face as he landed, clutching his back in pain.

"I think that's all of them," Scorpius stated afterwards, glancing around the room, the total volume of which was now considerably lower. All of the Dark Alliance members present were incapacitated in some way or form, but Albus, unwilling to take any chances, strode towards the nearest of them and searched them for a wand, grabbing hold of it and tossing it aside a moment later.

"Search for more of them," he said to Scorpius, who gave a dutiful nod and stepped over the body of their final victim to explore further. "And let's get their wands from them too," Albus added to Morrison, who immediately crouched and started patting the nearest body, that of the squirming man who'd been hit by the crate of potions.

Albus also went through with this task, extracting each wand in turn and tossing them out the door and away from sight. He then stood, gazing around at their work, trying to determine what the next step would be. As he'd expected, Darvy had not been among his men. But that didn't mean that he was out of reach...

"Nothing," said Scorpius upon returning. "Just tons of potions-they had something big going on here."

"Well it's over with now," Albus said callously, and he next flicked his wand, levitating the lone witch among the array of foes.

"What are you doing?" Scorpius asked him, raising his eyebrows.

"Setting them up for interrogation," he answered, letting the floating body fall up against the wall.

"All of them?" Morrison asked, dragging the now scaly-skinned individual over to where the witch was.

"At first," said Albus. "Until we figure out which one Markson is."

He heard a slight whimper, then immediately turned his attention to the wizard who'd been tripped up. *We'll start there*, he told himself, strolling towards the man and seizing him roughly around the collar. He lifted him to his buckling knees, taking note of his triangular face and awkwardly slanted mouth; he almost resembled a canine of some sort.

"Which one of you is Markson?" he demanded, his voice low, but strict.

"M- Markson's not here," the man insisted, and Albus watched his eyes to see if they shifted to someone else in the room, keen on discerning some sort of subconscious betrayal. They didn't, though.

"And who are you then?" Morrison asked, also tossing a handful of procured wands out the door.

The man hesitated in Albus' clutches, stammering his response pitifully. "M- me?"

Morrison actually chortled, now coming to Albus' side. "Yeah, you."

"A- Rookwood," the man spat out, and Albus raised his eyebrows at the name. "Augustus Rookwood!"

"Is that right?" Albus asked at once, turning back to catch Scorpius' look. He was leaning against the wall of the cabin, shaking his head fervently.

"Y- yes, I-"

"Because we've met Augustus Rookwood," Albus interjected swiftly, and the man's eyes lit up in fear. "And you're not him."

"I- I- I- I mean-"

Albus threw him back against the wall, now stepping forward and aiming his wand at the man cowering before him. "Selling your mates out, eh Markson?" he asked, putting things together at once. "No wonder you and Darvy meet for little chats, you've got loads in common-"

"W-wait!" Markson said, not even denying it, holding up his thin hands defensively. "Whatever you want to know, I can give you whatever you want to know-"

"Where's Darvy?" Albus asked darkly, and Markson gave a whimper.

"I- I- that I don't know- b- but-"

"Damn you Markson," came a callous voice from elsewhere in the room, and they all turned to see who'd spoken; it was the man who'd been disfigured by the potions. He'd managed to support himself on his hands, and Albus saw that his skin had hardened all around his upper body, including the lower part of his face and mouth. Whether this contributed to his gravelly tone, Albus wasn't sure, but whatever the case he continued angrily, spit flying from his mouth he spoke. "You said the Hand had a plan for when you got back! Was this it!? Was this it!?"

"Shut it," Morrison said, turning to him with his wand raised, but Scorpius had flown from off the wall.

"Plan?" he said, looking confused, and Albus, sharing this thought, turned back to Markson with his eyebrows raised.

"What's he talking about?" he snapped. "What plan-where were you?"

Markson looked close to fainting. He'd curled himself up against the wall, his eyes now shifting as Albus had expected earlier, only this time towards the door, as though preparing to make a desperate bolt for freedom. His narrow jaw was opening and closing randomly though, as though he were considering some sort of verbal defense instead.

Albus struck him across the face with the back of his hand, ensuring that thoughts of the former didn't cross him again. "What's going on!?" he demanded sharply, and for some reason-he wasn't quite sure why-he felt afraid, almost vulnerable.

"I- nothing-"

But the scaly man had started to laugh, a grisly, booming guffaw, and Morrison, possibly sensing the atmosphere shift, fired a stunner right at him, sending him into a lull with his sniggering still hanging in the air.

Albus crouched down next to Markson now, feeling as though his entire body were clenched. Using the tip of his wand, he lifted Markson's face so that his twitching eyes were boring back into his own. "Where were you!?" he howled, his hands shaking. "Where are you getting back from!? Answer me! *Answer me!*"

He struck him once more, this time with enough force to send Markson flat on the floor.

"Al-" Scorpius started, and Albus felt him approach, but he ignored it. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. Something had happened, and whatever it was, it was bad

enough that the man sniveling before him was unwilling to say it aloud, lest he be punished more severely...

But then he did. Raising his head slowly, a line of blood tricking from his snout-like nose, he gave a timid wail. "From the house!" he said, a few tears falling freely on his face. "From the house-"

"What house!?" Albus growled, and his friends were completely quiet behind him now. "Tell me what house!"

"The house, the big one, th- the big- the one she told us about!"

Albus froze, unable to believe what he'd just heard. "What did you just say?" he asked, his question a mere whisper.

"The house, th- the big-"

"Who!? Who told you-"

"The girl!" Markson cried dramatically, his eyes bulging. "The girl- the girl that went after you- the- the girl with the black hair-"

Albus snapped. He made a rough grab for Markson, one hand siezing him by the collar and the other by his hair, not even bothering to use magic as he stood and dragged him along behind him, seething, his heart pounding so fast it could explode at any moment.

"Al- Al- wait!" Scorpius started, and Morrison actually moved to block him, but Albus pushed him aside with his shoulder, still clinging to Markson's black strands of hair, ignoring his yells of pain and discomfort.

"Stay here," he said-no, commanded-to his friends. "Keep them here, no one moves."

"Al-" Morrison started-

"STAY HERE!"

He pulled Markson all along through the cabin and out the door, not sure what his destination was, but knowing that he wanted no one to see what he was about to do. It was into the darkness that he stalked, evening having finally settled upon them. The cool air did nothing to soothe him though; he felt as though his very skin were on fire, his mind flooded with horrible, horrible thoughts, each of them sharp as knives, serrated blades spinning in his head and sawing into his skull-

"Agh- aghh- no- no!" cried Markson, as he squirmed, trying to fight against his captor, and though Albus was staring ahead too defiantly to see it, he knew that his victim was sliding along the grass, his limbs flailing about as he tried to escape, to wrestle himself free.

But it was to no avail, and Albus, catching sight of a massive oak only a few feet away, slammed him up against the thick trunk, his wand brandished at the very next moment. Thick cords burst from the tip, coiling around Markson's torso in a serpentine manner, binding his hands behind his back and encircling his forehead, all but paralyzing him.

"Where is she!?" he roared, and though this was the first question to be extracted from the swirling muck in his head, thousands more were on the tip of his tongue.

"Ahkk- ah-"

The squeezing of the straps seemed to inhibit Markson's speech, but Albus did nothing to alleviate this pain or pressure; if he wanted to be done with this, he would need to provide answers.

"Agh- ehk- I- don't- I don't know-"

"Where were you!? Where were you!?"

Markson continued in his squirming, his eyes pointed towards the sky, and Albus, still seeking answers, realized that he was not being extreme enough. For a moment he considered turning to see just how much distance he'd put between them and the cabin, but he discarded his reluctance altogether when a chilling voice entered his ears.

Do it.

"Crucio!"

Markson thrashed about, screaming in agony, his position against the tree forcing him to sit straight as his innards seemed catch fire, his heaving and rigid struggling sending the blood from his nose into his open mouth, choking him-

"Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!"

Each dose of it seemed to send a new jolt of electricity through his skeleton, his yells now hoarse and matching each tremulous display of violent vibrating; his eyes were rolling to the back of his head, his body doing everything that it could to contort but failing miserably. Albus watched, impassioned, not letting up until one of his cries managed to carry a word with it into the night sky.

"Hkkg- ahkh- stahp-ghkk-"

Albus removed the curse, kneeling, grabbing at the now limp body and shaking it so fiercely that flecks of blood began to splatter on his face. "Answer me!" he snarled. "Where were you!? Where is she!? Where!? Where!?"

He slammed his fist into Markson's mouth, dislodging his teeth with a single blow. One of them

cut into his knuckles upon its ejection, but he felt no pain, felt nothing at this moment, because he still didn't know what it was he should be feeling; didn't know what had occurred, what he had lost-

Albus continued to brutalize him with his fist, pressing down on the collarbone of his victim and bludgeoning every inch that he could see, his cheeks, his nose, his eyes-

"Tell me!" he gasped wildly, tears starting to fall from his own face now, and he seized the sputtering man around the neck with both of his hands, and though he wasn't sure how it would get him the answers that he needed, he squeezed, his fingers digging into Markson's soft flesh, bruising his throat as it jerked uncontrollably from his own convulsing hands.

More! MORE!

Albus continued to strangle him, his own teeth bared, and he could see Markson's eyes widen exponentially as he fought for coveted breath. Albus could taste his own tears on his lips as he crushed the chunk of sorry flesh within his hands, and he watched as Markson's face started to turn purple, barely distinguishable due to the thick red ooze that was trickling over every inch of it. But Albus continued without pause, the voice in his head now shouting something that he couldn't even understand, the ringing in his ears blocking it, and strangely, he could have sworn that the rest of his body was weakening as he went on in his work, unremitting; all of his strength seemed to be leaving him, as though it were being allocated to his fingers, and somewhere, far back in the corners of his shattered mind, he registered that it was though he was draining his own life along with Markson's...

And then something hit him over the head, a blunt force sharp enough to force his cessation. Albus toppled over, hearing Markson's gasp of ecstasy, though he couldn't see it. The noises were punctuated by moans of anguish, but Albus, above all else, registered a voice very different from the one that had been coaching him along.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

It was Scorpius. His eyes were widened in his shock, his pale skin positively milky in the emerging moonlight, an expression on his face so far removed from its usual, collected self that it seemed to transform him completely.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing!?" his friend repeated, his mouth twisted in horror, staring back and forth between Albus and the loose collection of meat that Markson now resembled, flat on the grass and quivering slightly, unable to speak.

"He won't tell me!" Albus whimpered, still crying, now wiping at his face. "He won't tell me, he- he won't-"

"There are other ways!" Scorpius argued, looking mortified, and Albus was suddenly reminded of Eckley, the way that he stood there self-righteously, judging him, not understanding what needed to be done.

"There's twenty crates of Veritaserum right there!" Scorpius continued, jabbing his finger towards the cabin, and Albus dimly realized that his friend had undoubtedly heard the commotion and came to inspect it, leaving Morrison in charge of the scene. Albus too now saw that the structure wasn't terribly far at all, but merely sloped away from them; without realizing it, he'd pulled Markson up a moderately steep hill.

"It won't matter," Albus said, standing, the truth in his own words sending his body further into frenzy. "It won't matter," he lamented, "he doesn't *know*, he doesn't- he doesn't know any- any names, any- I'd have to- I'd have to see-"

He stopped there, the solution coming to him at once. Why he hadn't thought of it previously, he didn't know-perhaps some crude, malicious part of him hadn't wanted to-but there was a way to get the information that he so desperately needed, the knowledge that he had to attain before he could do anything else.

Albus turned sharply, aiming his wand back at Markson, who still seemed on the cusp of life. Scorpius made a sudden movement, but Albus had already said the incantation.

"Leglimens!"

Colors and shapes burst before his eyes, a collection of transparent, flickering settings that seemed to encircle him, welcoming him into their existence. His awareness of the situation was just as it had been when using the technique on Fairhart though; he was able to see his wand stretched out before him, see the blades of grass below his feet, even see Markson cringing, his eyes jammed tightly. From his side he registered that Scorpius had halted in his movement as well, but Albus did his best to ignore these sights, to instead peruse the images that had materialized around him.

Though standing still, he felt as though he were swimming through a sea of memories, waves of reality sloshing around him, overtaking him with their details. He saw and experienced things that didn't matter; an old man on a bench, a child on a swing, an event inside some convenience store. But Albus knocked these aside mentally, flipping through individual set pieces as though they were part of a storybook out of order, looking for an illustration that he could recognize...

Not this one, not this one either-

His heart skipped as he caught sight of something floating about, a flittering scene of a girl sitting upright in a chair, her hands bound to the arms of the seat, her expression blank. She had hair as dark as coal, hanging over her face like a ragged curtain, and her grey eyes looked glazed, unfocused as she spoke. Albus watched as Mirra spilled secrets against her will, and he watched as two hands emerged at that instant from the darkness behind her, gripping the back of the chair, accompanied by a maniacal, toothy grin, and electric blue eyes. Albus panicked upon seeing Darvy, seeing him that close to her, and-not knowing what else to do-he grabbed for her, trying to snatch her from this reality here and bring her into his own-

But then the scene disappeared, and despite Albus' best efforts to bring it back, a whirlwind of color enveloped him, and he found himself next among a loose arrangement of memories, brief splinters of a single event-

But he recognized some of it. He recognized the front of the Potter mansion, and then heard screaming, and next he saw a furious flurry of spells, watched as his brother dueled with a masked wizard on the very stairs that Albus had so often walked-

And then he was outside once more, and Hagrid was there, and he watched it, as terrified as Markson must have been viewing it, as the giant grabbed a man from behind and held him up like a ragdoll, slamming him down over his knee and breaking his back-

The world revolved once more, though it was still the same scene, still the same few minutes, and Albus watched as Hugo crawled, crying, his leg bleeding profusely, looking as though it would never be the same, his Uncle Charlie trying to lift him and carry him into a different room, where Scorpius' mother was, looking unharmed but in a state of complete shock, and Albus was just wondering why when he saw the next sight, the next body-

Lucius Malfoy lay dead on the carpet of their sitting room, his eyes widened and his long blonde hair billowing outward, his wand next to him, near his hand, where it must have dropped in his last few moments of life, the moments he'd spent trying to save the Potter family and their friends, and that was the last thing that Albus wanted to see, the last thing that he *needed* to see, and as the entire scene collapsed upon itself, he found him hurtling once more, indiscriminately through the contents of Markson's mind-

But he willed himself to find the scene from before, the scene with Mirra, to extract something-anything from it, and he found it at that very moment, as clear as it had been previously. She sat there, not aware of the havoc that was about to occur, and the darkness behind her had evaporated, the scene now more vivid, sharper, revealing her to be in a small, empty white room, empty but for other people.

Darvy still stood behind her, leering, and Albus watched as a wand extended in front of him, just as his own wand was now, and he realized that *he* was Markson for this one moment, prepared to say the curse-

"No," Darvy said, his voice a nearly unintelligible gurgle, as though he were speaking under water. But Albus understood him perfectly as the wand lowered. "*He needs to be here; needs to see it...*"

And then there was a laugh, a laugh so convoluted by the memory that it was almost demonic in nature, a deep, freakish, bloodthirsty cackle-

"No!" Albus yelled, and he exited that world entirely, actually stepping backwards as he did so, his eye jammed shut and his wand hanging loosely from his hand. "No! No no no no-"

"What did you see!? Did you- did it- did it work-"

Albus sank to his knees, still absorbing the contents of Markson's memories. A chill had ran through his spine like none that he'd ever had before; a numbing, nonhuman feeling, a feeling infinitely worse than the one that had overtaken him after speaking to Ares. It was a feeling beyond helplessness, beyond suffering-

"What happened!?" Scorpius blurted out, grabbing him at the shoulders, and Albus looked up at his friend with the most forlorn face he could muster, tears now welling in his eyes once more.

"He- they- they have- they got Mirra-"

Scorpius made a noise somewhere between a sob and a hiccup. He knelt down to Albus' level, still clinging to him, his eyes screwed up in a doleful manner.

"What- what do you mean they- they got her-"

"They took her! Darvy- she- they- she gave up- told them where- truth- potion- she-"

"Told them what!?" Scorpius said, and it sounded as though he meant to be soothing, but could not hide his own worry. "Albus! Albus, told them where what-"

"All of them," Albus admitted, his voice a paltry squeak. "I saw them, I- I- I- I saw it, I saw- Hugo, his leg-and I don't- I saw- a-a- and- I saw Hagrid and Ja- Scorpius I saw..."

He couldn't bring himself to say it. He could only stare up at his friend, his body cold, and he watched as Scorpius backed away from him, wearing a look of bewilderment tinted with terror.

"What did- Albus what did you- what did you see-"

Albus could only shake his head, still crying, turning his eyes to the ground.

"Was it- was it my mother...?" Scorpius asked, his voice as fragile as glass.

Albus shook his head, now sobbing, never less willing to speak in his life-

"Was it my-did they- my gran- my granddad...?"

Albus didn't know what made him do it, but he did it; he looked away, staring off into the distance.

He heard it-felt it even-as Scorpius cupped his hand to his mouth, and when he finally forced himself to view his friend, he looked hysterical, his eyes now as wet as Albus', his body shaking and his forehead pink.

"I'm sorry-" Albus croaked, not knowing what else to say, but Scorpius gave no response, only removing his hands from his mouth to tug at his hair, revealing the sporadic twitching of his lips.

And as Albus watched this look of grief overtake his friend's face, he felt his insides combust with rage, and he turned back to Markson, to the man who seemed unaware of the world being destroyed just inches away from, the man still clinging to his life selfishly, despite having just aided in the taking of others'-

Albus gave an inarticulate whelp of wrath as he made to strangle the man again, this time to succeed, but once more, he felt himself pulled away, and once more, by Scorpius, whose face had turned stony.

"He did this!" Albus argued, standing up straight and staring into the cold eyes of his friend. "He did this, he killed them, he was there-"

"He didn't do this, Albus," said Scorpius, his voice shaking with every word. "You did."

Albus gazed back at him. "*What!?*"

And then, Scorpius pushed him.

"You did this!" he spat venomously.

"I didn't do anything-"

"You did *everything!*" Scorpius said, tears streaking down his face. "Don't you get it!? Darvy sat back and did nothing, waiting for *you* to let this happen! All those people-your dad-mine-they've all been out looking for *you!* Mirra went out looking for *you!*"

"Don't you put this on her, she didn't-"

"I'm *not!*" Scorpius rebutted furiously. "I'm putting it on *you!* You're the reason no one was there, the reason for that siege-"

"That siege was for Darvy's lot!" Albus argued, unwilling to take even a granule of Scorpius' accusations. "It was for-"

"IT'S ALL FOR YOU!" Scorpius barked, the loudest that Albus had ever heard him, and he was now looking ravenous, his teeth bared like fangs. "This whole thing, this whole- this whole operation, with the potions-it was all a distraction! Don't you get it!? Don't you see!? Darvy wanted to confuse everyone, he'd set this whole thing up, maybe not for you to go here, but for you to go after him! So that your dad would leave and try and stop it, either to find you or to find him, and it worked! He led your dad to the Toxic Quarry, put that whole thing together, knowing he would leave everything behind, knowing he would be desperate to end this whole thing, because he knew that YOU WERE STILL GOING TO BE OUT THERE!"

Albus said nothing, each word another smack to his face. Somehow, his thoughts of Mirra, and Hugo, and everyone else left him, but only for a moment, only to allow him to consider the truth in Scorpius' words...

Had Darvy planned this all? Had he returned to the Toxic Quarry after so many years to design a fake operation, to lure his father there under the pretense that it could ultimately save his son?

"But why!?" Albus retorted, refusing to believe it. "Why do all that-"

"TO HURT YOU!" Scorpius screeched. "That's what this has always been about! To hurt you, to make you angry! He waited until he knew everyone you loved would be vulnerable, and he struck! And now my granddad is dead! Because of *you!*"

Albus watched as Scorpius shattered before his eyes, every muscle in his face giving way, his features dropping into a puddle of despair. Albus backed away from him then, still unwilling to believe it, but he knew that it was true, that it was all about him, that Darvy would go to such lengths, that he didn't care about potions and old towns from his childhood, that it was all about right now, all about what he wanted today...

"*You killed him,*" Scorpius repeated meekly, sobbing into his hands, and Albus, not wanting to hear this anymore, not wanting to be reminded of what he'd done, countered fiercely.

"Maybe he was asking for it!" he said, and Scorpius looked up bitterly, his eyes blotchy and hateful. "Maybe he had it coming to him, all the people he's murdered-"

"*What!?*" Scorpius said, sounding disbelieving, a hateful glare on his face. "You don't know what you're-"

"Oh come on!" Albus scowled. "Don't act like you didn't know-what did- what did you think, eh!? What did you think he was- he was some kind of- some kind of low level Death- whatever- you think he was just some petty thief, he's killed loads-"

"You shut up!" Scorpius snapped. "You shut up! That's not true!"

"He killed Blackwood's parents!" Albus announced at once, and Scorpius actually recoiled at this statement, looking lost for words. "Yeah, remember her!? He killed them, in case you ever wondered why she hated you so damn m-"

"AARGH!"

Albus felt the wind be knocked from his lungs as Scorpius lunged into him, ramming him in the stomach with his head and sending him to the ground. Albus collapsed on the grass, his knees buckling beneath him, but before he could respond Scorpius had already-with surprising strength-pinned him down, climbing atop him and cocking back his fist-

Albus blocked the first blow, but the second came in rapid succession, connecting with the side of his face; he felt a searing pain shoot through his jaw at once. Enraged, he lifted his body with all the strength that he could muster, Scorpius' next swing missing and hitting the grass. Albus then seized him by the collar of his robes, pulling him to the side, and with a sharp kick from underneath, he felt their knees bang together, the resulting pain forcing his attacker to roll off of

him.

He practically leapt to his feet, seeing that Scorpius was now hunched over, but still snarling viciously, aiming his fist back once more. Albus ducked, the swing grazing the top of his hand, and he propelled himself underneath the now exposed torso of his combatant, lifting him from his feet momentarily and slamming him to the ground. Scorpius aimed a swing as he fell, catching him in the shoulder, but Albus, now as frenzied as his friend, clung to him, following through the slam with a sharp elbow to Scorpius' nose.

Scorpius gave a growl of pain, though it was now he who'd made a grab for the collar, and he pulled Albus down on top of him, beating at his back with a balled up fist, each hit sending a jolt up his spine. Albus ignored them though, enduring as a means of establishing position, and slowly, he wrestled Scorpius underneath him, grabbing hold of the frenetic arms inflicting pain upon him and pressing them into the grass. Scorpius actually snapped his jaws at him as Albus positioned himself in a way that brought him complete dominance-he used his knee to pin one of Scorpius' arms to the grass, then his scarred left hand for the other. Scorpius writhed beneath him rabidly, kicking with his legs, but Albus now had a free hand, which he cocked back-

And launched into Scorpius' face. Just as with Markson, he pummeled away, the first two strikes meeting the nose, the second of which resulted in a spurt of blood. The third missed, only grazing Scorpius' cheek, but Albus persisted, not knowing why he was doing what he was doing, only knowing that he needed to do it-

But then he felt as Scorpius slipped an arm out from underneath him, and at the next moment Albus felt a terrible stinging in his eyes. He realized only a second later that Scorpius had scooped up dirt and grass and thrown it at his face to obscure his vision, and he rolled over at once, rubbing at his eyes, not seeing but feeling as Scorpius climbed back on top of him, ready to resume-

It never came though. The weight of his friend on his chest was removed in a single fluid motion, and the next thing that Albus knew, he'd been pulled to his feet as well, just as easily.

"Stop it!" yelled Morrison, looking between them both with horror. "Stop it! Stop it! What do you stop it!" he called again, as Scorpius made another lunge forward.

Morrison grabbed his arm and yanked it back though, pulling him away as one would a dog. Albus stood still, continuing to pick and rub at his eyes for dirt particles, just barely making out Morrison's struggle as he wove his arms through Scorpius, holding him to prevent him from moving completely.

"Stop- erhght- Scorpius *stop it!*" Morrison groaned, and Albus saw his face twist itself into one of outrage and confusion. "What happened here!?" he asked, and when Albus didn't answer, he went on, "How did this- this- this is supposed to be *unbreakable right here!*" he whimpered, and for some reason, Albus heard Darvy's altered, infernal laugh ring in his head. Scorpius relaxed at these words though, and a moment later, his friend had released him.

Albus braced himself for the impact, but it didn't come. Instead, Scorpius let his arms drop languidly, his face once more apparently void of activity. "That's my *family*," he bemoaned, crying again. "That's my *family mate*, that's- that's-"

And he covered his face once more, sinking to his knees. Morrison dropped with him, giving his friend a hug like few Albus had seen before.

"Hey- hey- I know, I know mate, I know-"

"That's my *granddad*..."

"I know," Morrison said, though Albus knew he wasn't actually aware of anything that had transpired-or if he was, he was just picking up on it now. "Just give me- just give me a second."

And then he stood, leaving Scorpius to wail in his arms alone.

"What happened?" he asked, sounding nonplussed.

Albus could only shake his head, his tears all dried, the sight of Scorpius now making him feel ill more than anything else. "Darvy," he said. "Darvy, he- he has Mirra."

It was the only sentence he could muster, but he knew that it had encapsulated a tremendous amount, for Morrison had went cold upon hearing it.

"Oh- n- we have to go back," he said. "To your dad, we have to-"

"No," Albus croaked. "I'm going after him. Now."

Morrison gave him a wild look. "Go- after- after *Darvy*!? You don't even know where-"

"Yes I do," Albus said blandly, and it was the truth. The entire time he'd been fighting with Scorpius, it had been processing in his head, and now, it had all come together. The white room had been the missing piece of the puzzle.

"He's at the Ministry of Magic," he said. "The Department of Mysteries, actually."

"*What?*"

Morrison ogled him for a moment, then looked back and forth between his two friends, apparently not sure which needed him more. "What- what do you mean...?"

"The building!" Albus explained, losing his temper with his other friend now as well. "The- the actual *building*, the headquarters of the Ministry of Magic, in London-"

"How- how do- how do you know-"

"Because that's what he wants," said Abus, now shaking on the spot. "I get it now; I get him. He doesn't just want people to fear him, or to respect him. He doesn't just want to control them. He wants *all* of these things. He wants what his brother wanted," Albus realized, thinking back to Ares. "That's all that he's ever wanted, because that's all he could do, is steal from others. It was Ares who wanted the army, Ares who wanted to destroy the Ministry...Ares who wanted to rebuild it. And Darvy, he- he twisted it all, made it into something it wasn't. Made it into something different, not a reformation, something else, something that will give him power, make him a ruler. He wants to *be* the Minister of Magic, but not of this world, of the next one, of the one where he has his army. But he needs me dead first."

Albus stared down at his feet as he said these things, all of it connecting together seamlessly. *Of course* Darvy was at the Ministry of Magic. Where else would he be? Where else could he sit and feel as though he were in charge of others, where else, now that Azkaban was ruined, could he build his army? And he was residing in the Department of Mysteries, no less, the place where the Veil had originally been, no doubt hoping to uncover more of its secrets...

"Al, listen to me," Morrison said lowly, as though careful not to interrupt Scorpius' sobbing. "If you know where Darvy is, you can tell your dad-"

"No," Albus repeated, shaking his head. "Darvy wants me," he said. "All of this-everything-he did this all because he needs me out of the way. He can't build his new world-the one he stole from Ares-unless I'm dead. That's the only way he can have his army; have the Wand work for him like he needs it to."

"So then he wants you to go after him!" Morrison exclaimed. "He wants you to do this, Al you can't, you can't fall for it-"

"I have to," Albus responded. "He has Mirra. And he's waiting for me to get there, he wants to set me off, wants me to do something stupid-and he's waiting for me to get to him so he can kill Mirra, because he wants me to see it, I don't know why, but he wants me to see it. But that could change," he added darkly. "That could all change. He doesn't know that I know where he is yet. He doesn't know that I've figured him out. Things could still change. I need to go now, I need to end this *now*."

Morrison tilted his head back as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So what you're just- I mean- is he- will he be alone...?"

"I doubt it," Albus said, now growing restless. "No-he can't make his army yet, he'll have people there, around the building probably."

"How many-"

"I don't know!" Albus exclaimed. "Whoever's not here, or who wasn't in Kakos-I don't know! But I have to go-"

"But you'll need help! We can go back to your dad-"

"No," Albus said for a third time. "No...they can't be part of this anymore. They need to go back. They can't be out trying to help me anymore, because it puts other people in danger, and besides, his lot is in no shape to fight after that siege..."

Morrison gave a groan of discontent, dancing on the spot. "Fine, just me and you then, but let me-"

"You too," Albus said, and Morrison gave him a patronizing look.

"Don't you tell me what I-"

"You have to get him home," Albus said, indicating Scorpius, and the sight of his friend sitting next to Markson in a catatonic state made his insides crawl. "His granddad just died," he added, and Morrison cringed. "You need to get him home."

"What about these blokes here-" his friend started, pointing at Markson, and then at the cabin.

"Leave them," Albus said. "They don't matter. The only thing that matters now is getting to Darvy. Please," he pleaded, "I need you to do this for me. Just get him home-I need everyone to be together."

Morrison gawked at him, not knowing what to say. He made to stammer something out, but Albus cut him off once more.

"*Please*," he said again, to his oldest friend. "I won't be able to do this otherwise. I need- I need him taken care of," he added, gesturing towards Scorpius.

Slowly, Morrison nodded. "Okay," he said. "But if you need help-"

"I can get help," Albus said. "Or at least I can try."

"What? Who-"

"Someone who wants Darvy gone just as much as I do," Albus said; the thought had dwelled inside of him at random intervals during the course of his journey, but now, it seemed to be the only option that he had left. If he wanted to stop Darvy from becoming the next Minister of Magic, he was going to need the help of the incumbent-or whatever Waddlesworth now was.

"Just take care of him," Albus said, gesturing towards Scorpius, and Morrison nodded.

"I will," his friend said, a frown formulating on his face. And then, he strode forward, giving him an enormous clap on the back as he did so. "I will. And I'll...I guess I'll see you later then, Al," he added, sounding as though he was trying his hardest to not let the worry show in his voice.

Albus nodded, returning the gesture. "Yeah," he said, not sure if he was lying or not. "See you later."

And then he walked away, turning to get one last look at his best friends, before spinning into nothingness.

Chapter 19: Warren's Word

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Albus reappeared into darkness, though this time, the surrounding area was much more familiar. He had not been to Hogsmeade since prior to seeking out Fairhart's cabin, and when he had been there, the circumstances had been closer to reconnaissance, a sort of preliminary event meant to introduce him to living on his own. Hogsmeade had been busy then, but quiet; though people had moved about together, they'd had their discussions only indoors, the dangerous implications of their anarchic world lingering over them.

Now, with night falling, he found himself on a vacant road in the midst of the Hogpenn, certain that his entrance had attracted attention, but too preoccupied to care much for waking up shop owners. No, he had a job to do here, and it would have to be fast...

We can do this, the voice in his head crooned. *We're so close.*

"I know," he answered, though panic was still coursing through him. The image of Mirra with Darvy was frozen in the back of his mind, a permanent fixture in a region already too cluttered to hold much else. The sight of him leering behind her was sickening, and the knowledge of what it had led to had only made it somehow worse.

What casualties accompanied that of Lucius Malfoy? He had seen his brother fighting adamantly, but saw nothing of his mother or sister. Hagrid had been in the midst of fighting, handling himself reasonably well, but he was not invincible, and given that he was outside, had probably been surrounded. Hugo...Hugo had been maimed, and his sister had been nowhere in sight...

He realized with ire that not only were these things a complication of his actions, and a symbol for how dangerous his feud with Darvy had escalated, but that moreover, his lack of knowledge on the matter was an example of just how unprepared he was to deal with the ramifications of his venture. It had been one thing to consider his own eventual termination; he'd come to terms with the fact that his mind would soon be gone, that soon, he would cease to be Albus. But the idea that he'd clung to was that he could use his little time left to prevent harm from befalling his loved ones, and in this regard, he'd spectacularly failed. Albus had abandoned his friends and family, under the impression that the worst it would bring them was a period of confusion and worry, culminating, of course, with grief and mourning, but that they would be *safe*. He'd done this all to keep them safe, to keep Mirra, and Lily, and James, and everyone else out of a conflict that had become so personal, and with a man so maniacal, that his departure and subsequent undertaking had been the *only* option available to him.

And of course, it wasn't just Darvy that he wanted to keep them away from; it was from himself as well, as he slowly slipped away, to be replaced by his nefarious, intemperate clone. Albus

had seen in his dreams what *that* Albus did to his friends and family, and though he'd failed in keeping them safe from Darvy, he could still succeed there. Morrison and Scorpius had elected to expose themselves to such a danger, but Albus was not accepting such requests anymore, was not going to concede to such obligations. From here on out, it was down to he and Darvy- he just needed to get to him first.

You think so bad of us. After all we've done together.

"I think bad of *you*," Albus said aloud-he was alone now, he could be crazy if he wanted to, could indulge in his descent into madness.

But you'll use me all the same. You used me back there, didn't you? What are you even here for, when you have me?

"I'm here to get help," Albus admitted, peering sideways as he hurried along, absorbing the facades of every dingy and suspicious structure that he came across. The headquarters to WAR were around here somewhere...

We don't need help. We've only gotten stronger-

"I need it!" Albus blurted out, turning, for the voice seemed not only to be within him, but just behind him as well.

And for a moment, something flickered within his line of sight, a ghoulish outline that seemed to merge with the darkness around it, the only light to reveal it the glowing beads of gold it used as eyes. Albus stared at the projection hatefully, knowing it was a hallucination but longing to throttle it all the same, to wipe off the smirk that was emerging on its monstrous face-

But then it disappeared, and for a moment it seemed as though it was going to let him be, but as Albus returned to his walking, the voice spoke within him once more, and this time, though it was his own, there was an argumentative tone to it.

You need me; you always have. I've done everything for you, everything. I got you here, I kept you in one piece in that prison, I got you through that siege, I held off your father-

"That was me!" Albus argued, sweating, now frantically throwing glances everywhere he could, as though reaching his destination would make the torment end. "I did those things, that was me-"

Your body; perhaps even your skill. But the will...that was me. And I've given you power before as well, power that's saved you! I turned those chains to ash, I reduced our army to rubble for you! And I can do so much more...if you just let me...

"I don't want you to!" Albus yelled into the night, and then he felt a painful throbbing in his head. He staggered forward blindly, disoriented by the pain and the accompanying, deafening noise, and though his body had been battered over the course of the day, it was this that brought him

to his knees with the most ease.

He curled himself up in a sitting position on the cold concrete, the throbbing vanishing, but the residual stinging still in effect. Unconsciously, he brought his hand to the side of his head and felt a viscous glob saturate his fingers; his ear was bleeding.

Albus stared down at the red liquid, shaking, not knowing if it was the result of the day's physical strain or of his mental strife-possibly both. He wiped it on the inside of his robes, checking and rechecking his ear to ensure that it didn't persist, and when satisfied, he looked up.

You'll use me all the same...

These words came to him not as a separate voice, but rather, as a memory of what he'd just heard. And there was no denying that the claim would carry truth to it this time. Without even realizing where his feet were taking him, he'd navigated the winding streets of the Hogpenn perfectly, arriving at the door of the most rundown shop he'd ever seen; the *Quality Quidditch Supplies* that contained within it the headquarters of WAR.

He stood up and braced himself, mulling over the situation once more. There should be no difficulty with entering from a technical standpoint; Albus had been granted passage years ago, and had entered of his own accord as recently as only a few months ago. What he needed now was for Waddlesworth to be there, and his first step through the door would tell him as much-

Albus brandished his wand and kicked the door in, marching intrepidly forward. At that first instant it was the faint, dainty chamber music that flooded his ears, drowned out a moment later by the yells of indignation from those he'd intruded upon. He caught sight of all of the familiar decor; the intricately woven, crimson carper, the chandelier hanging over head, the paintings adorning the walls, and then, in an instant, wands had been turned on him.

Albus recalled a time not too long ago when a young boy had entered this very room with his wand raised awkwardly, only to be laughed at, his demands to see Waddlesworth ignored. The recollection passed though, and at the next moment he'd been engaged by the small gathering of Renegades within the room, hexes flying at him furiously, the yells of his opponents revealing both their surprise and anger.

But Albus swirled his wand about as he now so often did, the jets of light slamming into invisible, angular barriers that sent them elsewhere throughout the room. One hit a painting and set it ablaze; another rebounded and hit a woman approaching him from the side, sending her to the ground in an unconscious heap.

He continued in this form until he was certain that his adversaries were showing signs of tedium, and then broke out of his defensive phase, twirling his wand through the air and lashing it across the face of the man nearest him, his Stinging Hex producing a welt so large it seemed to weigh him down to the floor. He heard a *whooshing* noise behind him and turned in time to deflect the jinx back, and felt a particular surge of triumph upon seeing Hank Hornsbrook try and fail to volley it, the blast of blue light exploding up into his face and turning his nose to sludge.

With an inkling of curiosity, Albus briefly scoured the rest of the room to see if there was another familiar face, and was just in the process of identifying one when he was forced to deflect another spell away, this time following it up with a stunner that connected perfectly. His opposition dwindling and allowing for more space, he flicked his wand at the large couch that had just been housing WAR members a moment ago, flinging it upwards to knock one foe to the ground, then sending it flying into another, where it settled on top of him, his squirming doing little to help in budging it.

Albus traced his eyes around the room then, seeking out the individuals who still showed signs of activity. He sauntered over to each of them in turn, firing stunners almost lazily to put an end to their movements, then turned his attention to the only other person left conscious in the room.

Donovon Hornsbrook was standing up against the wall, his burly body motionless, and the look of confidence that he so often used to wear replaced by one of utter fear.

Albus approached his former classmate, taking in his strict posture and short, bristled hair, his thick neck and thicker frame. Another memory swam in his head, a much earlier one, one of being thumped in the face by the boy standing across from him, the blow of which had sent him reeling...

He seized Hornsbrook roughly by the collar, slamming him up against the wall with strength that most certainly would have served him well back in his second year. Hornsbrook winced, saying nothing, only staring as the painting next to him fell from the force in which he'd hit the wall. He eyed Albus with a most curious mixture of anxiety and amusement, as though he couldn't quite believe who it was that had just made quick work of his father and pals.

And then Albus pointed his wand at his throat, and he gave a squeak, forcing his head away from it, looking rather small despite his considerable size advantage. His lips quivering, he made to speak, possibly to dissuade...

"Your mother is worried about you," Albus told him, and for some reason, he heard his own voice shake as he said it. "Go home to her. *Now!*"

And then he released him. Hornsbrook slid himself along the wall, wearing a look of both shock and relief, then aimed a look at the room, which looked as though a tornado had moved through. He gave a quick glance at his father, who lay unmoving and severely impaired, and then ran, nearly tripping over an overturned chair as he did so, bolting through the damaged door and out of sight.

Albus couldn't help but heave a sigh as he watched him go, wondering just how jubilated his mother would be to have him home safe and sound. He snapped himself away from these sentimental thoughts a moment later though, strolling past the bodies of Waddlesworth's pitiful guardsmen and up the cramped staircase in the corner, at the next second finding himself at the beginning of a white corridor. He allowed his gaze to flicker briefly towards the battered door at the far end, but then turned his body rigidly towards the red entrance on his left.

For a single, absurd moment, he considered knocking, but then something writhed within him ferociously, and he pushed the door open forcefully, more music entering his ears.

This time it was not elegant chamber music though, but rather, a slow, mournful, operatic dirge, not quite loud but certainly audible. Waddlesworth's office looked the same in basic structure as it always did as well; a small replica of the downstairs area, everything from the same shade of red for the carpet to the same positioning of the tasteful paintings. Unlike on previous occasions though, Albus derived no sense of organization from the setting; littering the floor he saw crinkled sleeves of parchment and smashed bottles of ink, knocked over wine bottles and the glass that they'd once filled. And sitting at his desk, head almost buried in his arms, was Warren Waddlesworth.

But the mystique of him was gone. His long red hair had curled itself into a frenzy around his ears, and his pale skin had a grayish tinge to it. For the first time that Albus could recall, he wore no immaculate, exquisitely tasteful suit-instead he was in a bathrobe, plain black and with dark stains around the collar. He looked up as he heard Albus enter, and took in the full sight of his bloodshot eyes before he spoke.

"Albus!" he exclaimed, a crack in his voice. "Thought I heard your voice. Come in," he added sarcastically, for Albus was already halfway in the room.

Albus caught sight of the only upright bottle of wine left in the room, sitting on Waddlesworth's cleared desk. The former Minister of Magic immediately reached for it, as well as the nearest empty glass.

"You're drunk," Albus declared, feeling rather disappointed.

Waddlesworth filled the glass entirely before downing the yellowish liquid in a single shot. "We're all drunk, Al," he said, wiping at his lips. "Some of us with power, some of us with lust. And some of us, of course, with alcohol," he added, extending the glass as though to toast him.

And then he went to fill it once more. Albus frowned, wondering how best to initiate the conversation that needed to happen, but the reminder of Mirra, locked up in some room with Darvy, made him abandon whatever manners he had left.

"I need you to do something for me," he said, and Waddlesworth smiled, giving him a knowing grin.

"Another one with their priorities straight," he slurred, reaching for another empty glass. "I only have white, I'm afraid," he added, grabbing for the bottle.

Albus intercepted, snatching the bottle away at the last moment and heaving it against the wall, where it exploded, showering the carpet with more uncleanness. Waddlesworth gazed at him angrily, hand still outstretched.

"What do you want?" he asked, not sounding nearly as flippant as before. "And where are my

guards!?" he added to himself, and he immediately craned his neck around the body in his way and yelled for them.

"Hank! Ha-"

"They took a shift off," Albus told him icily. "And what I *want* is for you to start being the person who you shoved down everyone's throats for the last few years or so. Look at you! What happened to you!?"

Waddlesworth leaned back in his seat, ignoring the comment about his supporters, but still wearing his strict look. "What *didn't* happen," he said, before giving a light hiccup. "Don't come in here and pretend, Al, you know as much about it as I do."

"So you've lost some support," Albus said, tossing his hands up. "And some gold. And some people; so what? You founded *Wands and Redemption*, you've helped rebuild this world-

"Just to watch it get knocked down again," Waddlesworth interrupted, reaching for his glass once more. He stopped though, upon seeing the look that Albus had thrown his way.

"You're pathetic," Albus told him, truly angry now. "Ready to just give up, just like that, to lose, because you've lost- lost- lost what? Who? T- the Hammer? Your bodyguard? Get a new one-

"I've known Zydrunas since I was three years old," Waddlesworth said, looking for a moment as though his red eyes were about to break open with fluid.

Albus stopped in his lashing for a moment, unaware of this fact, but recovered immediately.

"Well- well so then what? That's enough to just do you in, to send you into *this*?" he said, turning for a moment to indicate the room as a whole.

Waddlesworth ogled him, suddenly looking offended. "Why are you here?" he asked. "You- you come in here-pontificating, ridiculing me-w- why? What is this is all about? What makes me so worth your time?"

Albus inhaled, then spoke. "I know where Darvy is," he said, and Waddlesworth's drooping eyes fixed themselves for a moment. "And I can stop him, tonight. I can end this tonight."

Waddlesworth said nothing at first. He instead merely stared away into the corner, and Albus was just beginning to wonder if he'd even heard him speak when he finally looked up and answered.

"Good luck," he said simply.

Albus gave a groan of fury, pressing his palms into the desk. "I need your help!" he shouted.

"What do you want from me!?" Waddlesworth spat back at him, staring hatefully. "I don't have

anything for you-I offered you everything I had!" he added, pointing to the stain on the wall that the wine bottle had left.

"I need your support," Albus said testily. "And I need all the support that you've gotten. I need people, people who can fight-"

"There were some able bodied wizards and witches downstairs," Waddlesworth cut him off, "assuming you've left any of them alive, I'm sure they'd be delighted-"

"I don't need a handful of people!" Albus growled, feeling a burn rise in his throat from all of the yelling he'd been doing recently. Randomly, he wondered if Morrison and Scorpius were okay. "I need an *army*, or something like it, something that can make one last push! Darvy is at the Ministry headquarters, but he'll have people there-anyone from his lot who's left. I can't take them all, I need you to gather up whoever-"

"And why should I!?" Waddlesworth blurted. "Even if everything you say is true, why should I indulge you!? Why!?"

"Because you owe me," Albus said, simply, and Waddlesworth made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a laugh.

"Owe *you*? Nonsense, I don't owe you a thing-"

"We had a deal," Albus said, his teeth gritted. "You said you would do anything you could to get my dad out of Azkaban, and you didn't, *I* had to do that, *I* had to go to that damn island-"

"Our deal," Waddlesworth shot out, "was contingent on you bringing me Sancticus Fairhart, if you'll remember-"

"You wanted Fairhart dead!" Albus announced. "And he is! I delivered on my end-"

Waddlesworth scoffed once more. "Don't you- don't you pretend like you kept your part of the bargain, dead he may be, but *you* didn't kill him-"

"Yes I did!" Albus declared, a pang in his gut accompanying these words. "Yes I did," he repeated, and he wasn't lying in the slightest. "I did kill him," he said, feeling tears come on again, for it was the first time he'd admitted it, even to himself. "I killed him, because he didn't *have* to die. We could have left! I was in charge, he said, and we could have left if I wanted to, I could have made him leave, but I- but I wanted to trust someone that he didn't, I trusted someone who Fairhart *knew* wasn't trustworthy, someone who he hated, and he went along with it anyway because of me!"

Waddlesworth said nothing, his face impassive, and Albus knew that he didn't understand what he was talking about, but he'd be damned if he was going to let that determine the reality of what had occurred.

"San died because of me," Albus said, his body shaking now, droplets of salt sliding over his lips. "They slashed him up-they cut him to pieces and he was in pain- and he- and he was scared, and alone, and felt betrayed and- and Darvy- and- and he was *miserable* when he died," he choked out. "And that's because of me, and you owe me for that-something, I don't know what-but you owe me *something* for that, for what I did, for what I had to see!"

An extremely odd expression overtook Waddlesworth's face as he listened, though Albus again found himself incapable of interpreting it in any meaningful way. He could only stand there and wait, breathing extremely fast and wiping at his eyes, for Waddlesworth to respond.

"I can't give you something I don't have," he finally told him. "It- it doesn't work like how you think it works," he added, giving Albus an almost embarrassed expression. "I am *ruined*, people have moved on from me, I can't just- I can't just ask them or bribe them, there's nothing left, everyone is- *Wands and Redemption is dead*, Albus-"

"You don't have to lie or bribe anyone," Albus said, and, feeling as though he might be making progress, he changed his tone to something more conciliatory. "You can tell people the truth, you can tell them that they can finally end this-I know they're still out there! WAR isn't dead, it's just broken up, I've heard about, I've- I've *seen it*- the Renegade movement still exists, everyone still wants the same thing, they want Darvy dead-"

"Then go!" Waddlesworth urged him. "Go, find them, tell them what you can offer them, don't expect me-"

"I don't have time!" Albus pleaded. "*We don't have time*," he added, and rare though it was, he was including in that plural those other than his two halves. "And I couldn't do it anyway, they won't listen to me, but they'll listen to you, they know you, you- you know how to *speak* to them, I've seen you do it! But we can't wait, Darvy is only going to get stronger, and soon I won't be able to-"

"Why you?" Waddlesworth asked, doubt clearly in his voice. "You come here making demands of me, insisting that I help you, that I convince people to help you-how can I do that? What do I tell them, that a sixteen year old boy-"

"They don't need to trust in me, they need to trust in you-"

"*I need to trust in you!*" Waddlesworth sneered. "Maybe you do know where Darvy is, but what makes you sure- why should *you* be able to do anything about it-"

"Darvy fears me," Albus insisted. "I *can* stop him, and he knows it, he's seen me, seen what I can do-he saw what I did to the prison-"

"The *prison*?" Waddlesworth asked, sounding confused for a moment. "W- what pr- *Azkaban*?" he added, and he actually rolled his eyes. "What *you did to*- I'd wondered who the first was to progenitor that rumor, I never thought for a moment it would be you-"

"I did do it," Albus said. "I blew Azkaban to bits-"

Waddlesworth gave a callous laugh. "Albus please, you can't expect me to believe that rubbish-"

"What do you think this is?" Albus asked him, stretching forward his left hand, showing the mass of scar tissue in his palm. Waddlesworth looked at in revulsion, apparently not knowing what to say. "What do you think that is, eh? Tell- *look at it!*" he barked, for Waddlesworth had turned away, wearing a queasy look.

"I don't know," he said, returning to it for a moment. "And I don't-"

"That's what a Killing Curse looks like when it doesn't kill," Albus told him, flexing his fingers to show it in detail.

Waddlesworth's eyes darted towards his empty glass once more, as though his intoxication was wearing off and he desperately needed to replenish it. He said nothing however, apparently lost for words, and Albus withdrew his hand from sight accordingly.

"You were right," he told Waddlesworth, "there is something special about me. All those years ago, right here, in this office, you asked me if there was, and I didn't know it at the time, but you did it. You knew it then, and Darvy knows it now. I can't explain it all to you-I don't even understand all of it. But I know that it's what makes me the only one that can do this. Darvy can't send those things after me, he can't do to me what he's done to everyone else-I'm the only one that can face him one-on-one, and I'm strong enough to beat him too, whether he knows it or not."

Waddlesworth reclined back in his seat, looking uneasy. He ran his hands through his long red hair, causing further disarray for it, and when he looked up again, ready to speak, Albus felt relief course through him-

"I'm sorry," Waddlesworth said, and he sounded like it. "I'm sorry-if this were another time, if this- if this were before, I could help you. But I can't do these things now, I can't-"

"I know that you're afraid of this not working," Albus said, "believe me, I-"

"It's not just fear!" Waddlesworth announced, now looking the most vulnerable that he had during the entirety of their discourse. "It's not the fear that it won't work, maybe there is something special about you, maybe you *can* do this," he told him, as though he was now daring to believe it himself. "But it can't be through me-these people left me! They've no interest in hearing what I've got to say, they want nothing to do with me! No one does!"

And then he rose from his seat, looking as though he was moments from breaking down completely, from sinking to his filthy carpet and tugging at his hair. "I was the first British Minister of Magic to be elected by popular vote in two hundred years and I was *sacked!* In two months! Do you know how humiliating that is!?" he added, his mouth sagging itself into a

meager shape.

Albus could only shake his head. "That doesn't matter anymore-"

"It does matter!" Waddlesworth blathered, and he seemed to be doing his very best to remain even slightly composed. "I was sacked, then disparaged by every news outlet in the world! My people abandoned me in broad daylight, my own parents denounced me publicly! People shed the name *WAR* like it was plague, like I'd never existed-the only ones who stayed were the ones who had nothing else, who'd already invested so much in me. I was only a lesser evil! All but Zydrunas," he added with a hiccup. "And then they took him away from me too! Killed him, just for proudly wearing my emblem-"

"Then this isn't about helping the world!" Albus argued, feeling sick at what he was hearing. "This was about your reputation-that's it!? And now it's ruined, and you couldn't care less what happens now, what Darvy does now, is that right?"

"That's not true!" Waddlesworth spit back. "That's not true at all!" he repeated, his voice breaking. "But I'm a joke to these people! And I can't go back crawling to them now, asking them to fight for me again, I can't do that, not now-"

"*Now* is the only time it can be! This isn't just the best shot we have, it's the *last* shot that we may well have! The Dark Alliance isn't all together right now, half of them just got wrecked by my dad's lot, and Darvy doesn't know yet that I know where he is! And I- I may not be around long enough to do this under better circumstances."

Waddlesworth gave him a curious look at this statement, though Albus didn't add to it, and he didn't press for anything either. Instead he shook his head slightly, a look on his face the likes of which told Albus long before he said anything that he was not going to commit to him. But he said it anyway.

"I can't- I- I can't. I'm already a *joke* to these people," he reiterated bitterly, upon hearing Albus groan and look away in resentment. "I can't!" he repeated, and he then sat back down, grabbing at his head as though it would help block out whatever it was he was feeling. "It's not that easy- it's not- it doesn't work like how you think it does! What, do you just expect me to call these people in the middle of the night, to send little owls tapping to their windows with little letters asking them to leave their children in their beds and march on the Ministry of Magic? You expect me to-"

"I expect you to *unite* them," Albus stressed, and he was certain that the sound of pleading had never been stronger in his voice. "I expect you to do what you'd *been* doing! That's what this was all about, wasn't it!?" he asserted. "About unity, and bringing people together, everyone, all against Darvy-"

"That's over with," Waddlesworth said, still shaking his head.

Albus could have sworn he felt steam shoot from his ears. "No it's not! It's still there! I already

told you, I've seen it, you started a movement and it's still going on, it's just going on *without you*. Without WAR. And whether it's a good or a bad thing doesn't matter, because right now it exists, and we can use it! There are little groups everywhere, all over, and you can get in contact with them, bring them together, if only for one night-I know you can!"

Waddlesworth stopped shaking his head, but when he looked up at him, his mien was the same. "You don't know that," he said, and he frowned.

Albus back away from him slowly, electing not to bother anymore with it. He'd wasted too much time here already, too much time trying to bring a dead man back to life. Mirra was in danger, his family was hurt, and he had a confrontation to attend to. But whether he got to it or not-whether he got through to Darvy or died trying-he was not going to leave without letting Waddlesworth know exactly how he felt about him.

"You know, you're one of the worst people I've ever met," he said, and Waddlesworth looked away. "You are conniving, and manipulative, and you destroy people's lives, and whatever good is in you is so corrupted by the things you do that it's not even worth anything anymore. But if there was *one person*," he went on, "*one person*, who I thought would *never* turn their back on what they believed in, who- who would always did everything that they could, to finish what they started, it was you."

Waddlesworth continued to look away, though when Albus saw that his face had reddened, his added to the condemnation.

"You gave you *word*," he said. "And not just to me, with what happened with my dad, and Fairhart, you gave it to everyone. You told everyone what it was you wanted, that you were going to do everything you could to stop Darvy, and here you are, still with that chance, drinking wine and moping in your office, and that tells me that your word doesn't mean *anything*, it's nothing, it's less than that, your word is the *opposite* of what you are! And the Hammer," he added, the thought coming to him an instant, "the Hammer, and Blackwood, and- and Fairhart, they would be *ashamed* of you, if they could see you now, like this, giving up-"

"You think I care!?" Waddlesworth screeched, finally turning back to him, anger etched into his angular features. "You think I care what those-"

"Yeah!" Albus roared back, even louder. "Yeah I do," he said, remembering the photograph that he'd once found in Blackwood's office. "I do think you care, I *know* you do, because whatever may have happened to you, whatever may have happened with WAR, I know why you started it! I know you did it for them, for people like them, and I know that they supported you and that you *valued* that support! I know that this meant something to you back then, when you had them, and I thought it would still mean something now, but it doesn't. You don't believe in uniting the people anymore, you don't believe in saving lives, you don't believe in redemption, WAR isn't about that for you anymore, it's- it's just a damn logo on a T-shirt now!"

He finished his tirade there, now breathing heavily. Waddlesworth looked as though he'd been slapped in the face repeatedly. His anger appeared to have subsided though, replaced instead

with a look that a child might wear upon punishment, a mortified look that gave the distinct impression that he was uncomfortable in his very own skin.

Albus, satisfied with this result and acknowledging that it was the best consolation he would get for his efforts, then turned sharply, not even wanting to look at the man anymore. He'd just laid his hand on the door when he'd heard him speak.

"I can't get you an army, Albus."

Albus turned to him, heart pounding. "I know," he replied. "I know- I get that -I didn't mean that, but if you can get me *something*-something more than- than a handful of your personal guards-

"I'll do everything I can," Waddlesworth said, and he suddenly looked terrified, as though the prospect of communicating with the people who'd vilified him was a more harrowing notion than even living in the clutches of Death's Right Hand. "But Albus...it may well not be enough."

Albus nodded, understanding. Whatever it ended up being, it was more than he had an hour ago, and he would take it.

"Thank you," he said, and Waddlesworth nodded. "I'm going to the Ministry now, going to scout things out-

"Give me one hour," Waddlesworth said, rising again and turning away. "Whoever I have for you in an hour, that's all that you're going to be getting."

"I understand," Albus confirmed, watching as he started rifling through the papers on his carpet- he realized immediately that he was probably searching for the names and contact information of his subordinates. "This is your redemption," added Albus, and Waddlesworth briefly looked up. "So give it everything you've got."

He didn't wait for Waddlesworth's response, instead exiting and practically flying down the corridor and the stairs. He passed over the still debilitated Renegades a moment later, not even bothering to give them a second look as he emerged back into the Hogshead, the chilly night sky greeting him yet again. He gazed up at it for a moment, appreciative of the quiet, and then a moment later he'd turned on the spot, the familiar and awkward sense of compression overtaking him once more.

Chapter 20: The Renegade Alliance

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Albus seemed to dwell in his state of nonexistence for half a second longer than he usually did. The mere moment was sufficient in sending him into a panic however, a million thoughts racing through his head over what may have went wrong, from being captured to splinching to maybe even never returning to the world in his usual capacity. His feet then hit solid ground though, and despite finding his posture immediately lopsided, he gave a squelch of relief and swallowed at the fresh air as he materialized once more.

It didn't take him long to realize what had went wrong while Apparating; a simple look around him explained the occurrence perfectly.

It was not due to anything familiar, but rather, the fact that none of it was. In his haste to pursue Darvy, Albus had concentrated on the idea of the Ministry as a whole, briefly considering the atrium and a few other, choice locations within its headquarters. But Apparating to within the Ministry of Magic's head office was quite impossible, and the enchantments had pushed him to the outside-to above ground-to an area that he'd never actually been in before.

He was standing in a muggle suburb, or what was left of it anyway. Like so many other places that his journey had taken him on, the streets that hid the Ministry headquarters in their bowels were a mess of destroyed concrete and overturned vehicles, the large office buildings that encircled him standing as mighty monuments with huge chunks missing from their facades, as though they'd weathered some sort of storm yet wore their scars proudly. A broken traffic light hung just over his head, crooked and so close that it would injure him if he jumped, and scattered all about him, in the wreckage, were the vestiges of a once lively city; he saw an umbrella caught in an electrical wire overhead, a purse on the ground, its contents spilled about. Albus removed his foot from whatever was causing his slanted stance and looked down to find that he'd Apparated directly on top of a stroller for pushing infants.

He leapt back from it at once, feeling sick, realizing that the destruction of the city around him was in some ways worse than what else he'd seen. Not in terms of the lives lost, or the actual amount of damage, but in it what it represented. That a London suburb had been ravaged was significant in that it provided a clear example of how Darvy's works were not specific to his wizarding brethren, but rather, to people as a whole.

Mottley and Struckton had been hybrid towns, from what he'd gathered, dwellings that allowed wizard kind and muggles to live peacefully together, the latter simply unaware of the former. Kakos had been exclusively magical by his account, but the condensed corruption seemed to operate separately from the rest of the world as a whole, its only meaningful connection the illegal potion trade that it had progenerated for so long. But this here-what he stared at now-was his first glimpse at what would happen to muggles if Darvy's new world was built. He

remembered what Ares had said, all of those years ago, prior to his death, of how muggles would have been welcome; that fate was not a respecter of blood. It seemed as though Darvy disagreed.

He heard a noise, a mild rustling nearby, and though he deemed it at once no more than a stray cat rifling through garbage, it inspired him to move about, clearing a pathway through the debris and heading for a more effective vantage point. The silence of the still suburb, coupled with the surrounding darkness, made for an unsettling atmosphere that somehow rivaled what he'd felt in the Quarry. Knowing that the place had once been so lively, and was now barren, added to this feeling tremendously. Albus realized that he had no idea when this destruction had occurred; Darvy could have taken over anywhere from hours to weeks ago. There was no one to dispute the matter with now, and with the world crumbling around him, he didn't think that anyone other than those who'd been involved would have such information available. No matter how shrewd the editors of the *Prophet* were, he doubted very much that they'd been able to predict this, and there was a chance that they were not even aware of it now as well.

He continued to navigate the ruined city streets aimlessly, the urgency that he'd had when conversing with Waddlesworth attenuating somewhat due to the position that he was now in. Albus knew that the headquarters of the Ministry were located underground, and he was quite certain that he was standing over it—indeed, Darvy and Mirra might have been just below his very feet. But entering the building was going to be much more difficult than merely acknowledging its presence. While Albus had been within the governmental facility before, it had been in limited capacity; he'd been there as recently as months prior, to visit his imprisoned father, but his brother had Apparated him to directly outside the telephone booth that served as an entrance. And it had been a *different* telephone booth that he'd taken during his first ever trip, the lone time that he'd accompanied his father to work. This occasion was much too difficult to remember accurately though, as it had been years ago, specifically during the summer prior to his second year.

The mere thought of that day halted him in his tracks somewhat; he'd just remembered that that had been the day where he'd first encountered Sancticus Fairhart. He'd thought him unusual then, and later, suspicious. He'd met Fango Wilde that day too for the first time—but he'd hardly given him a thought at all. No, what Albus had been thinking about most at that time in his life was his eventual return to Hogwarts, to see his friends, whom he'd just left in a mess of fists and shouts, to see Mirra, who was now in very great danger from the professor that he'd been most looking forward to seeing that year...

Was it possible that those things had been but four or so years ago? Could a life change in that many ways, so fast? With an additional jolt, Albus remembered that at that point in his life, his mind had still been his own, not yet afflicted by the viral nature of the Dragonfang Wand. No, that wouldn't begin until the end of that school year, though of course, at that time he hadn't thought of the matter in the slightest...

Albus did his very best to push these thoughts away, to toss aside these memories of a different life, of a different Albus, but he found it impossible. No matter how badly he wanted to throw away that innocence that he'd once possessed, to depart from that juvenile mindset that had led to so

much carnage for he and the world alike, to embrace the consequences of his actions and the inevitability of his end-be it physically or mentally-he just couldn't. He couldn't, because while it was a younger, different Albus that made those errors, it was that same Albus that had made those friends, had started those relationships, the same ones that he fought for now.

The idea of it all terrified him, but somehow, he knew, it was blocking the words of his other half, the words that had pounded his skull and buckled his knees prior to speaking to Waddlesworth. For the first time in quite a while, he realized, as he meandered the vacant pit that had once been a thriving city block, there was calmness in his head. A wonderful equanimity that he realized quickly was a sign of what was to come. Both of his halves-the part of his mind that was his own, and the part that belonged to the Wand-wanted to be here right now. They both wanted to find and put an end to Darvy. The former wanted it because it meant ensuring the safety of his loved ones, the little that he could still provide for them. And the latter wanted it because it knew, just as he did, that once it was done, there would be no more struggle within him. With his deeds done and his affairs in order, with Mirra safe and his friends and family able to grieve and rebuild, Albus would submit to the Wand. It was a pact that they'd made, really, whether his two halves had ever discussed it or not. By morning, he knew, he would cease to be; either he would die at the hands of Darvy or his men, or his mind would slip away, lost forever to the Dragonfang Wand, replaced by whatever malevolent drone paraded about in his body. Albus could only hope that if it came to this, someone was capable of killing him. Ares had been prescient enough to make such arrangements, entrusting the task to Fango Wilde; Albus had not been so thoughtful.

He wiped at his face but a single time, determined not to allow such harrowing notions to impede him. He had a job to do, and he intended on doing it. Albus continued to scour the devastation in hopes of some sort of cue for his current whereabouts, for just how close he was, but it seemed that no matter what direction he went in, he felt as though he were going further away from it. What occurred to him most in his wandering was that he had yet to encounter a single Dark Alliance member, or a person of any kind for that matter, and this thought weighed heavily upon him for each step that he took. Shouldn't Darvy have *some* subordinates around here? Even if he'd allocated a significant chunk of them to the Quarry, and even if he had started to rebuild his army, surely, he was not so confident in his privacy that he'd ignored such a rudimentary security measure...

How long he stood there pondering these things he wasn't sure, but no distraction came until a myriad of faint popping noises wafted about in his ears, varying in volume but condensed into a single moment. Albus turned, instinctively reaching for his wand, but then the loudest crack had sounded, and he jumped away as a figure appeared before him.

It was Waddlesworth.

The first thing that Albus noticed was the stark contrast in appearance to what he'd seen only an hour ago. Somehow-despite the enormous task assigned him, and the little time at his disposal-he'd still managed to clean himself up quite a bit. His hair was straight down his back, curling at the tips just over his slim shoulders, and his eyes were more piercing, more focused; the drunken stupor from before was absent. He'd changed his attire as well, but not, as Albus might

have expected, to the wizarding robes more befitting of physical strain. Instead he'd shed his bathrobe for one of his pristine suits, this one light blue, a yellow tie hanging from his neck.

"Get any scouting done?" Waddlesworth asked him, his voice no longer broken, but rather its usual blend of oily and sweet.

"A little," said Albus, still taken aback somewhat by his appearance. "But-I didn't know you could Apparate," he blurted out, not sure why such a fact had just dawned on him in the middle of what was supposed to be a very practical sentence.

Waddlesworth made an almost offended motion, though he smiled nonetheless. "I am an adult wizard, Albus, I am capable of Apparition; I confess, however, that I was later than most in obtaining a license. Twenty-nine, actually."

Albus nearly followed this with a question, for he was just now realizing that the man whose help he'd enlisted was the same one who'd once tried to have him killed. But such questions would have to wait, he reasoned, for the issue at hand, as usual, was on a timer.

"Right, well, I got here and found the place like this. Couldn't tell you when it happened though, and no sign of any Dark Alliance members either."

"But you're sure he's here?" Waddlesworth asked, sounding mildly skeptical.

Albus gave it only a moment's consideration before answering. "I am," he nodded. "He's here. He *has* to be."

"Very well then," Waddlesworth said, his tone dignified and straightforward, and Albus found it hard to believe that an hour ago the man before him had been bawling in his office. "I suppose we continue with our endeavor."

"I don't know how to *get in*," Albus admitted quickly, before their conversation went any further.

Waddlesworth gave him a shrewd look. "What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

"I mean I've never entered the Ministry on my own before, I don't even know where it is," Albus told him, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Do you...?"

He expected the leader of WAR to chastise him for his lack of forethought, but instead, he merely pointed away, over his head, squinting slightly.

"Do you see that alleyway, there?" he asked.

Albus spun, shifting his gaze in the direction of Waddlesworth's lanky finger.

"Yeah," he said, nodding.

"Through that alleyway there, the Ministry headquarters lies just underground, in terms of total area. Once we pass through that alley, any men that Sebastian Darvy has at his disposal will be waiting to strike, if their leader is indeed underneath them."

Albus turned slightly, shocked at this statement. "But I haven't seen or heard-"

"There are enchantments to separate the areas. On the surface they appear to blend, but once we cross over that invisible line, everything from Caterwauling Charms to Anti-Intruder Jinxes will trigger."

Albus turned his attention back to the truly unremarkable alley, thankful that his wandering feet had not taken him so far. "You're sure?" he asked, still not quite convinced, and Waddlesworth gave an uncharacteristic chortle.

"Albus, please; I used to work here, remember?"

There was no arguing this matter, and so Albus launched into his one remaining issue. "And how- how exactly do I get in?"

"Assuming that Darvy has kept the means of entrance the same, the easiest way will be through the telephone box."

"I remember that!" Albus exclaimed, glad that he was able to keep up. "I've done that before, with my mum and my dad, but I don't- I don't know to make it work-

"It is very simple," Waddlesworth told him. "But you'll have to find it first. Once we enter into the enchantments, keep to your right-you'll see it a block or so down, across the road. It's located in an alley covered in graffiti."

"And to use it?"

"You'll need to dial the password," Waddlesworth told him. "It's 6-2-4-4-2."

"Are you sure?" Albus asked. "What if Darvy changed-"

"It never changes," Waddlesworth said, shaking his head. "But Albus," he went on, and when Albus met his gaze, he saw that Waddlesworth's confidence was flickering. "I don't know how many people you expected me to bring, but if even a quarter of the Dark Alliance is here, we'll be outmatched. I cannot guarantee you a completely clear passage, nor do I think you'll have more than fifteen minutes of chaos to take advantage of."

Albus nodded, saying nothing. When Waddlesworth saw this, he turned, away from the direction of the alley, gesturing as he did so.

"Then come, meet your new allies."

He did as he was told, following along after Waddlesworth for a full minute, every ten seconds or so glancing back over his shoulder, as if expecting their point of entry to vanish. It wasn't until they'd turned behind one of the gigantic, splintered office buildings that he was finally met with the sight of someone other than Waddlesworth.

The Renegades that Waddlesworth had accumulated were standing in quite undisciplined fashion, splashed over the road in different clusters and all looking wary of those next to them. Albus did not count them, but he estimated that their numbers ranked somewhere between twenty and thirty-impressive, he realized, given the little time allotted-and that they appeared to have been drawn almost randomly. Some of them were still in their nightclothes, apparently just roused from their slumber, and a few others wore the dark cloaks that sported the silver sword-wand emblem of WAR. Many others were dressed for combat as well, but appeared to be members of unaffiliated, nameless Renegade groups; Albus saw that a solid chunk of them were wearing a blue and bronze uniform of sorts, but he didn't bother asking.

They all shuffled their feet upon Waddlesworth's approach, Albus just behind him, but trying to hide from their view; he didn't want to have to answer any questions, not now, not when time was already so much of the essence.

"Good evening," Waddlesworth drawled, and from these words alone Albus detected that mild swagger in his voice that he'd so often loathed; the collected, pompous, yet somehow endearing quality that allowed him to persuade and rile as only he could. "You all know Albus," he added, stepping aside and waving towards him. "Or at least, *of him?*"

Albus felt his face burn red, expecting comments to emerge from this declaration, but interestingly, the statement was only met with nods of acknowledgement.

"Good," Waddlesworth affirmed, and he then starting pacing about before them, and Albus vividly recalled once seeing the man do the same thing on a makeshift stage in Diagon Alley. "With no introductions needed, we can turn to the matter at hand; the nature of our being here.

"When I contacted each of you I offered but a few sentences, a few moments of my time, prepared for you to turn away, but hopeful that you would not allow your personal feelings to overcome the sense of duty instilled in you by the sights and sounds that have enveloped you as of late. You-all of you here-responded not because of my invitation, but in spite of it, caring not for me or what you think I stand for; you responded because of you.

"You've no obligation to be here; no contract, no favors to return. You're not here for redemption," Waddlesworth told them all, "you've all fought already, you've paid your dues, and you fought every day for too long now. This night is not about making amends or acquiring glory, it is not about serving anyone above you, or to your right or your left; it is about your desire to protect yourselves and your families.

"What I see before me now is a splinter; a lone fragment of what had been a unified cause. I see branches that scoff at their roots, infrastructure that claims no relation to their foundations. You all stand here as individuals, fighting for something or someone that only you know, but you

stand here *together*, nonetheless, because an idea persists among you. The idea of responsibility. You stand here, on this night, aware that come morning, you might have ensured a better world for those who you hold dear."

Albus balled his hands into fists as Waddlesworth spoke, restless with his speech, but aware that it was necessary. He himself may not need such motivation for what was about to occur, but these wizards and witches standing here, he realized, most certainly did. Already he could see them staring back with emboldened expressions, their bodies rigid with attentiveness.

"Many of you do not like or possibly even detest those who stand next to you," Waddlesworth continued, his voice gradually building in volume as he continued to pass back and forth in front of them. "You undoubtedly share that sentiment for me. That is fine. You all stood together once, certain that this war could be ended through unity, and when that failed, you rejected that conviction, opting instead to separate, to embrace like minds and eschew those who you deemed unworthy, as is your right. But tonight, no such thing can occur. Tonight you are all allies, individuals fighting for that common desire to preserve what matters to you most. It is not an example of unity, no; that suggests order of some kind, a common goal. But your goals are separate, they are unique to you-they are merely all addressed through the same act, and that is why, on this night, you fight together, an alliance of Renegades with varying views and one origin, different aims but one *purpose!* To end the tyranny of 'Death's Right Hand!'"

There was mumbling of assent following these words, and Albus noticed that it was fueled passionately; that Waddlesworth had reached in the way that he'd once reached them before. They didn't move though, still waiting for instructions, and Waddlesworth stepped aside, stretching out his arm to issue them.

"Albus Potter knows where the Hand is; can defeat him. But he needs *your* help! Together we walk towards the headquarters of the Ministry of Magic, and as we approach, the Hand's forces will unleash themselves upon us. We must defend Albus; we must defeat those forces! You are the only ones who answered the call-there's no one else coming. This is the last chance that we as a people have, and you are the last representatives of the world that was stripped from you, the world that you demand be returned! Now go! Fight for your loved ones, fight for yourselves, fight as though there is nothing after tonight, for there may very well not be!"

An uproar that seemed to rattle Albus' bones followed these words, and at the next moment, the group had pushed itself forward in the most disorderly fashion imaginable, not marching but sprinting, wands brandished as they collided with one another in their haste to begin the confrontation. Albus watched them go, feeling an additional urge of stimulation himself, and was surprised to see Waddlesworth meeting his stride.

"You're going to fight?" Albus hollered over the jostling, noticing that Waddlesworth had withdrawn his own wand-a stubby, yet clean instrument that looked as though it rarely saw use.

"Of course," Waddlesworth answered him, and Albus noted that he looked quite awkward when running; like a paper bag blowing in the wind. "I've never won a game where the pawns were the only ones to move."

Albus had no response for this other than to sigh and quicken his movements; Waddlesworth's collection of vigilantes seemed to be moving faster with every second that went by. Just how they knew exactly where to go, he wasn't sure-perhaps they were more familiar with the location, or maybe they were just going off of instinct-whatever the case, he gazed as he ran, watching as the first of them neared the narrow alley, then passed through it-

Banging and whizzing filled the air at that very moment. The Caterwauling Charms seemed to be the precursor to it all, but the screeching was drowned out at the next second by a collection of screams and explosions, the whooshing noises of furious spellwork at play. Albus grimaced as he neared the cramped backstreet, his heart pounding in his ears at what the disturbance signified; he'd been right, as he'd known since first seeing the memory. The Dark Alliance was here, and that meant that Darvy was too.

He checked to his side for a moment to see if Waddlesworth had managed to keep up, but he hadn't. Whatever his determination, he did not seem to be primed for such strenuous activity, and Albus looked back and spared him only the slightest of reassuring glances as he thrust himself through the passage and into the disarray.

Immediately his eyes were scorched by color. He had a sudden memory of the scene from Mottley, but those flashes didn't quite do justice to the scene that met him here. This was not random citizens doing battle with one another; this was a war between two forces that could not have been more polarized, a continuation of sorts from what he'd viewed on the island. But this time, it was not an organized infantry of white cloaked soldiers marching to battle the undead; it was those with masks against those without them, and nothing more.

The first thing that Albus noticed was the abundance of Killing Curses being fired. Streaks of green were soaring from all directions, and just a few feet away from him a woman proudly wearing the WAR emblem had been struck in the stomach, falling over dead at once, her eyes still open. Albus practically leapt for cover, skidding across his belly behind a parked car. A mere glance over the hood then told him that he was not the only one using abandoned muggle vehicles for cover.

The cars seemed to line up on either side of the main road, but the considerable stretch of pavement between them allowed for makeshift organization, with combatants on both sides were using the tactic, the chunks of metal serving as barriers as they emerged briefly to fire a spell and then retreat. It didn't take long for this idea to be exposed as impudent, however. One of the Renegades had fired a Blasting Curse across the road, the resulting combustion of which sent an automobile skidding sideways, engulfed in flames, the same said for the two Dark Alliance members taking cover behind it.

Albus eyed the conflagration nervously, sensing retaliation in similar capacity, and he abandoned his temporary shelter accordingly, moving in a crouched position towards the next thing he could find to conceal him; in this case, the hedge of what might have once been someone's lawn.

Curses seemed to explode over his head as he hurried along however, and at the next moment

he found himself peeking out from behind the bush, his wand aimed as he tried to locate whoever had identified him. He saw nothing at first though, bar the ruin of a dingy pub. But then a figure with a red face emerged from within the shattered window frame, an emerald streak issuing directly from him-

Albus ducked, the Killing Curse soaring over the spot where his head had been a moment earlier. He fired a stunner back at the next moment, but his aim wasn't good enough to have it soar through the crevice, and it collided with the front of the pub instead.

He took cover behind the brambly barrier once more, realizing that he didn't have time to wait out the confrontation and hope that his opponent was tackled by someone else. Waddlesworth had told him to keep to his right, meaning he had but one direction to go, and he hadn't been promised much time either.

He spun around the other side of the hedge, just as the Dark Alliance member had poked his own head out. Albus was just about to take aim when he saw another streak of light blast the mask from the man's face, sending him downward and out of sight. It had been a small stunner; meager enough to fit through the window frame, anyway, but Albus had no time to contemplate which of Waddlesworth's men had come to his aid.

Instead he tore off, tripping over and nearly falling due to a charred bicycle laying hazardously on the sidewalk. He scrambled about to keep his balance though, throwing a gaze across the road and seeing that he still had more opposition to face. A handful of Dark Alliance members had emerged from behind a series of newspaper vending machines, firing streaks of green at him relentlessly.

Albus dove to the ground to avoid the collection of them, frantically searching for a viable means of defense; looking skyward, a towering lamp post beside his attackers caught his eye.

"*Deprimo!*" he cried, flailing his wand about from ground level and hoping for the best.

It functioned as well as he could have hoped; an invisible force struck the pole, causing it to go lopsided until it eventually reeled, falling over to crash into his assailants.

They caught notice of it and scattered, but the temporary distraction allowed Albus to stun one of them from his back; simultaneously, a more feeble beam of red light connected with another, catching them unawares and reducing the amount of competition by roughly half.

Albus again ignored the help, seizing the distraction as a means of continuing in his path. He made to cross over the road, thinking that it might help to duel at close range, but decided against it at the next moment; there was no telling how many of Darvy's forces were lurking about, and the distance could continue to serve as an advantage.

Not all shared his mindset though. The battle seeming to be moving eastward with him, and he spotted Waddlesworth's men across the road now, slashing their way through the Dark Alliance members who were creeping about in the interiors of shops and pubs. He caught himself

distracting for a moment by the sight of a masked figure dueling a Renegade evenly, both of them flailing their wands about and sending hexes just over the shoulders of one another, ending only when the Renegade was struck in the back by a stray Killing Curse.

He considered intervening, but reminded himself once more of how little time Waddlesworth had assured him, and sped off again down the sidewalk, his eyes peeled for a red telephone booth. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to see though, not just because it was the dead of night, but because the conflict had spread even beyond where he was in the battle. No matter which direction he looked he could see curses and hexes flashing; a fiery orange one caught another Renegade and sent them spiraling through the air just ahead of him, and to his left, a Dark Alliance member had just been hit by a Killing Curse, toppling over with their shout of fear and surprise still lingering in the air.

Realizing that there was no time to sneak around, Albus thrust himself into the middle of the road, understanding that in this rare occurrence, speed trumped safety. Brazenly, he marched onward, calculating in his head that he'd travelled at least a half a block by now. He watched as a triangular traffic sign sped through the air just beside him, scooping someone-to who they claimed allegiance, he wasn't sure-out from underneath his own legs, resulting in a flip that left him on his back. A red mask burst into view a moment later, and Albus dodged whatever violet curse had been aimed at him at the very next moment, slashing his wand through the air and blasting his opponent away with the Reductor Curse.

He had only a moment to revel in his success, though. Immediately following this he heard a high pitched whistling, and he turned just in time to see a yellowish curse descend upon him from above; Albus flung his wand upwards as a means of blocking it, but found himself unable to do so fully; a sliver of light seemed to burn itself into his left shoulder, knocking him to the ground with a searing pain near his collar.

He looked up to find the source of the curse, catching sight of an unmasked Dark Alliance member who'd settled herself on the balcony of some battered flat, using her vantage point to pick off unsuspecting victims. Albus tried to aim his wand while also blocking the burning pain, but there was no reason to do so; at that moment, streaks of different colors had soared upwards towards her from whatever surrounding Renegades had been waiting for her to show vulnerability. She managed to deflect one and dodge another, but a Killing Curse hit her square in the chest, sending her backwards and out of view.

Albus rolled over to make his knees aid in the lifting of his body, taking a moment to realize just how impossible this would have been without Waddlesworth's assistance; his decision to pay the man a visit had paid dividends numerous times over already. What he just needed now was to complete the task; to fully capitalize on the bedlam that he'd started-

Everything seemed to freeze around him as his destination came into view. Rising from the ground and looking to his right, he'd spotted it off in the distance, not quite at, but near the very end of the demolished city block. There, pressed up against an alley wall, cloaked by darkness but untouched by the battle, sat a red telephone booth, the wall behind it splashed with unfinished images and inarticulate messages. The entrance to the Ministry of Magic was not far

at all, two minutes away if he ran-

And he did. Clutching his singed shoulder, Albus launched off of one foot and in to the other, oblivious to his surroundings completely. The battle around him had thinned somewhat as time had went by, he knew, and whether his side was winning or losing it was quite irrelevant; what mattered now was escaping it all in one piece. He jogged steadily, the shadowy entryway growing closer with each step-

He skidded to a halt as a figure emerged from his left, lunging at him with their wand drawn. Albus barely registered the Dark Alliance member as he spun about, his own wand raised to defend himself or possibly duck, but once more, he received assistance before he could consider his options. A brief flash of red light had scorched his eyes, and his enemy fell over wordlessly, rendered indisposed at once.

Albus spun in a full circle to identify his savior, but needed to turn his attention downward to identify him properly. There, a few feet away, a blue stain lay stretched about the concrete in the darkness-Waddlesworth.

He was curled up as though a child, his wand stretched out and upwards but loosely gripped. Even with little light to go by, Albus identified an expression of fear and pain on his face, and after sparing the phone booth a nervous glance, he hurried over to him.

"Are you alright!?" he asked, kneeling by his side.

Waddlesworth said nothing, merely giving a groan instead. He eyed Albus with something that resembled delirium, his lips pursed from apparent discomfort.

"What did you get hit with!?" Albus asked him, sensing that the situation was more dire than the WAR leader was letting on. He then looked over his shoulder, not forgetting that conflict was still all around them; thankfully, though, everyone seemed occupied at the moment.

Waddlesworth shifted his weight, rolling over onto his back to expose the injury. "Here," he wheezed, and Albus noted a tremor in his voice. "Here..."

He tried pointing at it, but the gesture was unnecessary. Albus caught sight of it at once; a blotch of dark red on his once-clean suit, located at the lower abdomen. Albus cringed upon seeing it, not knowing what it was exactly, but certain that it was a curse of some sort. Slowly, and without the victim's permission, Albus gently lifted the fabric and severed it with his wand, exposing the raw flesh.

"Oh...no..."

"It was purple!" Waddlesworth gasped desperately, apparently thinking that this information would help.

Albus wasn't sure that it would though. The sounds of the surrounding conflict seemed to

disappear completely as he gazed at the wound, trying to soak in the specifics of it. The skin was dark and bruised, though there didn't appear to be any actual gash. The blood instead seemed to be seeping through the skin, as though the curse had not only burst something within him, but was designed to draw the blood out magically as well. The sight of it oozing made him queasy, but it was not until the thick liquid congealed over his fingers that he started to panic.

"Okay," Albus started, feeling his hand shake. "Just- just- just give me- just give me a- a minute-"

"You can fix it, right?" Waddlesworth breathed, looking hopeful. Albus didn't answer, however, instead steadying his wand over the site of the abrasion and trying to remember something from his past. He'd seen wizards heal curse wounds before by waving their wand over the injuries- had even seen Fairhart do it to himself on the island! He tried to mimic this movement, concentrating fiercely on the damaged area, but what it was he was supposed to be thinking or saying, he wasn't sure.

"J- just hold on!" Albus told him, again casting a glance over his shoulder, and again finding himself fortunate. He continued to delicately wave his wand over the bloody pulp that had formed and was now pooling on the soft tissue of Waddlesworth's stomach.

"Is it working!?" Waddlesworth asked him, picking up his head slightly to spectate.

"I- I just- hold on!" Albus repeated, still working at it, but again, he saw no indication of mitigation; the wound was only continuing to expand.

"I- I just- I- I...I don't know how to heal," Albus admitted sadly, and he stopped in his foolish, worthless motions, opting to hang his head instead.

Waddlesworth said nothing at first, instead continuing to eye his own lesion best he could from his position. After a moment of consideration he turned his head to Albus, his face quite blank, and then, after a moment, he gave a strangled noise that Albus mistook as anguish-it proved to be laughter, though.

"What-"

"Still modest," Waddlesworth said, leaning his head back on the concrete to rest; it nestled itself atop his waves of long red hair. "Never lose that, Al," he added, and his hiss now had an inkling of amusement to accompany the anguish that carried over so strongly.

"I can get help!" Albus insisted, and he looked around once more, this time hoping that they were seen. "I can get someone, s- someone to heal you-"

"Go," Waddlesworth said flatly, and for a moment, Albus thought he was telling him to find someone. But instead he'd pointed over his head, raising his arm with difficulty, it seemed, to point in the direction of the phone booth. "Go," he repeated. "It's right there. You can get there,

go-

"I can help you first-

"We didn't come here to help me," Waddlesworth said, his tone still lifeless. "We didn't- we didn't do all this," he added, waving his arm aimlessly, as though to indicate the entire battle, "so that I could get up and walk away. We did this for *you*, Al. You have something you need to do."

Albus stared down at him in disbelief. Was this really the same Waddlesworth that he'd known all of these years? It seemed so outlandish, so unlike him, to lie here, facing death unabashed, and to deny assistance. And yet...

Was it? For all that Waddlesworth had said and done over the years, had he ever given any indication of being a man unwilling to die for his cause? Albus had always considered him a coward for his tendency to delegate confrontations to his henchmen, but here he saw the evidence that the man was not afraid to brandish a wand and fight-even if he probably wasn't very good at it. Waddlesworth had spent years espousing the view that it was the duty of the people, the responsibility of those who can fight to do so, to even die so that others could live. Albus had allowed his hatred for the man's tactics to blind him to a very simple fact, a fact that Waddlesworth had reinforced here; that he meant it all.

"If you can't save me now," Waddlesworth drawled, his eyes blinking almost sleepily, "you won't be able to do it in five minutes, either. Don't wait. J- just go. Do what you came here to do..."

Albus felt tears burn behind his eyes, perhaps the most unexpected tears of his life. "You did a good thing here, tonight," he told the dying man next to him. "You- you're a-

"You don't need to tell me what I am," Waddlesworth practically snarled, though his voice again had some semblance of cheerfulness to it-or perhaps it was acceptance. "Or who I am, you don't need to tell me that, I know who I am," he went on, and Albus flinched as he gave a cough, for blood had started to form in his mouth, staining his teeth. "I know who I am, I know what I've done, I know why I did it. I tried to have you killed," he said, as simply as if he were stating the time of day. "I marched a hundred people to their deaths. I've had men and women and children tortured; I know what I've done. I did these things because they *needed* to be done; and I don't regret a single one of them, I'd do them again too, if I had to, if it was the only way. I know what I stand for, Albus," he added, giving him the firmest, most confident look that he could. "You don't have to tell me a damn thing about who I am, I already know, I've always known, and I've never changed my mind on it, not for one second. It's them you need to tell," he finished, giving his head the slightest of jerks.

Albus understood at once that he was not necessarily speaking of the men that he'd recruited for the night's work, but rather, as a generality-he was referring to the Wizarding World as a whole. And he understood the implication of it, too.

"I'll tell them," Albus said, wiping at his eyes before anything could manifest itself. "I will-

"You're the only one left," Waddlesworth interrupted, the pain on his face now never more evident. The confidence that he'd worn before had vanished as quickly as it'd come. "You're the only one who can tell them-Zydrunas is dead," he added, tears forming in his own eyes now. "And that means...that means that you're the only one..."

"I'll let them know," Albus affirmed, his insides twisting at the look that had overtaken Waddlesworth's sagging face. "I'll tell them, I will. All of them."

Waddlesworth stared at him for a moment, breathing heavily, and Albus now saw that blood was leaking from the corners of his mouth, sliding down his cheeks and into his hair. He then nodded, his pale face stoic as he rolled his head over to confront the sky.

"Then go," he repeated. "I'll keep- I'll keep a lookout for you," he struggled to gasp.

Albus rose up, still shaking somewhat, his hands still coated in Waddlesworth's blood. He stared down at him with shock on his face, now trying desperately to mask the surge of emotion that was creeping up his chest at the sight of the wounded Renegade at his feet.

"I- I'm going- I'm going to- to go-"

"I don't hear you running," Waddlesworth said softly, and Albus turned and wiped at his eyes once more, locating the red telephone booth and preparing himself to speed off to it. He caught one more sight of Waddlesworth before doing so, one more image of the man as he turned away from the sky and gripped his wand once more, prepared to defend him from attackers during his dash for the booth, in whatever capacity he could, and then Albus had scampered off, again unaware of the battle around him, the noises of which had finally returned.

He practically galloped towards the alley, his strides doubling in length every time he discerned how close he was getting, and when he finally reached it, he pulled at the handle of the booth with such force that he nearly ripped the door off. He then made an immediate grab for the appliance, reciting the digits as he spun the dial frantically.

"Six-two-four-four-two!"

A familiar, crisp female voice flooded the box a moment later.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business. Please note that visitors-"

"Albus Potter!" he shouted into the receiver, not caring to let it finish. "And I'm here to end this war!"

A silver badge shot from the chute where coins would be dispensed, but Albus paid it no mind, instead staring off through the box and to the outside, where the angle of it allowed him to just make out the slightest of shapes in the road. He scanned the scene briefly, his eyes sliding over everything from flames in the distance to a patch of darkness where spells were still being traded.

The booth gave a slow rumbling a moment later, though, ready to descend underground, and just when it had started to sink, Albus found his gaze lingering on a single spot on the ground, where he was certain Waddlesworth had been. With the distance and darkness both impeding him, he could barely make out the shape that lay there, and yet, the eerie stillness of it told him, as the booth plummeted him out of sight, that the man who occupied that spot was no longer keeping a lookout.

Chapter 21: Who We Are

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Albus stared blankly at the stretch of grainy grey as the booth lowered itself, the sounds of the fighting above dampening and then dissolving completely seconds within the descent. He was left with silence then, silence and darkness, darker than how it had been outside even, and he found himself turning on the spot within the booth, the only form of pacing that he could undertake given the small area of the transportation vessel.

Unwilling to think about all that he'd just witnessed, Albus used the respite as a means of evaluating his well-being. He was exhausted; more tired and sore than he'd ever been in his entire life. He knew that he would need to stave off this fatigue, though, for only a little bit longer, and instead of allowing himself to succumb to it, he reminded himself of just how much he had overcome thus far. He was dimly aware of hunger pangs in his stomach, and his feet had seemed to have gone numb during his most recent bout of running. But these usual bothers were nothing when he considered all of the physical strain that had been inflicted upon him since the morning-from attending that Dark Alliance meeting, to dueling with his father, to standing here in this cramped telephone booth. His scorched shoulder from minutes ago still stung with a mild burning, though he was unwilling to remove his robes and investigate it, lest the sight or feel of it bring him additional discomfort. Whatever his father had hit him with seemed to have a mind of its own; sometimes he couldn't feel it at all, and yet other times, his innards ached with an extremely unexpected twinge. Perhaps the injury that seemed most likely to bother him was the stinging behind his eyelids, however, the result of Scorpius' underhanded tactics during their brawl. He'd managed to ignore it quite well since then, even with the constant accumulation of liquid forming there, but as he stood in the darkness, blinking rapidly, he was sure that he'd never had a more irksome injury. His vision, he reasoned, was fine, but the agitation and soreness of his eyes, without a distraction to occupy him, was quite unbearable.

Thinking back to his friend made sadness stir within him. It had been less than two hours ago that Albus had perused the contents of Markson's mind, shattering Scorpius' world and his own alike. He couldn't help but wonder just what Scorpius was facing now; if Morrison had managed to get him home to his mother-if his father yet knew. The agony stretched out on his friend's face seemed etched into every inch of him, a powerful reminder of just what this war had really been-what it still was.

But he could not dwell on it all now, not yet. He still had things to do. Harrowing though it was to consider the turmoil that Scorpius and his family were enduring, he needed to turn his focus to what could now be prevented; specifically, serious harm befalling Mirra. He imagined the looks of horror stretched out on the faces of her grandparents, who surely were as alarmed as anyone that he'd yet encountered, and he used these fabricated images to piece together that lone, coherent thought, that idea that his responsibility now, first and foremost, was to get to her.

And truly, this was likely his only opportunity to do it. Darvy was not far at all-they were within the same building at this very moment, actually, or close enough-and Mirra was almost certainly with him. Albus retraced the memories that he'd seen with the best detail that he could, positive that Darvy had mentioned keeping her alive until Albus had arrived. But there was little hope to be derived from this statement, given the monster that Darvy was; little reason to believe that he would keep a promise even to himself. Albus could only hope that he had a very good reason for wanting him to be there to witness whatever it was he planned on doing. That meant, at least, there would still be time for him to interfere with it...

The grinding of the telephone booth ceased-a strange thing, as Albus could have sworn that he'd been standing in complete silence. He felt the box come to an abrupt, yet smooth stop as well, and then, the crisp voice from before had spoken once more.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day."

Albus heard the box spring upon, not even realizing that in his pacing, he'd turned himself away from the door. He spun around, preparing to enter the atrium, but had barely gotten a foot into it when he'd stopped, a gasp caught in his throat.

The atrium was not empty, as he'd expected-and yet, there was no life in it, either.

The entire splendid hall had lit up at his arrival, and immediately, he'd been met with the sight of Darvy's new army. They stood there, as organized as Albus had ever seen them, over a hundred Silhouettes lining each of the opposing walls, their slimy, thin skin dangling from the dark, oozing bones that made up their bodies, their hollow eyes staring off blankly at those across from them. Despite the considerable size of the main hall, Albus felt cramped upon taking in this view, his eyes sliding up and down the rows of them, his nose flooded by their putrid smell, and yet, he felt safe as well.

He stepped into the atrium, and no sooner had he done so did he hear a rattling of bones. All of them had shifted their heads towards him, their lopsided bodies straightening only slightly as they acknowledged the presence of something that wasn't one of their own. Albus heard the beginnings of a screech, a battle cry-

"No!" he called, not angrily, but with a tone of strict severity-as one might sound when warning a child. "No," he repeated, a little softer. "Stay where you are."

The Silhouettes froze on the spot, as though time had kidnapped them. Even with the holes of their eyes quite empty, Albus could see all of them staring at him as he started to walk, and somehow, as he strolled by them, he felt warmth at their gazes-as a king would when passing by his subjects.

This, he realized, was precisely why it needed to be he who faced Darvy. He hadn't imagined the moment quite like this-not with these ferocious, deadly creatures lining the walls of the atrium at the headquarters of the Ministry-but he'd known, since leaving his home so many weeks ago, that this was why the burden fell on him. Because these monsters would not stop

for anyone else, would obey no one else's words. Other, better wizards, might have made it this far, might have endured all that he'd endured up until this point, but none of them, not even his father, would have been able to make it past this. These creatures could not be defeated; only abated, and Albus, as their master, could do just that.

He walked by them slowly, each of his steps crisp and clear against the polished floor, his head turning to ogle each of the towering, disgusting figures in turn. They looked almost peaceful when not digging their claws into human flesh, or crawling along the floor with the dexterity of beasts half their size. Albus even found himself nodding at them as he passed, though the gesture was quite involuntary-it was as though it came from a different part of him, a part of him that, despite going silent recently, simply could not resist acknowledging the relationship that it shared with them.

Something else caught his eyes as he walked though, something large; the fountain that lay in the middle of the atrium. Albus diverted his attention to it as he neared, examining the Fountain of Brethren with interest. The last time he'd viewed it, the face of the stone-cut wizard had been magically altered to resemble Waddlesworth. That it still did so told him that Darvy had not been here very long-or was perhaps waiting until his army was complete and his grip on the world tightened before doing so.

Albus stared at the image of Waddlesworth's face, a feeling that he couldn't quite describe washing over him. He'd just seen the man performing his death throes minutes ago, and yet, the smirking visage above him brought him something that resembled tranquility. It was though he were still here in the Ministry, not quite ready to surrender his position of power over to Darvy. And Albus wasn't going to let that happen either.

He strolled away from it, his eyes now resting firmly ahead at the golden grilles of the lifts that would take him lower in the building. Albus recalled that there was usually a security checkpoint prior to the lifts-indeed, it had been a former Potions professor who'd stood there on his last visit. But there was no such thing this time, nothing but empty space for him to saunter through as he approached the expertly wrought gates, all of which jingled and clanked earnestly at his approach. Albus stepped forward towards the one closest to where he was walking, and the grille unraveled itself at once, welcoming him forward.

Albus didn't enter it right away, however, instead turning to view the hundred or so undead creatures that Darvy had conjured. He stared at them passively, not really knowing what he was thinking as he did so, but certain that he was comforted by it. And then, he stepped onto the lift, the gates clapping themselves together noisily a moment later.

The lift jiggled at the very next second, apparently somehow aware of where it was he wanted to go, for Albus hadn't pushed a button of any sort. The lift lowered itself as slowly as the telephone booth had, but the journey went by much faster, culminating once more with a vocal indication of his whereabouts.

"Level Nine, the Department of Mysteries."

The gates then slid themselves open, revealing an area much unlike the atrium just above it. No light of any kind was fluttering in; instead it was torches that brought him vision, their flames glowing white and blue in a most mystifying manner. Albus entered the dimly lit hall, catching sight of a black door at the end of it at once.

He recalled when he'd come to this floor last, with his siblings and mother, to visit his father. On that occasion months ago, they'd turned before reaching the dark door, descending down a set of stairs with regular torches adorning them, leading them towards the room where his father had sat in chains. This time, however, he knew that he would have to go through the door. Albus found himself breathing heavily as he approached it, the sharp pain in his chest digging into him as he pushed at it hoping it would be unlocked-

It was. He found himself next in a circular chamber, the floor underneath him dark marble. He was surrounded by more doors, and the torches had been replaced by candles, each of which gave of their cool light in a much smaller dosage, as though designed to let him see only the way back out. Albus revolved on the spot however, eyeing each of the identical doors in turn. He'd been here before-had dealt with this before, knew where some of these doors led. In the memory he had seen Darvy and Mirra in one of the empty Observation Chambers, but he doubted that they were in there now. Where else could they be?

He thought of the Death Chamber, as Fairhart had once called it-the place where Albus had first seen the Executioner's Veil. Was it possible that Darvy, after all that he'd went through to get that very powerful portal, had returned it to its rightful place?

But even if he had, Albus still had no idea which door it was. He would have to try them each in turn, marking them with fire to eliminate them from contention over time. He walked over to the door that was the furthest from him, deciding to take a guess-

But it wouldn't budge. The door remained firmly locked, and Albus felt panic overtake him. What if this was the one that he needed to enter?

"Come on!" he growled at it, pushing into it with all of the strength that he could muster. "Come on!"

It refused to budge however, and Albus felt as his entire body started to tremble, unable to bear the thought of Mirra being so close, but yet out of reach. He thought of her being maybe only inches away as he pushed again, knowing that nothing would happen-

Click.

Somehow, for some reason, the door unlocked itself at his most recent exertion, flinging itself open to reveal the contents within. Albus found himself terribly disappointed by the result, however; indeed, for a moment, he thought that he'd stumbled upon the Observation Chambers.

A blaring whiteness had met his eyes, though he registered quickly that it was not a series of chambers, but rather, a long, white hallway, and one with no other doors within it. Even as

Albus stared ahead, he saw that the hallway seemed to go on endlessly, and the only indication given of anything at the end of it was a faint tinkling noise that seemed to caress his ears, almost as of liquid splashing about merrily. Strangely drawn to it, though simultaneously aware of the unlikelihood of his destination being along this path, he took a single step into the hall to investigate-

Noooooooooo!

"AAARGHH!"

The rattle in his head had timed itself perfectly with the pain that had exploded within him. Albus leapt back from the hall at once, his body shaking, unable to focus on anything other than what he'd just endured. It had been excruciating, a million times worse than the Cruciatus Curse; he felt as though his very existence were on fire, beneath his skin, beneath his innards, beneath even his mind. He was being stretched, torn into, crushed under the weight of everything that there was.

He fell to the cool black floor, but it gave him no comfort as he clutched at his head, which seemed to be the place that had been most afflicted. He could still hear the sobbing of his other half, of the part of his mind that the Dragonfang Wand had infected; it was sputtering, barely able to address him.

No...no...never again...

It seemed to breathe these things into his ears, and Albus lay there feeling as though he'd never agreed with it more. The torture had subsided as an actual sensation, but the mere act of remembering it gave him the urge to vomit, the torment had been so bad. With what little strength he could muster, Albus stood and slammed the door shut, returning him to the darkness and cool blue light, and at the next moment, the room had started to spin in a manner very similar to how he felt.

What had been in that hallway? What had been so powerful, that a mere moment in its presence had sent the voice in his head into a frenzy of despair, and had seemingly started to rip his very being to shreds merely for having accompanied it?

Whatever it was, Albus knew that he never wanted to provoke its wrath again. Deciding that if the next door was locked, he would simply try another one, he staggered over to a random entrance, still trying to collect himself. If there was one benefit to the absurd agony that he'd just felt, it was that it had put the other injuries of the day into considerable perspective; so long as he wasn't dealing with *that*, whatever it had been, he could function.

He straightened himself up, finding with great pleasure that his memory was not accurate enough to keep him in those moments for long. The pain all out of his system, Albus gently brought his hand to the door that he'd stumbled over to, pushing into it slightly-

This one opened at once, and when Albus saw what was in it, he gave a sigh of relief. It was a

much more welcoming place; another place that he felt drawn to, though in a much different manner. He entered it without a second thought, mesmerized by both its size and what resided within it.

There were paintings; hundreds of them. They adorned the walls, mostly, but also stood leaning against one another, large, vivid images that seemed to connect into rows, and Albus recognized it as an art gallery of sorts. The images were all stationary though, unlike all the other magical pictures that Albus had seen, yet this didn't detract from their allure in the slightest; he caught sight of landscapes of regions that he'd never seen, of people that he'd never met. Some of them seemed to depict scenes that may or may not have ever occurred, and he saw a beautiful array of these captured moments, though they all lacked context; he saw a ship battling a storm, a man walking in a desert. He saw what looked like a house, blown to pieces, a shadowy figure standing atop the rubble in a powerful, triumphant pose, and on another, particularly large canvas he saw two giants serpents wrestling, their bodies a brilliant shade of green, their eyes a dark red. The artwork was all fantastic, all of it incredibly lifelike, and Albus, despite knowing that he had other things to do, felt himself compelled to appreciate it, all of it, even the blank canvas that lay in the middle of the room...

He walked over to it, steering himself through the columns of depictions that ranged in size and shape, and it wasn't until he was directly in front of the smaller, entirely blank stretch of canvas, that he saw that it was beautiful despite the lack of paint; it had designs running along the sides of it, along with sparkling jewels. Albus had just caught sight of the blank title card when he felt another presence nearby, and he turned to it accordingly.

Sebastian Darvy was standing only meters away. He stood exactly as he had in the memory that he'd witnessed, dressed in all black and wearing a malevolent sneer that seemed to penetrate the quiet. His long blonde hair was ruffled and coiled around his neck, locks of it hanging over his frighteningly animated eyes, the bright blue of which seemed to make them protrude from atop his nose.

Albus said nothing, merely eyeing his smile with utter contempt, before he realized that the source of it was not far from him. At his feet, curled up and unmoving, lay Mirra; and a golden wand was pointed down at her.

Albus felt his body jolt, instinct telling him to lunge for her, but Darvy's face seemed to light up upon seeing this, and he froze immediately. Albus swallowed, not quite sure how to approach this situation, but this was an unnecessary worry, for at the next moment, Darvy had engaged him.

"Albus Potter," he said, softly, his lips curling beyond a smirk and into a hungry, malicious leer. "I have waited a *long* time to have you here with me again."

Albus again said nothing, instead trying to identify the nature of this statement. He recalled this room now-seeing the blank portrait had made the connection for him. But he had never been inside it with Darvy. He realized a moment later, however, that Darvy was referring to the Department of Mysteries instead, as a whole; it had been here, after all, on this level of the

building, that Albus had first demonstrated the power of the Dragonfang Wand.

This single thought ripped his eyes away from Mirra-who he realized was breathing softly-and towards the wand pointed at her. He felt an uncomfortable desire overtake him at the sight of it; the phantom in his head seemed to have recovered from its contact with the hall behind the locked door, and was once more salivating for its physical counterpart.

"Do you like what I did with the upstairs?" Darvy asked him an almost conversational tone, apparently unaware of what Albus was focusing on, pointing upwards with his free hand.

Albus understood this to mean the atrium, where the precursors to his next army stood. He gave no acknowledgement of this however, his attention returning instead to Mirra. She was still alive. There was still hope...

"You see I wanted *desperately* for you to visit my new home," Darvy went on, now using his hand to indicate seemingly the entire establishment. "But I've never been one for entertaining more than a few at a time, and I felt it appropriate to ensure that it was *just* you who made it to me. I felt compelled to leave our good, ghoulish friends otherwise out of sight though, given that they seemed to be ah- *indecisive* when in the presence of us both, don't they?"

The fact that a question had been raised towards him made Albus understand that he was expected to speak, but when he finally did so, it had nothing to do with Darvy's crude preamble.

"She has nothing to do with this," he said, knowing that he was trying to reason with a mad man, but feeling compelled to try anyway. "You've already gotten everything that you wanted from her, you got me to come here, this is just about me and you now-"

Darvy laughed; an uproarious, exaggerated cackle that reminded Albus harshly of the utterance he'd made when kicking Fairhart through the Veil. He felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck as his most hated enemy breathed his insanity into the air.

"Oh let's not pretend Albus, this is *not* about *just* me and you. You didn't come here to kill me just for the sake of killing me, now, did you?"

Albus narrowed his eyes at his former professor, whose lips had shifted themselves into a slightly more condescending expression.

"Oh, you think I don't know?" asked Darvy. "You think I don't understand? You're here to kill me, Albus, make no mistake; you've played it over in your head a thousand times. I know that feeling," he hissed, sounding almost aroused, his blue eyes rolling themselves backwards slightly as he said it. "I know it well; that *feeling*. That feeling of breaking into someone's home!" he exclaimed, waving his hand upwards. "To take their *life*. To *steal it* from them, the only thing that they wouldn't have given you...the most precious thing that they had. It's *invigorating*," he finished darkly.

Albus avoided his eyes the entire time that he spoke, still gazing at Mirra, who was much too

close to her kidnapper for him to initiate any attack. If Darvy fired a Killing Curse at her, there would be nothing to be done about it...

Something else had caught his interest, though; something much closer to him. The blank canvas at his side had started to produce images, albeit sloppily constructed ones. Simple, black lines had started to connect themselves on the empty square, and Albus watched, from the corner of his eye, as they began to formulate a vague scene, absent of all but the most basic of details. There was person, composed entirely of a circle and a handful of lines; a stick figure. And he had another stick angled from his arm, a wand, perhaps, that he was pointing downwards...

And another figure sat slumped, the lines that formed them quite broken, misshapen, even, and it was leaning against a most unusually drawn shape, a square with a sloped top, almost, Albus realized, like an arc.

He watched as the figure holding the wand collapsed into a pile of sticks, but he paid this no mind, not understanding it nor caring for it, for the sight of the arc had made him wonder...

Albus turned himself away from the distraction slightly, craning his neck to peer past Darvy and around a rather large canvas that had been obscuring his view. He felt a lump rise in his throat at what he saw.

"Ah, you've found the Veil!" Darvy said, excitedly, and Albus wasn't sure if he'd been speaking previously or not-the painting had been too engrossing. Now he was at his most attentive, however, for the Executioner's Veil did indeed sit not terribly far from where Darvy stood at all, the heavy black cloth blowing ominously, despite the lack of wind in the room, a chill that Albus had not even realized before seeming to emanate from it.

"Yes, I know, it seems a tad callous to keep it somewhere other than its designated area, but I *do* like to keep my things close, and besides, the Fate Chamber is a rather lovely place for it, don't you think?"

Albus' ears perked up at this, and Darvy seemed to catch on to his interest, for he continued in a voice dripping of pomposity.

"Did you not know, what this lovely area here is called? By far my favorite part of my new residency; the most intriguing of all the rooms now subject to my exploration, though of course, I've yet to unlock one of them...but yes, the Fate Chamber is a severely underused site, I think. Most, it seem, don't seem to put much stock in what's studied here; aside from fools like my brother that is, who were *obsessed* with it. But this room has proven far more educational than any of the others; indeed, it was that very portrait standing beside you that showed me just what needed to be done to get you here," Darvy revealed, grinning widely. "And of course, what I would need to do once you *got here*."

He arm shuddered, and Albus knew that he'd gripped his wand, prepared to use it on Mirra-

"Wait!" Albus cried, holding out his hand, and he wasn't sure why, but Darvy had stopped in his movement to eye him intently. "Wait," Albus repeated. "I don't know what you saw," he said. "But I'm going to make it easier on you. If this is all for me to end up dead, then you can have it, right now, nothing else in-between."

Darvy gave him a suspicious stare, but Albus didn't wait to hear his response. Instead, he slowly held up his right hand, reaching his left into his robes. He watched as Darvy tightened his grip once more...

"I'm just going to throw my wand away," Albus insisted, removing a long, thin stick from within his robes, and holding it loosely with his thumb and forefinger, as though it were contaminated. "See?" he said. "Just going to throw it away..."

And he did. He tossed the wand as far as he could with a single flick of his wrist, and he saw Darvy ogle it as he soared towards the wall, looking dumbfounded. He actually took half a step towards it as it landed just below the portrait of a noble looking wizard, as though ready to snatch it up and declare himself triumphant-

Albus seized the opportunity to remove his own wand, not even bothering to spare a glance towards Ares', which had started to roll slightly due to its impact against the wall. He fired a barrage of stunners Darvy's way, unwilling to use anything that could be deflected towards Mirra, and when Davy saw them he gave a sneer of outrage, looking torn between the idea of defending himself and turning his wand on the girl next to him for revenge at Albus' duplicity-

Ultimately, he opted for the former, raising his wand and knocking the spells away one after the other. Albus didn't relent, however, knowing that a single moment of rest would give Darvy the time to complete his thoughts from earlier. He would have to draw him away from Mirra, move him somewhere in the room where he couldn't get a clear shot at her...

Albus started to march forward as he fired the stunners, and was surprised to find that Darvy was able to deflect them all adequately. He realized that simply not being in the category as his father or Fairhart in terms of skill did not exclude him from being capable, and as he pressed forward he took the time to fire his spells at varying locations and speeds, eager to catch him off guard-

One of them nearly did. Darvy deflected it downwards at a poor angle, and the blast against the floor made him stagger out of sight behind the same large canvas that had blocked the Veil from view.

Albus hurried after him, his wand still raised but his head turning momentarily towards Mirra. She was clearly unconscious, her slim figure curled about uncomfortably, her slight breathing not quite audible but apparent from the marginal movement of the strands of hair near her nose. Albus maintained his glance for a moment more before turning away, realizing that he still couldn't relent.

He emerged from behind the large canvas that had sheltered Darvy away, soaking in the sight

of the Executioner's Veil as he did so. It billowed in menacing fashion as he neared it, and Albus could have sworn that he heard a faint whispering just behind it, though at the next moment Darvy had sprung himself from behind one of the other large canvases in the room, a streak of green light blasting forth from his wand-

Too near it to dodge, Albus flicked his wand towards at one of the illustrations on the wall; Albus caught sight of a mountain setting before it sprang towards him and intercepted the curse. It erupted with emerald flames the moment it made contact, the embers sitting in the air for a fraction of a second before falling to the ground and smoldering, eliciting an eerie screech as it did so; it was as though the painting, though not of a person, somehow had had a life of its own.

Albus used the opportunity brought about by his successful defense to distance himself from Darvy slightly, leaping back to allow for more flexibility in the event of additional Killing Curses being fired. He then shot forth another stunner, which Darvy sidestepped, whipping his golden wand about to fire a jet of purple that seemed to soar at him twice as fast as any other spell that Albus had been met with.

He waved his wand in a complicated circle of his own though, somewhat aware of the fact that he was able now to utilize the technique with nearly the same speed and efficiency as its originator. An invisible bubble deflected the curse away, and when Darvy followed it up with two more, his fluid movements rebounded these as well.

He watched as Davy curled his lip in frustration, beginning to make sharper, more foreboding movements with the Dragonfang Wand instead. Albus didn't allow him to execute whatever it was he was attempting, though, blasting at his feet with the strongest Reductor Curse he could produce.

The pristine floor shattered just by Darvy's feet, forcing him to stagger back and abandon in his motions. Albus made to follow it up with a stunner, but Darvy had whipped his wand about as he was falling, resulting in a loud, whistling noise that that seemed to bring an invisible force with it-

It smacked into the side of his face, and Albus collapsed abruptly as a result, feeling as though he'd been smacked by a giant. Tiny spheres of light materialized in his line of vision as he struggled to fall over completely, managing to use a single knee for support. He knew that he would need more than that though, for Darvy would be on the attack once more soon enough.

Instinctively, he allowed himself to fall and roll as fast as he could, and with perfect timing too; a flash of green and a rustling sound later, and he became aware that he'd narrowly dodged yet another Killing Curse. He continued to roll though, eager to give Darvy a moving target to deal with it, and it wasn't until the spots of light had started to disappear slightly that he bothered to look up, aiming his wand at a dark shape that he knew to be his adversary. He thought of the first spell that he could that could deal damage no matter where it was fired-

There was a loud banging noise, and then Darvy gave a yell, the Fracturing Curse apparently successful. Albus managed to scoop himself up, his vision now completely restored, and he saw that Darvy was standing in a slightly loping manner; the curse had made contact with his ankle.

Pleased that he'd dealt some damage, Albus raised his wand to fire another spell, but Darvy threw himself behind yet another row of paintings, no doubt to nurse his injury best he could. Albus kept his wand raised as he inched himself forward though, realizing that the duel had taken him deeper into the Fate Chamber, so deep that he'd lost sight of Mirra. He could still see the Veil though, its height allowing him to glimpse at it from beyond a few of the bulkier paintings, and Albus inched himself in this direction, knowing that Mirra would not be far from it, indeed, was even at the same line of vision from it at an angle...

At that next moment Darvy reemerged from the passage of colorful paintings, but this time, he was not alone. Fiery shapes were moving at his sides, almost bestial in appearance, tendrils of flame that seemed to claw at the images that they were squeezing themselves through. Albus felt beads of sweat trickle from his brow despite his distance from them, the heat making it difficult for him to breathe. Albus raised his wand and fired a jet of water at the mass of jostling fire, sure that it would have to have *some* effect, but the stream of clear liquid seemed to evaporate before even making contact.

The roaring of the fire failed to mask Darvy's screech of delight as Albus stared blankly at the inferno, which was now charring the rows of artwork that they touched and filling the room with more screams. Albus backed up, not knowing what to do, the look of jubilation of Darvy's face nearly as intimidating as the blazing beasts that he'd conjured, whose shapes had started to manifest themselves in more clear and obvious forms; Albus saw the snout of a dragon in the fire, as well as what looked like horns, just near Darvy's wand-

Which, he realized, was held up firmly, the streams of flame spiraling out of the tip at a continuous rate. Albus registered that the cursed fire was going to persist as long as Darvy held this position, and thus resigned himself to stop the wand movement rather than the actual magic. Unable to acquire a clear shot, though, he tore off to the side, darting down a row of paintings just next to the ones that were being scorched. Albus ran down the cramped pathway, practically counting his steps as he did so, and as he reached a spot that lined itself up with where he presumed Darvy to be, he aimed his wand at it.

A portrait stared back at him lifelessly for a moment, this one of an aging man supported by a cane, and Albus gave it an apologetic look as he jammed his wand through the center of it, unable to see what it was he was pointing at, but knowing that he didn't have much time before the flames worked their way over to where Mirra was-

"*Confringo!*" he cried, thinking of the most wide-reaching curse he could, and an explosive vibration followed. He heard Darvy give a howl of rage, and though Albus took this to mean that he hadn't been knocked unconscious, he still saw that the flames towering above the aisle of paintings had spiked as though dying, then disappeared in a smoky haze at the next moment.

Albus ran back towards the direction of the Veil, understanding that he'd been successful in stopping the activity of the curse. He came to a skid when he'd returned to the row of paintings where Darvy and the flames had been, peering through the smoke to see if the aggressor was still present. He wasn't though, apparently have retreated once more, to another region of the colorful labyrinth that they were both trapped in.

Albus turned his attention back towards the Veil; towards Mirra. Fearful that his former professor may have fled in that direction, he ran to the archway in sloppy fashion, his breathing still difficult due to his proximity to the fire. He skidded to a halt right as he approached the Veil, finding that Mirra was still in the same position that she was in, unmoving but still quite safe. He heard a heavy breathing nearby though, and as he turned his head slowly, he saw that Darvy hadn't gone much further.

He was leaning up against the same wall that Albus had tossed Ares' wand towards, directly to the right of the portrait of the longed haired, royal looking wizard that Albus had noticed before; the face that commanded the most attention, though, was Darvy's.

Half of it was blackened, almost singed; it was as though the Blasting Curse had not only disoriented him, but had blasted some of the flames out of his control, scorching his left cheek and the entirety of his chin. How much of it was just ash, Albus wasn't sure, but he could tell from Darvy's bulging eyes that he was in a good deal of pain, no doubt exacerbated by the fact that he was supporting himself on an injured foot.

Albus raised his wand, not prepared to simply let the fight end with Darvy only marginally incapacitated, but Darvy, after a moment of apparent consideration, raised his own-at Mirra.

Albus gripped his wand tightly, steering his body into Darvy's line of sight, to block her from view, but upon doing so Darvy started to laugh; a laugh as maniacal as any other that Albus had heard him put forth.

"I confess my confusion," he said, sounding almost giddy. "The portrait...it didn't show me this. I gazed at it, time and time again, and it always showed the same thing; something so much simpler."

Albus had no idea what he was talking about; he assumed that Darvy was referring to the same portrait that he'd been viewing earlier, but had no idea what the monster could have seen. Already, he'd forgotten what he himself had processed while staring at the poorly drawn figures.

Darvy was still shaking with laughter as he continued to speak. "I'd thought, for a moment there, that it would happen a different way; that I'd win by a different means. But now I see, that fate is never wrong!"

He lunged forward, propelling himself from the wall with tremendous force, his wand aimed downwards at Mirra, underneath Albus' outstretched arm. Albus panicked, knowing that he had no way to defend whatever curse issued from his wand, and so he thrust himself forward, and the two of them collided-

Albus grabbed Darvy's wrist with his scarred hand, forcing it upwards at the ceiling just a moment before a jet of green had streaked from it. Albus had no time to see what became of the curse, already striking his own wand through the air, aiming it for Darvy's charred face-

But Darvy had grabbed at *his* wrist now, with his own free hand, forcing it downwards, and

Albus felt the muscles in his arms flex as their magical duel became a physical one. They wrestled with one another, face to face, Darvy's wretched breath penetrating his nostrils, his singed hair tickling at his forehead. Albus maintained his grip, however, still forcing Darvy's wand arm skyward, simultaneously struggling to lift his own. He gritted his teeth as he fought, twisting and thrashing about to gain an advantage, and it wasn't until he saw the look of surprise on Darvy's face, saw him slinking slowly from view, that he realized something.

"I'm...stronger...than you!" he hissed, confident in every word. He was younger and fitter, he realized, his body more athletic due to his time spent playing and training for Quidditch, honed from battling whirlpools with Fairhart and running through roads with his companions; Darvy had done nothing but sit back and build an army.

This seemed to dawn on his foe too, as he sank to his knees with hatred and resentment visible in every line of his darkened face, and just when Albus was certain he was going to snap Darvy's wrist and wrestle his own arm free, he felt a wad of liquid hit him the eye.

It was worse than even what Scorpius had done; Darvy had spat in his face, and Albus relaxed his body immediately after, instead bringing his arms to his eyes to try and wipe at the saliva that had burned itself into one of his corneas. Darvy capitalized at once, throwing him downwards and banging his head onto the polished floor.

Despite his temporary blindness, he became aware that Darvy was now on top of him, his face so close that Albus was now choking on his long, disgusting hair. He then felt resistance in his left arm, and knew that Darvy was trying to force his wand into a position where he could strike.

Heavily impeded by his position, Albus had no choice but to let him, but not before relinquishing hold of his own wand, so that he could grab a fistful of Darvy's hair and yank at it as hard as he could. Darvy gave a yelp of pain at the tugging, his brief moment of weakness enough for Albus to slide his right arm now out of Darvy's grip entirely, allowing him to take the strongest swing that he could. His knuckles collided with the burnt part of Darvy's face, but though he gave yet another cry of pain, he remained on top-

Albus slammed his fist upwards once more, hitting the same spot, and this time, Darvy flew off of him, and Albus picked his head up to see the extent of the damage that he'd inflicted. Darvy had staggered away, actually spinning about slightly due to his daze, and Albus felt his heart sink when he realized that the blow had sent him closer to Mirra and the Veil, rather than away from it.

Darvy didn't seem to realize this though, instead blinking furiously to combat his stupor, and when his expression had finally returned to its normal, unhinged self, Albus saw that he was laughing once more; only this time, he knew why.

Though backing up had distanced them by a dozen steps or so, effectively ending their physical confrontation, Darvy was the only one who'd managed to retain a grip of his wand. Still shimmering golden, he raised the Dragonfang Wand up with a shaking hand, apparently trying to regain his balance fully so that he could make a decisive blow.

Albus, still on his back, searched for his own wand, seeing that it had rolled only a few paces away. He didn't have time to stand completely however, and instead he brought himself to his knees just enough so that he could lunge for it. He did so just as Darvy was raising his own wand, sliding across the polished floor and feeling it bump against his fingers-

"Avada-"

Albus gripped his wand and struck it through the air from his side, shouting the first incantation that had inexplicably entered his head.

"Sectumsempra!"

Darvy's utterance seemed to catch in his throat, a most peculiar look crossing his euphoric face. It was a look of blank confusion, as though he'd expected, for some reason, for Albus' curse to not connect; as though he'd expected someone to leap in front of it for him, to take the blow and allow him to continue his incantation uninterrupted.

But no such thing occurred. Instead a heavy gash stretched itself from his left knee up to his belly, as though an invisible sword had sprung from the ground and swung itself at the crudest angle that it could. The blood splattered the floor at his feet, soaking his robes and sending him backwards unsteadily. Albus watched as he did everything he could to maintain his balance, but his knees and legs slowly gave out as he teetered, staggering passed Mirra, towards the Veil-

For a moment, Albus thought that he was going to fall through it. But instead he collided with the side of the archway, sinking to his backside and slumping himself up against it, staring down at his stomach, where the thick blood continued to flow out and coat his legs.

Albus stood, still gripping his wand, not quite sure what to do. He watched as Darvy sputtered, apparently too in shock to speak, but he was still quite alive, the curse having not had any intention of, nor actually, inflicting fatal damage upon him. Darvy clutched his stomach all the same though, and in doing so dropped the Dragonfang Wand, which rolled away from him at once, inching itself towards Albus, almost as though begging to be picked up by him.

He wasn't quite sure why he did it-perhaps it was another of those involuntary movements, but Albus placed his wand gently in his robes, then approached the one rolling on the floor. He then briefly knelt by its side, and when he took hold of it, he felt something that he'd never felt before.

It was the complete opposite of what he'd just experienced in the white hall. Pleasure was coursing through him, waves of it, pleasure not just of his body, but of his mind. It was complete and utter bliss, a feeling of weightlessness, but at the same time of tremendous power. He felt just as he would on those occasions where his eyes would glow, just as he knew he had on the island, when he'd reduced that prison to rubble, those creatures to dust. But this time he was aware of it all, both of his halves, and that made it so much better, so much more real, so much more objective.

There was no dissent within his head, no voice aside from his own. The conflict was gone,

replaced only by the knowledge that he could have anything, anything he wanted, could do anything that he sought to do, could be anything that he wanted to be. It was a feeling of freedom, freedom that seemed to course itself through his veins, a sensation higher than peace or harmony, but one of complete security, as though he were finally safe in his own body, yet stronger than he'd ever been, stronger than anyone had ever been. Finally, after years of seeking it, he was holding his wand.

He held the Dragonfang Wand up, examining it in detail. It seemed designed for his fingers, its luster so magnificent that it could have been meant for his eyes only. He twirled it in his hands, excitement now accompanying the delight that had already overtaken him. The wondrous things that he would soon be doing, now that he had his wand...

"What are you waiting for!?" growled Darvy, his question wrapped in a strangled gasp for air.

Albus slid his eyes across the floor, momentarily catching sight of Mirra, who lay not particularly far off, but out of the way, before settling his gaze upon Darvy.

The broken tyrant was still lulling his head against the side of archway, his gaze unfocused, yet full of rage. His hands lay over his lap, coated in red, his legs stretched out before him uselessly.

"Go on!" he urged once more. "Don't you fight it-don't you pretend-come on!" he shrieked, spit flying from his mouth as well as blood. "DO IT!"

Albus raised his wand, and this time, it was only Darvy's chiding that he heard. There were no additional voices in his ear, no whispers; that was all gone now. He stood here now as nothing more than himself, complete, just as he'd been the last time he'd held his wand high, primed to kill.

And yet, Darvy's insistence on the matter confused him. Why was he pleading for death? Were his injuries so gruesome, that he wanted his life to end?

It didn't matter though. It wasn't Darvy's choice, it was his, and Albus gripped his wand tightly as he straightened his posture, feeling no fear in the slightest. Darvy continued to stare at him though, his grisly, mangled features twisting themselves into one of expectance, something similar to acceptance...

Albus closed his eyes, though he wasn't quite sure why. There was no argument within him, nothing to hold him back, and yet at the same time, he found himself almost wishing that there was. Why, he couldn't fathom, but for some reason, he suddenly felt unsure of just who he was; of what he was doing here. And with his eyes closed and nothing but the silence of the Fate Chamber around him, Albus found vague recollections swimming in his head, as though attempting to inform him...

"I want to put the nose on!"

"You have to stay still, Lils," James retorted, seizing her underneath the arms and lifting her up. Lily was six, or maybe seven, bundled up in a crimson and gold coat to combat the furious flurries of snow. They were just outside the Potter residence, and James was lifting her so that she could thrust the carrot that she'd been holding all day into the snowman's nose. Albus wasn't much bigger, but he was tall enough that he could smooth the head of the snow being with his fingers carefully, patting it down to ensure that it was as firm as it needed to be. Lily practically punched the head in a moment later though, the carrot sticking, but the head falling clean off, and they all laughed, though Albus cringed a second later, for his mother was yelling for him to wear his scarf...

He was on the Hogwarts Express for the first time ever. He was nervous, but Rose was next to him, and the awkward looking boy sitting across from him was bringing him comfort as well. Albus thought his new friend quite unusual, but found himself grinning at the idea of already having someone to talk to...

It was dark out, and he was by the lake, and a young girl was sitting next to him, her knees up to her chin as they spoke...

He was running, running through the Forbidden Forest, giving chase, anger flooding him...

And then he was back on the Hogwarts Express, but this time he was older, and Morrison and Scorpius were both with him. They were laughing, clutching at their sides, and Scorpius had a decaying, severed hand in his clutches...

He was young again. This time, he was on the swings, his father pushing him. It was a joy to be there at the park, just the two of them; Albus had been too afraid to sit through the entire game, even though it was his mother playing. They'd been too high up, and he'd told his father this, and they'd left James and Lily behind with his uncles and aunts, to get away from it, and here, swinging upwards at his father's lightest push, he wasn't so afraid, the height wasn't so bad...

He had his wand stretched outward, and a man sat cowering against a tree. Ares was begging, pleading for him not to listen to the voice, but Albus couldn't ignore it, it was telling him everything that he already knew, telling him that he had to do it, to kill the frightened man in front of him...

He was on a balcony, and the girl from the lake was back. He and Mirra were staring out at the lights of the city, but holding one another close too. And he'd said something, something stupid that he couldn't remember, and she'd removed herself from his arms, a look of horror on her face, and he recalled just a handful of what she said next...

"I could never love a murderer..."

Albus opened his eyes, and Darvy's face replaced all the others that he'd seen. He wore the same look that he'd been wearing, though there was an inkling of restlessness to it now as well. He seemed to be nodding his head, as though trying to instill an idea in him.

Albus gripped the Dragonfang Wand firmly. "I hate you," he told him, and Darvy's face widened into a smile. "I hate you so much," Albus continued, "that I could never be you. Could never do that to them."

And he lowered it.

Darvy twitched, looking as though he'd been robbed of a treat that Albus wasn't sure he'd even offered. Whatever the case, he stalked off, leaving Darvy to soak in what he'd said, taking himself towards Mirra instead.

He pocketed the Dragonfang Wand, then gently touched her cheek with the back of his hand; her skin was cold, and clammy, but her breathing persisted as well. He nudged her gently, trying to stir her, and when she gave no indication of awareness, he lifted her slowly, not in his arms, as one would an infant, or over his shoulder, as one would a fellow combatant, but instead he brought her to her feet, leaning her head up against him as he'd once done before, years and years ago...

This movement seemed to jolt her into something that resembled consciousness, for she started to apply pressure on her own two feet, apparently out of necessity, and her eyes were now clenched as well, as though she thought herself dreaming.

"Just walk," he told her soothingly, arms still around her as he pushed her forward, away from Darvy and the Veil and towards the exit.

"Don't you walk away from me!" he heard Darvy yell after him, sounding ravenous. "Don't you-Potter!" he roared, panting heavily. "Don't you walk away from me, don't you leave me like this! You *hate* me, you said it, you said it! You-Potter! You came here to do something!"

Albus ignored this statement, knowing exactly what he'd done. He'd come here to retrieve Mirra, and he'd done so. And he'd stopped Darvy every other step of the way, he realized, culminating in his defeat of him here. The Book was destroyed. The Quarry had been over taken by his father's men. Waddlesworth's forces had inflicted heavy damage against whatever other members of the Dark Alliance remained, and they now had nothing to rally behind. The people had united slightly, soon to grow. And Albus had taken the Wand, removed it from Darvy's possession, leaving him in no condition to fight in, and with a Veil that, though active, he couldn't use. Killing him wouldn't have served any purpose at all.

And yet, Darvy didn't relent.

"You're not any better than me!" he screeched after him. "Don't you- don't- not killing me doesn't make you any better, you hear me!? It makes you *weaker*," he spat, and he sounded like he was crying now. "Weaker, that's all! That's all you are, if you walk away now, you hear me!? Weak! Just the same weak, scared little boy that followed me into that forest-*Potter get back here!*"

But Albus only continued to walk away, barely processing the taunting as he went. Just what

Darvy had to gain from goading him, he wasn't sure, nor did he care; he had Mirra now, and he next needed to get her to safety, and at this moment, that was all that mattered.

"You didn't beat me, Albus Potter!" Darvy wailed after him, and he now sounded more unhinged than Albus had ever heard him before. "Don't you- don't you go- don't you go thinking you did, you didn't! You didn't beat me, you hear me!? I didn't lose to you, not here! Not today!"

Albus stopped, still supporting Mirra, but turning slightly. "You're right," he called back, and he saw Darvy's face soften. "You're right, *professor*," he said, using the last word with force, to show that he recalled that time as well. "I didn't beat you; not here, not today. You lost a *long* time ago. The day you chose to stop caring about other people...that's the day I beat you. That's the day you lost."

And then he made to turn back towards the exit. But his words seemed to have stirred something within Darvy, for he gave a sudden lurch upon them, leaping to his feet as best he could, given his wound, and Albus stared at him with surprise, in complete disbelief at what he was seeing, for Darvy had plunged his hand into his soaked robes, withdrawing another wand from it-

It came to Albus in a horrible moment of realization; at some point during their duel, probably just after he'd stopped the cursed fire, Darvy had fetched his brother's wand. He held it up now, giving his familiar cackle, though his laughter now sent droplets of blood down his chin and onto his neck. He gripped Ares' wand tightly, and Albus, taken aback from it all, and somehow feeling both guilty and foolish for having forgotten Ares' wand altogether, tightened himself around Mirra, unwilling to drop her in an attempt to reach for his wand. He turned slightly as Darvy opened his mouth to fire a curse, prepared to shield Mirra from it-

A hand shot out from beyond the Veil. Albus gave a gasp of surprise at it, but it was nothing to the look on Darvy's face; he'd turned a ghastly white as the scabby, rotten fingers had clasped themselves around his mouth, preventing him from saying anything. Albus could only gawk as Darvy dropped the wand, sinking to his knees as he tried to pry away at the fingers, but they were too tightly coiled around his face-

And then more hands were emerging. Bony extremities were joining in the fray, emerging from beyond the Veil at every angle, seizing Darvy around his arms and legs, and his neck, and even his forehead. It was a few of them at first, but soon at least a dozen of them were present, and Albus could only watch in horror as they pulled at him, dragging him through the Veil silently, his feet first, but his torso soon after, and eventually it was only Darvy's head still visible, his electric eyes watery and full of fright, and Albus realized, as his face started to disappear, that there was something slightly different about the hand that had caught his mouth, the one that had been the first to emerge. It was slimier, and more fleshy, as though it hadn't yet fully deteriorated, and Albus could have sworn, as he watched the hand slink back into the Veil, that he saw a glimmer of silver on it...

And then it was gone, and Darvy with it. Only two things remained now; the Veil and Ares' wand, which lay next to it. Albus gazed ahead at the scene, the curtain still blowing gently, and

with no other sounds present, he heard the light whispering once more. He slowly walked forward, still holding Mirra, though she was walking much more independently now, even murmuring softly, and as he neared the ancient archway he felt fear flood him-

No! Keep it away!

Albus froze on the spot, at first unaware of the source of the shriek. But then it dawned on him.

Away! Away from it!

Albus scooped up Ares' wand and pocketed it, though a moment later, he'd produced another in its place, withdrawing the Dragonfang Wand in the same motion. He gazed at it intensely, and though it did nothing but sit in his hand lifelessly, he knew that there was something much more sinister at work.

"You're alive," he said to it, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. "You need my body...you need my mind, too. But you're alive, in some way, in some form."

And at that very moment, more clear than in any of his previous memories, Albus recalled Ares' voice.

To be rid of the Wand, you would need to bring it ultimate death, to remove all faculties of its existence from this world, all at once...

"You're alive," he repeated aloud. "And that means... that means you can die too..."

He slowly extended the Wand towards the Veil, and just as the whispers started to grow in volume, so did the voice that had hidden for so long in his head.

NO! NO! STOP! AWAY! I CAN GIVE YOU POWER! STOP! I CAN GIVE-

He tossed it through the Veil, and the voice ceased at once. He felt a powerful relief then, a relief that he couldn't quite explain, for it had not been a physical burden, but the eerie whispers behind the cloth had ceased, and when he looked on the other side of the Veil, he saw that the Wand-like Darvy-was nowhere to be seen as well.

Satisfied, Albus steered Mirra back towards the exit, slowly so that she could keep pace, and it was only a moment later that she spoke.

"Al...?" she muttered, looking sideways at him, her grey eyes finally opening slightly.

"It's okay," he told her. "It's me-I've got you."

She continued to stare at him, apparently quite confused, but Albus simply placed her head back on his shoulder, continuing his limited strides so that they could walk together. The exit was just ahead, and the battle above was secure, he was sure; there was nothing to do now

except leave. Before doing so, though, Albus stopped, catching sight of the blank portrait from before. He remembered it now from years ago, and he took a moment to inch them both towards it, his curiosity getting the best of him.

The canvas was blank once more. Albus stared at it expectantly, waiting for the lines to construct themselves into rudimentary shapes, but it never happened. It simply remained blank, and Albus, intrigued by this result, simply turned away from it, ready to finally leave, but not before catching sight of the name engraved at the bottom.

Albus Severus Potter

Chapter 22: Who We Want To Be

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Summer had not quite fallen upon them yet, but it was a difficult thing to tell due to the weather. It was a beautiful day, the sky clear, the heat not sweltering but easily felt under a ray of sunlight. It was a perfect morning for an outdoor event, though, even if the serene setting was to be contrasted with the somber affair.

Albus sat in one of the middle rows, the metal chair uncomfortable underneath him, but not nearly enough to distract him from his surroundings. He was in the midst of a dense patch of black, the standard attire for a funeral procession, but none of their dress robes seemed to match the inky hue of the casket.

They were in the courtyard of the Malfoy Manor, where Albus had once played Quidditch with Scorpius and his father. The handsome residence stood by their sides, an imposing figure of both prestige and eminence, yet at the moment, all eyes were elsewhere.

Lucius Malfoy lie only feet away, though the container was closed over, hiding him from view. It was sleek and elegant, a blotch of darkness from a distance but of a rather sophisticated shape when up close. Albus wasn't sure if it was the reflection of surrounding light or not, but the coffin seemed to be lined with deep green as well, and this added considerably to its attractiveness, given the lush grass that it lay on.

At that very moment, Albus caught a glossy face in the in the sheen of black, and he looked away immediately. He'd recognized it as Narcissa Malfoy's, though even if he hadn't, his options on who it had been would have been were quite limited. It was only the family of the deceased sitting in the front row, and Albus, try as he might to focus on this line of individuals, was already familiar with the precise seating arrangements.

Scorpius' grandmother sat in the middle, and Albus, despite his lone meeting with her having only been a few years ago, was certain that she'd aged a hundred years since then. Whether this had been a progressive change or a sudden one at the death of her husband, he wasn't sure, but her hair no longer had flecks of blonde in it, instead entirely white, and the slight sagging of her skin seemed to transform her face to a degree larger than it would with most others, for it turned her sneer into a stoic, blank expression. At either of her sides he saw her son and daughter-in-law, the latter of whom Albus had only briefly caught sight of since his arrival. Scorpius' mother stood out clearly in the row due to her darker features, her brown hair tied back in a bun, her eyes shadowed in a most mournful manner. Her husband had been the one to welcome them all to the occasion, and he'd looked as he always had, his hair smoothed back and his eyes narrowed perceptively. His attire was among the plainest of the morning as well, simple robes of black, and in this regard, he matched his son.

Scorpius sat at the corner of the row, and was the only one of his family who looked uncomfortable there. He was leaning over slightly, clutching somewhat at his chest, and Albus, who took these signs to be an indication of his friend's misery, forced himself to look away at his sides instead, to people just as familiar.

He was sitting apart from the rest of his family, but this was not, he knew, due to any strife among them. Instead it was because he was there as a supporter of Scorpius, rather than of his father or grandfather, and thus it was Morrison on his left, looking as grim as Albus had ever seen him, and Mirra on his right, herself staring off and away from the coffin.

Her dress matched her hair color, though it was difficult to tell given that she'd worn it back, similar to Scorpius' mother. She caught his eye as he'd turned, and gave him a warm, assuring smile accordingly, one of her hands already tightened around his own for support.

It had been a little over a week since the ordeal at the Ministry, yet even with so little time having had passed, Albus could only retain fragments of it. Everything following his exit from the Fate Chamber with Mirra seemed blurred into a single moment, though he knew, of course, that things had happened over a much longer interval. First he'd walked her back to the golden lifts, and taken her to the atrium-it was there where he'd seen the piles of dust that had once been Silhouettes, having apparently lost their bodies along with the Wand. Mirra had been fully aware at this point, if not confused at just what was going on and how she was with him, and only moments later, they'd taken the phone booth back up to the city level, where he'd met with his father.

Morrison, as it turned out, had Apparated as close as he could to Kakos after delivering Scorpius to his family, and upon entering and revealing Albus' presumed whereabouts, the siege on the Quarry had been lifted, all those capable of fighting heading to the Ministry instead. At exactly what point they'd arrived, he wasn't sure-probably at around the time that he'd been facing Darvy-but whatever the case, the scene had been secure upon his exit, the conflict lifted. He and his father had barely spoken then, he and Mirra having been immediately whisked away to receive medical attention, and indeed, he still hadn't had the opportunity to speak at length with his father; somehow, even with the Wizarding World in pieces, the man had still been managing to keep himself occupied at all hours of the day.

Mirra squeezed his hand tightly a moment later, as if sensing that his thoughts were veering towards that troublesome night. The two of them had still not delved into the circumstances of it all together. Mirra seemed to have no idea of what had transpired in the Fate Chamber, bar what she'd heard him tell his father upon their exit: that Darvy was dead. The details of just how this had happened were omitted however, with neither she nor his father asking for them, which Albus was glad for, for he did not want to relive it.

Likewise, Albus himself was unaware of just how Mirra had ended up in Darvy's clutches, as well as most of what had happened afterwards. He had learned from one of the Healers that his father had brought along that the worst of what she'd endured had been torture from the Cruciatus Curse, though for how long she'd been afflicted by it, they weren't sure-nor did Albus want to ask. She'd been administered Veritaserum shortly afterwards, though, and that seemed

to be all that she remembered, and Albus was more than content with leaving it at this. Perhaps one day they would speak about everything that occurred; parse it out chronologically together and discuss it with all of its nuances. But it would not be for a long while, he knew, and not when there were other things to be addressed; such as dealing with the various other, immediate ramifications of the war.

Thankfully, what Albus had seen in Markson's memories had been the fullest extent of the damage at his residence, in addition to the most personal. Hugo had, as he'd seen, been grievously injured, and even as Albus saw him today he remained unable to put any weight on his cursed leg at all—he was never expected to regain full mobility, but Healers were optimistic of some improvement over time. James too had been injured, the result of a nearby explosion, though his injuries were not permanent and he was on the cusp of a full recovery as it was. All others that he'd witnessed defending themselves had pulled through with only minor harm having befallen them; though there had been deaths elsewhere.

The siege on the Toxic Quarry that he'd both witnessed and taken part in had resulted in several deaths, and though Albus had not known any of those who'd died, he was well aware that his parents had. Several Aurors that had stuck by his father during and after his imprisonment had lost their lives, as had a few friends of the family. While the funeral of Lucius Malfoy was the first for Albus to attend following the war, he knew that this was not the same for his parents and older relatives. And there was still more to be had as well, and indeed, one ceremony in particular that Albus was certain he would be one of the few from his ilk attending: that of Warren Waddlesworth.

Aside from the Darvy's death and the end of his tyranny, the biggest points of discussion that Albus had been aware of all week was the death of Waddlesworth, as well his brief unification of several vigilante groups. The disgrace associated with his name seemed to vanish overnight, and already he was being heralded by the Wizarding World as one of the greatest heroes since, really, Harry Potter. The events of the night of his death remained, however, shrouded in mystery, and much like how rumors would spread at Hogwarts, Albus found similar misconceptions and rumors spreading about just how the war had ended; how Waddlesworth had defeated Death's Right Hand.

While there was much to be debated on the matter, the general idea seemed to be that Darvy had been stowed away in the headquarters of the Ministry, and Waddlesworth and whatever wizards and witches he'd rallied had marched on it, defeating whatever members of the Dark Alliance were there and ultimately, in the midst of the battle, defeating Darvy as well. Who exactly had performed the deed was a point of contention, and the same was said for Waddlesworth; quite a few seemed to think that they'd killed one another. Albus was content with these answers, though, pleased to know both that his own activities were unknown and that Waddlesworth was getting the credit that he deserved. Whatever tales were told of him, Albus knew that they were correct in principle, and he'd already told himself that when attending the ceremony, he was going to do his best to endorse them.

His thoughts of this future event vanished as the one around him began to truly take shape. There had been a light stirring in the crowd, and Albus saw that it was the result of an

approaching man, elderly yet slightly rotund, dressed in an official manner. Albus understood him at once to be the individual in charge of the ceremony, and knew that he would soon be speaking.

Albus watched as he exchanged some brief words with Scorpius' father; and then, a moment later, he was standing in front of the black coffin, and all muttering had stopped as he cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Welcome," he said, and Albus, from only a single word, thought that he sounded a bit like Professor Binns, "welcome, and thank you, for attending today. On this morning we have gathered for two reasons; to celebrate and to mourn-

Albus tuned him out at the next second, and intentionally as well. It was not meant to be disrespectful; quite the contrary, actually. He simply felt as though he had no right to sit and listen to the story of Lucius Malfoy, for Albus hadn't truly known him, and most of their interactions, for that matter, had been rather unpleasant. He was here to pay respects to Lucius Malfoy for what *he* had known him as; as a man who'd lost his life defending those that Albus knew and loved.

With this fresh in his thoughts, and the speaker capturing everyone else's attention, he took the time to discern the complexion of the gathering. There were many in attendance; many more, Albus was sure, than Lucius Malfoy had expected there to be when living. This was no doubt due to the incredible spread of red hair that seemed to take up a large chunk of the middle section, including a row ahead of him and two behind. Albus caught sight of his Uncle Ron almost at once, looking sullen yet dignified. He knew that his uncle had always been unapologetically brazen on the subject of the Malfoys, but there was no denying the sliver of sadness stretched upon his face today, and Albus knew why; whatever Lucius Malfoy had been in the past, he had died defending Weasleys and Potters alike, including his Uncle's own children, and additionally-though others may not have been aware-he had served as an undercover presence for the Ministry for a time as well.

He saw Hugo and Rose too, the latter with tears sparkling on her face and the former sitting rather uncomfortably due to his loping leg; he was still attentive, however, listening with his head on his mother's shoulder. Other Weasleys were scattered around this group; he saw Uncle George and his family in the immediate vicinity, and behind them, he caught a glimpse of Uncle Charlie.

Albus was sure that all of the others were represented somewhere, but the next face that he caught was his father's, and he promptly looked away, unwilling to make eye contact. Instead he shifted his sights back to his own row again, where he saw that Mirra was staring determinedly ahead, herself fighting back tears, and Morrison had adjusted his gaze so that he was keeping an eye on Scorpius, his own face red with worry. Next to Morrison sat Melonie Grue, who Albus knew, much like the others in his row, was there as a supporter of Scorpius- and possibly of Morrison as well, for Albus wasn't quite sure if their relationship had survived Morrison's abrupt disappearance and subsequent venturing. Indeed, he realized that he'd barely spoken to Morrison since that night as well, and he felt a pang of sadness at the idea. The war

had ended, but had his friendships ended with it?

He forced the thought from his mind, knowing that there was no reason to think such things; with what Morrison and Scorpius had endured for his sake, their loyalty was not something to be questioned. It would just take some time, he realized, for the three of them to cope with what had happened; and besides, Albus hadn't exactly been inviting conversation either, spending a good portion of his time at his home, where his watchful mother, while alternating between loving glances and seething outbursts at his idiocy, had been tiptoeing into his room four times a night to ensure that he hadn't left again.

He looked elsewhere in the crowd following his perusal of his own row, and found that of the sixty or so guests in attendance, he didn't really know the rest. They were mostly adults, closer in age to Scorpius' father than grandfather, and Albus assumed them to be friends of the former. With a pang, Albus realized that most of Lucius Malfoy's closest companions had been Death Eaters; wizards who'd either shrunk into obscurity, ended up in Azkaban, or joined Darvy-some of them participating in all three. This idea dug into him quite fiercely, for he became aware of just what Scorpius' grandfather had really been doing when he'd died; defending his former enemies from his former friends.

And at that moment, he had the urge to invest himself in the speaker once more. For he realized that *most* people here-his entire family, really-hadn't known Lucius Malfoy. And they weren't here to get to learn about him either, or to pay respects to what he'd been, but rather, were here to acknowledge how he'd ended up; to acknowledge his redemption.

His diligence came too late though, as by the time he'd returned his attention to the thick man delivering the speech, he seemed to be finishing up.

"And now," he was saying, "we have someone who wishes to speak on Lucius' behalf."

And then he stepped aside to welcome the next orator, and Albus felt his throat burn as Scorpius stood, his hands fumbling with a collection of notecards as he slowly treaded towards the front of the casket. Albus watched him go with tears burning in his own eyes now, realizing that he'd never wanted more to reach out and embrace his friend, to talk to him and console him, as he really should have done days ago, as he'd foolishly neglected to do when first delivering the awful news...

Scorpius turned to face them, his hands trembling as he tried to organize the contents of his eulogy properly. He was not crying, but was sweating enough so that it seemed so at certain angles, and his face was redder than any other that Albus had seen, like a brick had been laid under the smooth straw that was his feathered hair. His lower lip quivered as he began to speak, though when he did so, his voice came out calm and clear, if only slightly nervous.

"I- I want to thank everyone for coming today," he said, swallowing at the next second. "I want to thank you all for being here to recognize my granddad...even though a lot of you may not have known him."

His eyes seemed to slide over the Weasley section of the audience as he said this, but a moment later they'd returned to his cards, and when he spoke now, the slight wavering that had been in his tone had vanished, replaced with confidence.

"And that's okay," he continued, "if you didn't know him, because...to be honest, I don't really think I knew him all that well either. And I think- I think that one of the reasons for that is because, for a long time, I don't think he was really sure of who he was either."

A truly deafening silence followed this claim, though Scorpius took it in stride, shuffling through his notes as though unaware of the collective unease that had just overtaken the guests.

"But I think," he went on, "that during the last years of his life, he may have been starting to figure it out. And I think that he was trying to show people, too, and that's why I wanted to talk to you all today, because I think that I was one of them."

"It would be pretty easy for me to give you all some story about a good time that we shared together. Because I remember him reading to me when I was younger, sitting on his lap-and I remember him giving me sweets when my parents weren't looking, and all of those things that many of us remember our grandparents for. But I remember being afraid of him too, despite these things, and for a really long time; because when I was growing up here, sometimes in this very courtyard, I always remember feeling like he was secretly mad at everyone around him. Because when I'd catch him on his own, when he wasn't making an effort to be happy...he was always frowning. He always looked like he was embarrassed to be where he was."

"So I want to give you all a story that's a little bit more recent; I want to tell you about when I first realized just why that was, and why now, today, I feel like I've finally gotten to know my granddad."

He looked up at this, apparently to see if they were all interested in hearing his tale. Albus couldn't speak on behalf of the others in the congregation, but he knew that he was, and indeed, before Scorpius returned to his notecards, he was sure that their eyes had briefly met.

"It was a few years ago," he started, "the summer before my fourth year at Hogwarts. And I was having a huge row with my mum...over Quidditch."

Albus chortled at this, as did many others in the crowd, and he saw a watery smile form on Scorpius' face as well, though he continued seamlessly.

"We were having a row, because I really wanted to try out for my house team that year, as I always did, and she was still against it. And I know why that is mum," he added hurriedly, gesturing towards her in the front row, almost offhandedly. "I know it's because you think so highly of me, and want me to perform to the best of my abilities academically; I know it's because you love me and want me to be as successful as I can be. But I also know," he added, "just like I knew then, that you figured that the name Malfoy wasn't going to do me in any favors in life, and what that meant was that I couldn't afford any slip-ups in my education."

He gave his mother another warm, almost apologetic smile, and then turned his attention back to the group at large. "And I remember, that summer, that my granddad was acting really dodgy. I remember being really worried about it, and not wanting to disturb him, because he was always acting so tense; I remember being afraid of him a bit, like when I was younger. And that day, he overheard me and my mum arguing over Quidditch, and when he came marching in, yelling himself, I remember feeling really bad and ashamed of myself for disturbing him over something so stupid.

"But what happened next I'll never forget. He joined in on the row, but he was defending me, asking why I couldn't play, just shouting with my mum, and I'd never seen him so angry in my life; I couldn't believe it. And I stood there, and watched while they went at it, and I remember my mum asking him why he even cared. Why after so many years of staying out of it all, he suddenly cared about whether or not I could play Quidditch. And he answered her right away, and I'll never forget his response. He said that it was because he didn't understand why I needed to be punished for something he did. And that year, I was allowed to try out."

Albus looked up at his friend, unable to suppress his grin. He remembered that year as well, remembered how excited Scorpius had been. He recalled Scorpius having stipulations on his ability to play, but he'd never asked just what had changed his mother's mind...

"For the longest time," Scorpius went on, and the smile on his face had shifted itself into a wry grimace of fondness, "I wasn't really sure what my granddad meant by what he said. Because as far as I knew, my granddad had never been angry with the Malfoy name, as the rest of us all had. He was always going on about what it used to mean, about how respected it had once been, and about how much it bothered him when my parents would talk about it and the things that they had to overcome because of it. I knew that he loved his name, and I think he loved it until he died, too.

"But I think that now, I realize just why he always seemed to feel so embarrassed. He wasn't ashamed about being a Malfoy himself; he was ashamed for us. He felt bad that I, like my dad before me, was burdened with his reputation. I don't know if he ever felt bad for the things that he said, and did, and thought-and I'm not going to stand here and pretend like those things didn't exist, either. But I know that at the end of his life, those things didn't matter to him anymore, or not nearly as much as they once had. I know that his name wasn't what was most important to him anymore, and in the end, that's what I think matters most. That's what I know him as, and that's what I'll remember him as too."

Scorpius was visibly crying now, though his tears were not impeding his words. Albus heard a sob from somewhere in the front as well, though he didn't bother trying to make out whose it was, for he was rapt with attention at Scorpius' words, and a quick glance to his left told him that Morrison was the same.

Scorpius went quiet for a moment though, again shuffling through his cards, and after a slight, almost hurried wipe at his face, he went on boldly.

"And there's one other thing I want to tell you all about my granddad," he said. "I want to tell you

that he was wrong. Or at least, that that's how he ended up. Because you see my granddad...he thought that someone's name determined how they were viewed as a person. Even how they viewed themselves. And I used to think that too. But now, standing here in front of you all, I realize that it's the opposite. It's who a person is-what they believe and what they do-that determines how their name is viewed. When I was growing up, I was ashamed to be a Malfoy. But knowing how men like my granddad died, and knowing the changes that he made, I'm proud to share his name," he announced, again wiping at his eyes. "I'm proud to be a Malfoy, and you should be proud of me too, because it's a pretty great name to have. Thank you."

And with that, he returned to his seat. The crowd gave no overt indication of their feelings on the speech as whole, but slivers of positive reception were identifiable at once. Albus heard a watery sob from the front row following the end of it, and with a cringe he speculated it to be Scorpius' grandmother. Others had turned to one another, nodding in approval of Scorpius' words. Albus ignored these best he could, however, continuing to watch his friend instead. He noticed that though Scorpius hadn't returned to his slumped posture, he was still shaking quite a bit.

The ceremony ended soon after, with the ceremony official returning to prominence to thank them for their attendance and specify the details of the reception. It was to take place at the Malfoy Manor and surrounding grounds, with food to be served within the spacious structure. The courtyard would remain the primary place of commiseration though, and Albus kept this in mind as the attendants all rose, dispersing to either find different company or fill themselves on the selection inside. At this point, with everyone standing, Albus lost sight of Scorpius, and upon turning to Morrison, saw that he and Melonie had vanished as well. Mirra remained next to him, though, their hands still clasped.

Albus turned to her, prepared to tell her of his intentions to find Scorpius, but she seemed to already know.

"I'm going to go find Rose," she said, and Albus noticed a slight breakage in her voice, as though she were still fighting back tears. "She wanted to talk about Hugo earlier...and then I'm going to head in and eat," she added. "For if you want to meet up later."

"Yeah," he responded, smiling. "Yeah, meet up later..."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then, with tremendous difficulty, separated her fingers from his own. A spasm of panic surged through his muscles as they did so, but he ignored it; it happened often now, when he would watch her go, no doubt a complication of having nearly lost her such a short time ago.

This instinctive fear would diminish over time though, he knew, and thus he was forced to bear with it as she exited his sight, leaving him quite alone in the throng of black. He seemed to be the only one not moving, and naturally, he walked off aimlessly, hands in his pockets, intent on finding a familiar face. He'd just exited the last row of metal chairs when he came across one.

It was James.

He looked healthy, his injuries from the attack a weak prior so close to gone that they were not even visible, and he dressed in robes of black trimmed with scarlet, looking handsome, as he always had. Albus had had several conversations with his brother since their reunion, and while the initial interactions had been joyous and rank with relief, they'd steadily degenerated into normal sibling behavior-and it was for this reason that Albus frowned.

"Ready?" James asked him, holding up his fist, as though it were a loaded weapon.

"Really?" Albus asked. "We're at a *funeral*," he sighed.

"Doesn't change what you did, Al," his brother told him sadly, shaking his head. "Shouldn't have left like that. We can do it later," he added. "But I thought you might appreciate the padding of the robes..."

Albus gave another sigh. "Fine," he grunted, turning to expose his shoulder; he'd tactfully been selecting the one that hadn't been burned during the march on the Ministry.

James coked his fist back and thumped it with tremendous force, the accompanying dull ache now extremely familiar, but no less painful.

Albus grimaced following the strike, rubbing at his shoulder, while his brother looked on dutifully.

"Now remember," he told him. "It's once a day-"

"For the rest of my life," finished Albus flatly.

"That's right," James confirmed. "Unless you go running off again, in which case it's two-"

"Now is that two a day," piped up a voice from their side, and Albus saw that Morrison was heading their way, grinning, "or still just one, but for this life and the next?"

"Both," James revealed, smiling back, and he then clapped them both on the shoulder-for Albus, intentionally the one he'd just hit-and then departed.

Albus watched him go, noticing that for the entire duration of their exchange, Lily had been waiting for him from a distance. He gave his younger sister a smile, which she returned uneasily, before following her eldest brother towards the manor.

Albus gave yet another sigh. Lily had been just as relieved to see him as James had been, but was overall less welcoming, and Albus suspected, from the way that she acted around him, that she was somewhat afraid of him-possibly, he reasoned, because she hadn't fully understood his reason for leaving in the first place, and thought him somewhat unstable upon returning.

He'd realized quickly, though, that this was quite alright. There would be time to speak to her, to repair that relationship, to quell whatever discomfort she felt around him. Indeed, there would be an abundance of time...nearly too much to know what to do with it all, given what he'd once

considered. This uncomfortable thought had writhed within him deeply ever since he'd emerged from the Ministry with Mirra, though he still hadn't worked up the energy to face it, and with Morrison now at his side, he decided to postpone it a little longer.

"Everything alright?" Morrison asked him, his own hands in his pockets. The two of them now stood there idly in the middle of the courtyard, seemingly the lone figures of stillness in the assortment of guests.

"I suppose," Albus answered. "My sister thinks I'm mental, my brother thinks I deserve to be pummeled forever, my mum reckons I need to be treated like a prisoner in my own home, and I haven't even spoken to my dad long enough to know how he feels. I'll take it, though."

Morrison gave him a wry smile, shrugging his shoulders as he did so. "To be fair...they're all pretty accurate, aren't they?"

Albus stifled a chortle, giving his own shrug. A brief moment of quiet followed his statement, however, and Albus, fully aware that Morrison was one of those that he hadn't yet had the opportunity to have a real talk with since the harrowing events that had transpired, launched into a more serious discussion.

"Listen though-mate-I didn't get the chance to say it before but...you were brilliant," he told his friend. "Really, everything you did in the Quarry, and getting Scorpius out of there, and knowing to go back and find my dad...I couldn't have asked for more-

"You didn't need to ask for any of it," Morrison interjected, and his expression turned to the uncharacteristically mature one that he'd been wearing during the service. "That's what it's all about, isn't it? When you get as close as we've all been? And for that matter," he continued, lowering his voice somewhat, "I feel like I may have some stuff to thank you for too-in fact, we *all* might," he added in an undertone. "Am I ever going to hear what really happened-?"

"You will," Albus told him, and he meant it; Morrison and Scorpius, he was sure, were the only people that he could feel comfortable talking about it all with, everything from what he'd seen, to what he'd thought and felt.

"I'd like to hear about it too, when you get the chance" came a voice from just behind Morrison.

They both looked, though the drawl was so familiar they'd known its speaker even beforehand. Scorpius had approached them, his arms folded over in a manner suggesting some degree of trepidation. His face was clear however, and considerably less red; his transition back to the aloof, collected persona that Albus knew him for had been smooth and quick.

He approached them both, and within seconds, they stood as a slanted triangle, none of them speaking. Albus noticed that Morrison was bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet though, apparently expecting something to occur. Albus knew that his two friends had spoken with one another about all that had happened already-what was needed now, then, was for Albus to join.

"Hey," he started solemnly, and Scorpius looked up. "That was- that was- that was a beautiful speech up there mate, the stuff you were saying, really-"

He stopped here though, unsure if he'd taken the best route in initiating his friend. Scorpius twisted his mouth into something between a smirk and a scowl though, and then answered.

"Thanks," he said, now running his hands through his slick hair uncomfortably. "How have- how have you been?"

"Alright," Albus told him, though he barely registered the question. He nearly asked the same, but bit his tongue to prevent doing so. Interestingly though, Scorpius broke off from here.

"I'm sorry I gave you that beat down," he said, his tone sincere, yet also playful.

Albus grinned, feeling a weight lift within him at once. "It's fine," he said, "it was well deserved-"

"And I don't blame you," Scorpius followed up, his voice shaking somewhat; Albus wasn't sure if his friend believed his own words or not. "Not really...I shouldn't have said-"

Albus hugged him. It was a brief thing, meant to both stifle his sentence and ease the tension, but also to convey whatever words he'd been working up to respond with. They broke apart a moment later, though Albus kept his hands on his friend's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about your granddad," he told him. "I am, I'm so sorry-"

"It's okay," Scorpius assured him, his narrow eyes squinting even further in the light. "It's okay...it's over with now. No looking back at all that, not like that."

"Not like that," Albus agreed, wiping at his own face. This mutual, almost nonsensical claim seemed to trigger something within Morrison though, and at the next moment, he'd thrown an arm over each of their shoulders.

"I think if there's one thing we should take from what happened," he told them both, "it's that I can handle both of you pretty easily. And don't you two forget it-"

The three of them shared in a laugh; a hollow, forced one, but it was sufficient in lightening the mood, and at the next moment, they'd started walking together, to nowhere in particular, merely ambling about the courtyard in an attempt to grant further privacy.

"Mel meet up with Mirra and Rose?" Albus asked Morrison as they went.

"Left actually," Morrison replied. "Had another service to attend...her dad lost a friend this week."

Albus frowned, but gave a nod of understanding. "Sorry to hear that..."

"She wanted to offer her condolences, though," Morrison said, turning to Scorpius, and he gave a smile of gratitude.

"Thanks," he replied, before craning his neck to address Albus. "How's Hugo doing?"

Albus shifted his mouth to the side slightly, not really sure what to say. "He's doing okay, I guess. I haven't seen him much. Healers said he can only get better though, I know he's excited for that. My uncle's handled it well enough but...my Aunt Hermione has been in a right state..."

Both of his friends nodded grimly, and Albus suspected that they, like him, were wondering if their actions in the Quarry had possibly prevented Hugo's parents from reaching him in time. He forced the thought away though. Again, there would be time later to think about those things, to have good, proper talks about them...

"Bit of a strange feeling, isn't it?" Morrison spoke up from the middle.

"What d'you mean?" Albus asked him.

"Just thinking that it's all over now. All that time, dealing with Darvy, with- with you," Morrison replied, and Albus knew that he was acknowledging Albus' radical transformations, as well as his steady decline in individuality. "Feels almost...unnaturally calm, doesn't it?"

"It's something we'll have to get used to," Albus replied blandly, not really wanting to talk about it. Darvy was perhaps the last thing that he wanted to think about now. And as for what had happened between him and the Dragonfang Wand...

"So I take it that you're still here, then?" Scorpius asked him, actually knocking at his head playfully.

Albus smiled. "For the most part," he acknowledged.

"How'd you work that one out?"

They'd stopped walking now, settling themselves at the edge of the courtyard; an open fence not terribly far away led into a more woodland area, though Albus wasn't sure if this was part of the Malfoy residence or not. He glossed over it for a moment before turning to his friends, not really knowing how to explain.

"There's a lot to go over," he told them. "But basically...I just sort of remembered who I really was."

"And that worked?" Scorpius asked him, sounding skeptical.

"It went a long way," Albus answered, not sure if he would ever be able to articulate properly the dissonance he'd felt in those final moments of having ownership over the Wand. For that matter, he might never be able to explain just how important his friends had been to him at that

moment, however far away they'd been.

"So no more seeing and hearing things?" Morrison asked, sounding excited at the idea.

Albus gave them both the most genuine smile he could muster. "Not like how it was," he said. "And that's good enough for me. I'll explain it all to you guys, though-"

"Well I think there's someone who may want to talk about it with you first," Scorpius spoke up, jerking his head to the side.

Albus turned, temporarily unsure what he meant, but then saw what he saw indicating. They were not, as it turned out, the only three meandering the courtyard. Only a few dozen steps away, another three stood in their own triangle, looking rather deep in conversation themselves.

His father had his arms folded over much like how Scorpius' had been, though he looked slightly more loose, a thoughtful look on his face. Across from him was Aunt Hermione, who looked the most pensive, and she seemed to be doing the most talking, as she was quite animate with her hands. Her husband was to her side, an arm around her, the other shielding his eyes from the sun.

Just what they were talking about, Albus wasn't sure, but a moment later they all shared a laugh, and he had the very distinct feeling that it hadn't been forced in the slightest.

"We can go in and get something to eat, if you want some time on your own," Scorpius said, and Morrison nodded from next to him.

Albus gave his own nod in return, thankful-as always-that his friends understood.

"See you later on mate," Morrison said, giving him a clap on the back much how James had. Scorpius gave him the tiniest of nudges as well, and then, they'd both turned.

At the same moment, Albus caught his father's eye from across the yard. For a fraction of a second his green eyes met their older companions, and then his father had turned back to his own friends-family, now-and after a moment, they'd turned away as well, giving only gestures of departure as they went.

His father then started to walk over to him, and Albus, now quite alone himself, briskly carried himself forward to meet him. The two of them were only inches away from one another when his father started to speak.

"Friends have somewhere else to be?" he asked, and Albus-finally able to get a clear image of his father in the light-saw that he looked quite healthy, his hair ruffled about his head and his scar almost faint due to the glare.

"Just headed in to get something to eat," Albus told him. "Wasn't very hungry myself," he added.

His father turned to examine the scene, and upon seeing that it was just the two of them, extended an invitation.

"Care to take a walk with me?" he asked, and Albus nodded.

His father then steered him away, an arm just barely pushing into his back as they walked side by side through the courtyard. For a moment Albus wondered if there was a destination in mind, but he then saw that his father was taking him to the same dense patch of nature that he'd just been eyeing.

"So how are you feeling?" he asked him.

"I'm okay," Albus answered, though as was now so often the case, he wasn't sure if the question was directed at his physical or mental health. His father's next one seemed to indicate the former.

"Body feel banged up at all?" he asked, looking almost guilty, and Albus knew at once he was thinking of their brief duel in the Quarry.

"Not really," Albus answered truthfully. "Hurt for a bit, but the Healers gave me something for it and it went away pretty quickly. How are y-"

"I'll be fine, Albus," his father told him, offering a bemused expression. They'd officially left the courtyard now, entering the considerably quieter and more secluded region of trees and underbrush.

"I saw that you were speaking with Scorpius," his father stated, ducking underneath a hanging branch. "How is he?"

Albus stared down at his feet as they walked, wary of the upturned roots they'd already been encountering. "Okay, I guess. I think the shock of it's over...just going to take some time, that's all."

"And understandably so," his father commented. "But he's a strong boy-a strong man, actually. He'll need your help, though."

"I know," Albus replied. "And erm- have you spoken to Mr. Malfoy yet?"

"Oh yes," his father answered. "We've had quite a few talks, actually."

"And everything is- is okay?" Albus asked him nervously. The last that he'd really been aware, there had been quite a bit of tension between he and Scorpius' father.

His dad gave a small smile, though. "When you have a relationship as complicated as me and Draco's, Albus, it's very difficult for things to not return to a state of ambivalence at the least. We are on friendly terms now-somewhere down the line, there will be more animosity, I'm sure-and

then friendship again, or something rather like it. There's really no other way, when you have two people so fundamentally different. I'm certain that the peace will ultimately overtake the conflict, though," he added reassuringly.

Albus nodded, then, feeling as though it was best to push the conversation into more impersonal terms, asked his next question. "And what have you been up to, then?"

"Recently?" his father asked, now stuffing his hands in his pockets as they walked. "Not much in particular. I went and saw Hagrid the other day. He's doing well, fully recovered now, as I'm sure you know, and his brother was visiting-"

"I mean with- I mean with the- the *world*," Albus interjected, trying not to sound dramatic, but failing. "With the Ministry-"

"Well there's not much to do right now, Albus," his father told him. "The Ministry remains in its void, and before we can assemble it once more, we need to decide which pieces are relevant enough to keep. It will establish itself once more in time, though."

"But how?" Albus asked. "I mean even with the Dark Alliance done, with that war over, there's still-"

"Some disarray, yes," his father said. "Some mistrust. But Waddlesworth's final actions did go a long way in leading us to that unity that he'd promised. Darvy's defeat does not necessarily signify a return to form, but in some ways, a new era completely. The war with Voldemort was nearly lost because the Ministry refused to cooperate with its people; with Darvy, it almost lost because the merger was too severe. Perhaps we're getting closer to that balance that we need to truly better ourselves. Only time will tell, of course, but it won't be long until we will see the seeds of a new government, and soon, I think, we'll have a good idea of which direction it's going."

Albus felt himself start to sweat. His father had mentioned Darvy, a topic that they had not yet returned to since that night...

"Dad," he started slowly, "listen...about me and Darvy, and what happened-"

His father turned, and rather abruptly. They stopped in their movement, and Albus understood this to be an intentional interruption.

"What happened between you and Sebastian Darvy," his father said, "is between you, and Sebastian Darvy."

"But I want you to know-"

"I don't want to know," his father said, and he didn't sound angry, or disappointed, or even frightened; his tone was delicate, almost forgiving. "I don't want to know, Albus, because truly, it doesn't matter to me as it does for you. What I know is that Darvy had an army at his disposal,

and had this world on the cusp of destruction. And I know that now he is gone-and that you are responsible. And no matter what happened, Albus, whether it was the result of something that I would have done or not, I want you to know that it's okay. A war is over and the world is safer, and it's because of you. I truly could not be more proud."

They stared at one another for a moment, eyes linking just as they had in the courtyard, and then, wordlessly, they resumed walking. Albus wiped a single tear away, though no others came after it, and when the silence grew unbearable, he addressed his father once more.

"You were right though," he said. "Before-you said I was sick-"

"I should not have said that-"

"No, it's okay!" Albus almost yelled, actually holding his hands up to indicate so. "Really-you were right. I was sick, I found that out. But I wanted to let you know that I'm better now. I was just telling my friends that...I really am better now."

His father beamed at him. "Well I'd very much like to know just how that's the case Albus; there's a lot I'd like to know in that regard, actually. Perhaps it's best suited for another time, though."

Albus nodded, sharing the sentiment. A moment later, however, his father had segued into something rather unexpected.

"It's good that you're feeling better," he said, "though I'd advise you to take it easy this summer-you have a seventh year ahead of you, after all."

Albus looked up they strolled, thoroughly surprised at this information.

"It's official then?" he breathed excitedly. "Hogwarts is back?"

"Not quite yet," he was answered. "There's still some things to be worked out, much like with the Wizarding World as a whole. The board of governors will need to meet, we'll need some semblance of a Ministry to ensure that the papers get drawn up, and of course, there will be parents to reach out to; it's a process, like everything else. But Hogwarts will always be there, will always find a way, as I've learned over the years. I'd expect classes to resume in the fall, and though I know you didn't quite get to finish your sixth year, I'm sure Headmistress McGonagall-assuming she's still up for the job-will find a way to work things out for you. You'll need to take it seriously, though. N.E.W.T's are quite difficult I hear, and the stress can be overbearing for some."

"I think I can manage," Albus replied with a grin, and when he saw his father's matching face, they both gave a laugh.

This went on for quite a few seconds, and it wasn't until his father had pulled him close and hugged him that it finally died out. The next thing that Albus knew, he was returning the

embrace, and it wasn't until they broke apart that he saw that his father's expression had turned to a more somber one.

"I want you to know," he said, "that I cannot condone what you did; with leaving like that."

"I know-" Albus started hurriedly, but his father held up a hand to stop him.

"I can't condone it," he repeated. "And I can't pretend like I'm still not angry at it-you worried us Albus, you worried us all. But I *do* understand it," he added, just as Albus had turned his head downward in shame. "And I am sorry for doubting you. As your father I've dedicated my life to protecting you, but as a result I failed to see that as a wizard, you had much to offer. You should not have gone off on your own like that, but I should have been more receptive to what you had to say, about Darvy and his powerful objects. Perhaps this end result could have been attained in an easier way, if we'd both just had a little more faith in one another."

Albus looked up. It felt so horrible, to have his father stand here and apologize to him, after all the strife that he'd caused. But then, his father was intelligent, and a great wizard-he was not going to downplay his words.

Before he could respond, though, his father had already settled himself on a nearby log, looking peaceful due to the lush backdrop. He then patted the empty space next to him, and the moment that Albus had joined him on the log, he'd turned to say more.

"We have a long road ahead of us, Albus," he said. "As individuals, as a family, and as a society. And that's why I want to know, right now, if there's anything troubling you. If there's anything that you feel may hinder your ability to progress, after all that we've endured."

It was as though he'd read his mind. Albus inhaled sharply, not even sure where to start. True, he was worried for his loved ones still, not their personal well-being, but how well they would cope with their losses. And the idea of rebuilding so many relationships-with his family and friends both-was daunting. But there was something else that had been eating away at him, devouring him from the moment he'd thrown the Dragonfang Wand through the Veil...

"S- Fairhart left me a letter," he started, staring forward.

"You can call him Sancticus, if you wish," his father said quickly. "I once did as well, and I know that you two shared a bond-"

"San, then," Albus said quickly. "He- he left me a letter, at his cabin."

It was a letter that he still had-had carried without him all throughout his journey, though it was now back at his home, still wiped blank magically. Despite his inability to produce it, though, his father gave him a look of interest.

"I see. And its contents?"

"Information, for the most part," Albus revealed. "What he thought of- of how to stop Darvy. And other things too, more personal things," he added, unwilling to share much of what San had meant for his eyes only. "But there was one thing he said...one thing that I've been struggling with. He told me- he told me that no matter what happened, that he wanted me to have things to hope for."

He knew that it sounded quite mundane, compared to what may have been expected, but his father gave an amused look anyway. "An admirable wish," he said, "and one that I agree with. And this is what troubles you...?"

Albus turned to his father, feeling his face burn red. "Dad...for the longest time, I've only hoped for Darvy to be stopped. There were other things, sure, but they were all accomplished the same way; by stopping Darvy and ending the war. And there was a time, when I was- when I was out, after him, when I realized just how sick I was. And I didn't think I was going to get better. I thought I didn't have much time left.

"And I told myself, that all that I wanted, before I was gone, was to get rid of Darvy. That was it-if that happened, I could die satisfied. And now he's gone, and my sickness is gone, and I- I- I'm afraid," he uttered weakly. "I feel like I've been given this second chance at life, and I'm afraid that if I do something with it, I'll squander it-I'm scared that I *won't be able-*"

"-to live a normal life," his father finished for him, and he gave a sigh-followed by his own frown.

Albus nodded, thankful that someone understood. It seemed so pathetic in his head, so horribly weak, but if *felt* so much stronger, it was a burden that had so easily replaced the one he'd been carrying before...

"Albus I understand," his father said, and he actually patted his hand. "I do-"

"No, you don't, I thought that-"

"Albus," his father said, in a crisp, almost strict manner. "Albus, I understand, because I encountered the same thing, once."

Albus looked at him, waiting to hear more, and his father obliged.

"The magic may have been different, the circumstances altered, but I once resigned myself to death too, Albus. I faced it, prepared to leave everything behind, and I survived-and I will not lie to you, it was hard afterwards. It was hard to adjust, because I'd already come to terms with the idea of leaving my loved ones behind, and knowing that I had a life to lead afterwards was, for a time, overwhelming. But it passed."

"It did?" Albus asked, and he knew that he sounded childish, but he didn't care.

"It did," his father insisted. "The world went on, and I went with it, and I took part in the rebuilding-"

"But that's just it!" Albus exclaimed, this word triggering it for him. "You rebuilt-just like you need to do now! That's what I'm so afraid of. Because Darvy is gone, and everyone I love is safe, and all I can think about is if I'm ready for the next time around, for the next war! How can I have things to hope for, if I expect such horrible things to happen?"

"You will adjust," his father said, soothingly. "I know it doesn't seem like it, it never does, but you will come to realize that the life you're now able to live is worth more than the one you fear losing, just as I did."

"But I feel bad for you," Albus said, unable to stop himself, and when his father raised his eyebrows, he felt compelled to explain. "I feel bad because- because you fought a war, dad. When you were my age, you went through so much, you fought so hard, just so that you could have a life-and you- you- you didn't get to *do anything with it*- you just rebuilt, and it got destroyed again, and now-"

"Didn't get to do anything?" his father asked, rhetorically, and he sounded, strangely, like he was close to laughing. "Didn't get to *do anything*? Albus, I did *three* things, with my life, after the war, don't you see? And it's through those things-through my children-that I will be able to accomplish everything else. That's what you don't understand-not yet. What we do Albus, we do for the next generation. That's what it's about. No matter how it's done, whether it be raising a child, or teaching a student, or leaving an idea behind-whatever we choose-we live forever through our relationships with those around us. The only way I'll have done nothing with my life, Albus, is if you, and James, and Lily, all choose to do nothing with yours."

Albus nodded his head-he didn't fully understand, not really. But knowing that his father had come to think in such a way was reassuring. Before he could say this, though, his father had already resumed, now smiling widely.

"You're not even seventeen," he said. "It's okay if you don't quite know what you want yet-what there is to hope for. But even if there's nothing in particular, a general idea may well exist. You said that before, your hope was for Darvy to be stopped. But why? For what reason?"

Albus stared up at him, raising his own eyebrows now. "Erm- I'm not sure what you-"

"Was it vengeance?" his father asked. "Was it to prove something, or to-"

"No!" Albus countered at once. "No, it wasn't that at all, it was- it was knowing what it was he was after, it was about not wanting him to hurt people-"

"Then go from there," his father told him softly. "As you said yourself Albus, you have a second chance now. You need to start thinking about what that meant to you before. Think about *why* you went through what you did, what the ultimate purpose of it was; consider just what having that chance have meant to you, back when you didn't have it. Stop thinking about what you're supposed to want, and contemplate, really, what you *actually* want."

Albus thought about it. He wasn't quite sure if he could put it into words, but he found himself

thinking back to San once more, about how proactive he'd been; about the importance of what they'd been doing. Sancticus Fairhart had believed, as was written in his letter, that he'd squandered his talents and passed nothing on. But that had not been true...

"I think-I dunno," Albus said, but when his father gave him an earnest glance, he tried to articulate it best he could. "I guess I- what I want...I just want the world to be a better a place after I'm gone, than it was before I was here. Even if only by a little bit."

His father smiled at these words, and then, he tenderly moved his hand to his son's shoulder. "Then do it," he said. "If that's what you really want, then that's what you need to do. But know, Albus, that rarely does something like that occur by a lone instance. You need let those words flow through all of your choices from here on out; need to make them part of your identity. And if you do so, then maybe, you'll get to make that change even after you're gone. Maybe the generation after yours can look to *you*."

Albus returned the smile, feeling much better than he had. He wanted to let his father know this, too, but unable to help it, he allowed one more worry to escape his lips.

"Dad...I'm not crazy, am I?" he asked. "For thinking- for being afraid like I was."

His father gave him a bemused look. "I can't say for sure," he said, "but if so, know that you share in your issues with me. I understand your fears Albus, and I understand your aggravation- it's a very difficult thing to do, to accept that darkness is so profound in our world, and that we must always be prepared for it."

"But you're okay with that?" Albus asked. "You're okay with that idea-that bad things are going to happen, no matter what-"

"And good things, too," his father said smartly. "And it's those things that are more worthy of our focus, I think. You've come face to face now with the worst that mankind has to offer, but you mustn't let that shape your view of everyone else. There are good people in this world, Albus, everywhere-the bad ones simply seem to be a bit louder."

"I know that," Albus said, and at once, his thoughts jumped to the Brennan family, and to Carmen, and her grandfather. "I know that, I know there are good people everywhere. But I feel like it can never really make up for the bad-I think of people like Darvy, and that kind of evil...I just feel like goodness struggles to emerge from it all, when it should be the other way around."

"Is that so?" his father asked, sounding sincerely inquisitive, and Albus nodded his head.

"Doesn't it frighten you?" he asked. "To think that good people are the exception?"

His father raised his hands slightly, as though he hadn't really considered it before. "Perhaps it's an acquired taste," he said, "but I tend to view the notion in a somewhat different light. To me, the idea of a world where goodness can be born from evil is infinitely more comforting than a world where evil manages to sprout from goodness; it's the difference, I think, between finding a

flower among thorns...and a strand of hair in an otherwise delectable bowl of soup."

Albus smiled, more than willing to accept this answer. His father caught his eye, grinning as well, but before they could rise together, his father had already initiated another conversation, though this one seemed to be rooted more in curiosity than anything.

"Is there anything else troubling you, Albus?"

He thought about it. The fear that had started to snake its way through him had subsided, though there was one other thing that had been nagging at him-not something that he was worried about, but rather, something that he didn't quite understand.

"Well there is one other thing," he said. "Though- though I'm not sure you'll be able to answer it."

His father removed his spectacles from his face, then started to wipe at them absently. "Well I can certainly try," he said.

Albus nodded, though he found himself struggling somewhat on how to begin. "Well...basically, it's about when I found Darvy," he started, and when his father gave a somewhat anxious look, he delved further. "But nothing that happened!" he went on. "It's just about- about where we were. We were in the Department of Mysteries."

His father placed his glasses back on his face, then gave a curt nod. "Go on."

"Right...he and Mirra were in a certain room, a- a large art gallery of sorts. He called it the 'Fate Chamber'," he said, reading his father's face for signs of recognition.

"I've never been in it," he revealed simply. "Though I am aware of it."

"Okay," Albus continued. "Well this was actually my second time there. The first time was years ago, when I- well, you know. But there was this painting in there, a blank one-well it started blank. And I didn't remember what it was called at first, though I remember it now. It was called 'The Portrait of Fate and Fortune'."

Again he looked for signs of recognition, though his father merely gave another nod. "Go on," he said once more.

Albus hesitated. "Well I remember that years ago, when I'd seen it, it had started blank. But then it started to draw things-really poorly, mind you-but it started to draw things, and I don't remember what they were. But *this* time, the time when I faced Darvy, it drew something different, I know that. And I couldn't really make out what it was, but thinking back now...thinking back now, I feel like it showed me dying," he said. His father leaned forward curiously after this, though Albus still had more to say. "But when I looked at it again, after- after everything was over...it wouldn't draw. But it still showed my name. And I don't know what that means. I'm not scared or anything!" he added hastily. "Just- just confused."

His father folded his hands over, now looking quite pensive. Albus watched as he bit at his lip, apparently discussing something with himself in his head, and it was nearly a full minute later that he actually became audible.

"Well Albus, I'm afraid I can't offer you any answers-or at least, none that are definitively correct."

"But you have an idea though?" Albus asked, feeling hopeful.

"Well I can tell you what I know," his father. "And I suppose it starts with what the Fate Chamber is, as I understand it. Now admittedly I am not an Unspeakable, as this all lies far out of my realm of expertise, but from what I *do* know of the Fate Chamber...it's rather poorly named."

"Really?" Albus asked, surprised at this statement.

"Oh yes, quite a misnomer," his father said. "Again, I can't be sure, but from what I've gathered-and I've had a handful of talks about it over the years-the Fate Chamber deals more with *consequence*, then anything. Or rather, causality. It's closely related to Divination actually, which in itself is a rather woolly branch of magic, though, as in Divination, there is still a great deal to be learned from it, in the proper context."

Albus wasn't quite sure what he meant by this all, but he continued listening nonetheless, finding himself fascinated by it.

"Just what you saw in the Fate Chamber, I can't be sure," his father told him, "and what is studied in there, in its entirety, I don't know. But *fate* is certainly worthy as a mystery to be studied, if for no other reason than that it remains quite undefined within the Wizarding World. The Portrait of Fate and Fortune though, I am aware of it."

"You are?" Albus asked, eager to hear more.

"Oh yes. Though I've never looked upon it myself, it is my job to secure such objects, and I am thus familiar with the general idea behind it. The Portrait of Fate and Fortune is a portrait bewitched to sketch-not a wizard or witch's future-but rather, their *most likely* future. It does not read you as you are; not your desires or fears. Rather, it reads your choices. And from those choices, it determines which scenarios are most likely to occur as a result."

Albus frowned, trying to take this all in. "I don't- I'm not sure I understand-"

"Fate and choice are often portrayed as enemies," his father elaborated. "Yet in many ways, they share a very intimate relationship. Our choices take us down certain paths, severing others, and often, we are fated to make certain choices as a result. The Portrait identifies your tendencies and attributes, and your habits, but most importantly, the decisions that you've made, and from this information, it then seeks to predict what will happen next as a result."

"But like all things pertaining to choice, precision is not to be expected. The Portrait is studied

because it is a very powerfully bewitched object, and probably uncannily good at what it's designed to do. But nothing can properly, objectively assign value to how we feel; the Portrait knows what you've done, and may even know why you did it, but it cannot accurately assess how powerful the effects were; it cannot gauge how strongly you've feared, or hated, or loved something."

Albus nodded, not sure if he understood completely, but he had enough to warrant further, more intelligent thought on the matter. But that didn't explain...

"But my portrait was blank when I last looked at it," he said. "I waited, and it never did anything..."

Surprisingly, his father gave a shrug. "As to that Albus, I feel that I have so little to offer, it will only confuse you more. The most I can say is that the Portrait-like many other powerful objects-may have enough awareness to not wish to tarnish its reputation on peculiar cases. It's possible that it predicted you would do something Albus, and was so sure of it, that when you *didn't* do it, it elected to not do so again, or perhaps, to wait until you've made a few more choices to try once more."

"Well I don't think I'll ever be looking at it again," Albus said, standing, and his father joined him.

"Maybe not," he said. "I wouldn't think so. But you never know. Best not to dwell on it now, I think. The idea of understanding or having a relationship with great mysteries such as fate seems to sometimes envelop us; if you recall, Reginald Ares suffered in such a way."

This name exploded inside Albus' head, and at the next moment, he'd started digging into his robes frantically.

"Dad-"

"What's wrong-"

"-here," Albus said, producing it, and he'd only held out Ares' wand for a moment before his father had snatched it up.

"Red's wand!" he breathed, examining it with shock.

Albus watched as he did so, pleased to have finally been able to hand it over. He'd had it on him every day since he'd taken it back from Darvy, unsure of when he'd have the opportunity to hand it over to his father. This seemed an appropriate time, however.

It almost seemed as though his father had forgotten that his son was present; he was now inspecting the wand at every angle, even delicately holding it up to the light. When he finally finished, he turned with a bewildered expression.

"Albus, where did you get this?"

"Fango Wilde had it," he answered simply, and he saw his father frown.

"I see. So you did find Fango, then. Do I even want to know his whereabouts now?"

"I couldn't tell you," Albus replied. "He didn't tell me where he was going."

His father softened his look, but then returned his attention to the wand. "Still in good condition," he said. "I've used this before," he added, sounding almost nostalgic. "Oh there were times...some frantic moments, back in the day."

He then gave sigh, and suddenly, his tone went slightly more flat. "You know, it was I who gave this to Reginald."

"Really?"

"That's right," his father told him. "As a gift of sorts-personally made, by Ollivander actually; same man who made yours."

"Why?" Albus asked, unaware of this fact.

"Well, in truth, I always preferred knowing the make of the wands that my apprentices used," his father told him. "Just made me feel better, plus, it was just a nice thing to do, and it's always good to be on friendly terms with the people you work with. With Red in particular though...I remember it like it was yesterday. He was so thankful; must have told me so a thousand times. Told me he would cherish it until the day he died. It was like he'd never been given a gift before-he reminded me of myself a bit, when I was younger. Just not used to people doing nice things for him. So keen."

His father's face transformed itself into something slightly more despondent after this claim. He then pocketed Ares' wand, giving another sigh.

"I suppose we know just how false that all turned out to be, though. But it's good that you recovered it," he added. "When the Ministry gets sorted out, this can still be taken in for evidence."

"So you'll keep it, then?" Albus asked nervously.

"For a bit," his father answered. "But once we've given it a proper inspection, we'll snap it. There's no-"

"You can't!" Albus exclaimed, and his father looked taken aback at his fervor.

"Albus, Reginald Ares was a criminal. It's protocol, I can't let my fondness for the wand-"

"I know he was," Albus said. "But I just- I dunno. I feel like Ares cherished that wand a lot more than you think, dad," he told him, though he was unwilling to delve into specifics; to explain all

that Ares had told him, including the grim intentions he'd had in life. "I just- I can't explain why...but I feel like that wand meant just as much to Ares when he died as it did when you gave it to him. I wouldn't get rid of it so easily."

His father surveyed him with interest, the strangeness of this statement not lost on him, but upon seeing the look that had screwed itself up on his son's face, he gave a slight nod.

"I'll think about it," he said. "But anyway-if you think we've covered enough, we really should be getting back now; your mother's probably already started a search party for you."

Albus grinned, and together, they started to walk back through the bramble. They did so quietly though, merely matching one another's strides, and it wasn't until the courtyard came into view that Albus said what he felt he really needed to say most.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Albus?" he answered, looking at him.

"I'm sorry for being a huge prat these last few years."

His father smiled at him. "I know you are, Al, I know you are."

Albus grinned back, then allowed his eyes to hover the scene before them. He caught sight of Morrison and Scorpius as they entered the fold once more, watching Scorpius shield his eyes from the flecks of food spurring from Morrison's mouth as he spoke, a particularly messy plate in his hands. He saw his mother, standing with her eyes bulging as they came across him, James at her side, whispering something that Albus wasn't quite sure was meant to calm her or to instigate something. And then he saw Mirra, sitting back down on one of the metal chairs with Rose and a girl that he didn't recognize, the three of them chatting amiably, and he saw that his cousin looked much calmer than she had before.

"Why don't you go meet with your friends," his father murmured to him. "I'll handle your mother."

"I appreciate that," Albus told him, chortling, and they split themselves into two different directions, Albus heading for Scorpius and Morrison, who'd now seen him and were beckoning him forward.

There were still things to hope for, he realized, looking around at the gathering. The world had changed-as it tended to do, it seemed-and he knew that he would have to embrace it. But he found his head clear as he approached his friends, the uncertainty within him present, but voiceless, unable to interfere with these thoughts as they carried him towards those who he cared for most, those whose voices had always been stronger.

There was still more to do aside from adapt; there was much to look forward to. Hogwarts would be back soon, his father had said, and he longed to relax himself in the cool Slytherin Common Room, to stare up at the tapestry of a brave man and feel proud of sharing his name. And there

were still laughs to be had now, with his friends, in time. And there were entire days to spend with Mirra-his life, really, and nothing brought him more joy than this thought. And there were still many choices to be made, he knew, choices, he was sure, that he would still be able to discuss with his father for a long time to come.

Chapter 23: Epilogue

20 Years Later

"*Vincent Fairhart Potter!*"

Vincent froze, his eyes darting back and forth as he tried to determine the angle from which his mother's shriek was coming from. He removed his face from the cool pane of glass a moment later, turning to his right, where the footsteps were most audible.

"I didn't do anything!" he said automatically, all in one breath.

His mother didn't respond, still hurrying along towards him, though she slowed down every other second to ensure that she still had hold of Edie. Vincent's younger sister kept an expressionless gaze as the various shops of Diagon Alley seemed to flash before her bright green eyes, a consequence of their mother's torrid pace.

By the time that Vince's mother had reached him, she seemed quite out of breath, though she managed to show her annoyance all the same. Her cool grey eyes had narrowed in on her son, her hair-chopped above the chin and a bit shorter than Vince would see in old photographs-tangled from sweat. She placed his sister down a moment later, then immediately took her hand to prevent her from running off, as she now tended to do.

"Oh yes you did," his mother countered his claim from a moment ago. "You *ran off* again. Where is your father?"

"I dunno," Vincent said with a shrug, and he was being quite honest. Shopping with his father was *dreadfully* boring, and it had been at its worst when they'd been in the apothecary, where his father had seemed intent on explaining every slimy thing that they'd come across. That had been where Vince had left him, and indeed, thinking about it now, probably where he still was.

His mother didn't seem to approve of his actual answer though, as she briefly put her hand to her face, as if to conceal just how restless she was. Only a moment later she'd straightened herself though, her cheeks flushed with panic.

"Where is Desdemona!?" she blurted, peering at her son sharply, as though expecting someone to leap out from behind him. Vincent couldn't answer this one either though, and had just started to shrug once more when a sugary drawl made them both jump.

"I'm right here."

Both Vincent and his mother turned to look across the pathway, where sure enough, Des was leaning casually against the back of another shop, her acid colored dress contrasting sharply

with the wooden backdrop. Her wavy blonde hair was obscuring her face somewhat, hiding what Vincent knew was a scowl; Des *hated* being called by her full name.

When she pushed the bright locks out of her eyes though, her usually sharp, pointed face had taken on a soft expression, and before Vincent's mother could even address her, she inched herself forward courteously, balancing herself on the balls of her feet in a most innocent manner as she prepared to talk.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Potter, it's *my fault* that Vince got pulled away," she stressed in a sweet voice. "I had some extra books that I wanted to look at, but I didn't want to waste Mr. Potter's time, so I decided to go off on my own. Vince was just looking for me to make sure I was okay. I see now that it was a mistake to not let an adult know what I was doing though. I'm sorry."

She wore the most apologetic look imaginable as she stated her case. Vincent's mother eyed her for a few seconds, twisting her lip as though not entirely convinced, but after a moment—as was always the case with adults when it came to Des—she gave a sigh of consolation.

"It's fine," she breathed, grimacing somewhat. "Just—we need to be more careful, that's all. And don't give Vincent an excuse to run off next time," she added. "He has a habit of getting lost."

"That was *one* time," Vincent argued quickly, and his mother actually gave a laugh.

"It was several one-times; honestly, you're too much like your uncle for your own good. Anyway, let's find your father," she added. "I'm sure he's worried sick...and where is your sister?" she added to Des, though this time, it was more agitation than worry on her face. "She said that she'd be out with her friends for fifteen minutes, I haven't seen her in an hour..."

"Don't worry Mrs. Potter," Des said politely, "I'm sure that Sid's fine. Last I saw her she was *surrounded* by older, big, muscular boys," she added, smiling widely.

At this Vincent's mother actually gave a groan, this time bringing both of her hands to her face for a moment. Edith, who'd been silent the whole time, took advantage of her release and made to run, though Vincent nabbed her before she could get anywhere.

"Okay," his mother said, seeing that Edie was in Vince's grasp. "We'll find Cressida later...let's just get back to your father," she said to Vincent. "Where was he when you left him?"

"The apothecary," Vincent revealed, and his mother rolled her eyes.

"Probably still there then," she murmured, echoing Vince's thoughts from earlier. "Stay with me," she said to them both. "And keep hold of Edie," she added to her son, who tightened his grip around his sister's hand at once.

They started walking then, with Vince's mother leading the way down the strip, parting the crowd of bustling shoppers as she did so. Vincent did as he was told, though in limited capacity, hanging back a few extra steps so that he was more at pace with Des, allowing them to speak

out of his mother's earshot.

"Thanks," he told her lowly, giving her a grin.

"Don't worry about it," she answered. "Though one of these days you're going to have to learn to get yourself out of trouble," she added smugly.

Vincent nodded, though he followed it with a sneer. "And what were *you* actually up to?" he asked; she'd disappeared long before indicated in her story.

"Nothing," she said, her voice returning to the falsely sweet once that she so often used when lying.

"Ha, spying on your sister, more like," Vincent said, rolling his own eyes-grey, like his mother's. But then Des gave him a dark look.

"Careful," she told him. "I know how to get people *in trouble* too."

Vince chortled, though he knew full well that this was the case. He relented though, unwilling to press the point, however sure he was of the truth. Des absolutely loved spying on her older sister; though both Malfoys, Vince's father had always insisted that Des was more like Mr. Malfoy than her sister, in both tendencies and appearance. Of course, this wasn't a very difficult thing to achieve, though. Cressida, though clever in her own right, was considerably more animated, whereas Des was more dry, and had darker features well, more in common with her mother.

Vincent was just picturing her in his head when Des snapped him from his thoughts.

"And what were *you* really up to?"

"Just looking for books," he said, and Des seemed to bite back a laugh of her own.

"Honestly!" insisted Vincent, though he delved deeper into it a moment later. "That shop I was peering into?" he said, under his breath. "I overheard my dad say before that there's *tons* of books in there on dark magic. Really gruesome stuff-"

"Did you get to see any?" Des asked, apparently unable to hide her own excitement.

"Nah," Vince admitted. "Everything was blocked off by some new best seller," he told her, himself disappointed. He was just trying to recall the name of it when he caught sight of a book stand on their right. "It's that one there, actually," he told her, pointing.

Sure enough, the stand was composed completely of a single text, the seller standing by it absently, as though he didn't need to advertise at all; and indeed, he was right. Even as Vincent pointed, an older fellow approached him, withdrawing a handful of Galleons from his pocket as he did so.

Des gave it only the smallest of looks as they passed, though Vincent, who'd been unable to make out the title through the window from before, was more interested. Squinting, he ogled the copy on display and read it off in his head.

How One Man Won the War: The Story of Warren Waddlesworth
The Last Completed Biography by Rita Skeeter

Vincent was just about to mention that he was familiar with both names involved, though a moment later, they'd reached the apothecary. Vincent's mother checked behind her to see that the children were still there, then pushed the door open, ushering them in with a quick wave of her hand.

Des went in first, followed by Vince and his sister, with his mother then taking up the rear. No sooner had they entered the dim, grisly shop did he hear his father's voice, though it was not directed at any of them. Instead, as Vincent saw a moment later, his father was at the register, a pile of items scattered in front of him and bags of purchased goods at his feet as he leaned on his elbow, chatting up the shopkeeper in what was apparently a very intense discussion.

"And I'll tell you what the biggest issue is," he was saying. "It's that they- they talk about Golpalott's second law like it has nothing to do with the first or third, like it's just some separate idea that he had-"

"Oh absolutely!" the shopkeeper agreed, and Vincent saw that he was an older man, keen looking, with long grey hair.

"-and I get it, I do, it's easy to dismiss the second law when dealing with *non-antidotes*, and these kids are young, they haven't learned, but it's getting out of hand, I saw an article the other day-"

He stopped there though, for his wife had just cleared her throat. Both Vincent's father and the shopkeeper turned for a second, with the latter immediately beginning to bag the items afterwards.

"Hey!" his father said to them all, flashing a cautious smile at his wife in particular. Unlike Vincent's mother, his father was nearly identical in his features to how he looked in photographs. His hair was the same length as always, and equally untidy, and the eyes that he'd given to Edith remained as vibrant as ever, situated on either side of a nose that was just noticeably longer than most others. His grin was the only thing that seemed to have really been affected by age. In pictures, Vincent always had the sense that his father's smile was strained; that there was something on his mind that he was unwilling to burden others with. Here, even when aware that he was probably in trouble, there was still a sense of confidence to it.

"Where were you?" he asked her, taking the bags-there were three of them-and hurrying over.

"I was looking after our children," his wife replied, smiling sarcastically. "Where were you?"

"Oh I'm so sorry," he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek and then making a grab for Edith, who immediately climbed into his arms. "What happened with you?" he added to Vincent, though his eyes briefly darted to Des as well. "Could have sworn you were in here looking around. Run away, did you?"

"I wonder where he gets that from," Vincent's mother said flatly, and her husband cringed.

"Ouch," he said, though he didn't go further. "Regretting taking on the girls?" he added, giving Des a wink.

"No," his wife said stubbornly. "I was happy to do it, really, especially with everything Scorpius has on his plate. Lost Cressida though," she added, tossing her hands up.

"Sid's a big girl, and she's with her friends, she'll be fine."

"And I *do* regret not asking for some extra help. Should have asked Morrison to tag along."

Vincent's father gave a laugh. "Sweetheart please, it's three in the afternoon on a Saturday, Morrison's not even awake yet..."

Vince couldn't help but grin at this. Mr. Vincent-or Mr. Morrison, as he preferred to be called-was one of his favorite people in the world. Vincent had been named for him (as a consequence of Mr. Malfoy winning the title of godfather) and despite his age, Vincent always enjoyed spending time with him. Indeed, some of the most fun days he'd had in his life had been spent with his namesake-even if their activities were often unapproved by his father, and most times even unknown to his mother.

At the mere mention of him, Vincent piped up. "Ooh, we should see Mr. Morrison soon! It's been ages-"

"It's been a week," his father countered.

"Feels like longer," Vince said. "We need to have a room for him, like how Granddad has for Hagrid. Maybe the attic!" he put forth at once. "We could clear all that rubbish, we've even got my old crib up there-"

"Hey," his father interrupted smoothly, "I'll have you know a lot of that *rubbish* is important. And I built that crib with my bare hands, by the way. Morrison has his own attic to blow up, he'll be fine."

"Mr. Potter," Des spoke up at the next second, diverting his attention immediately, "would we perhaps have enough time to stop by Eeylops? My dad said I could get my own owl."

"I think we should have enough time," he answered, looking over at his wife. Before she could even speak, he'd already laid the plan out. "Why don't I take the kids?" he said, briefly turning to look at Edie as he did so, who was laying her head on his shoulder. "You can go and look for

Sid, and we can meet back at the Leaky Cauldron in an hour or so. There's a wand shop just around the corner from there that I've heard a good deal about, and Vince needs to give it a look as well," he added, smiling.

Vincent grinned himself; he'd been excited to get his wand for a very long time. He and Des then both looked up at his mother expectantly, but before even speaking, the look of immense relief on her face had given her answer away.

"Sounds good to me," she said, making a grab for the bags of potions ingredients, as well as the other goods accumulated from the day's trip. She then gave her husband and daughter both a swift kiss, then turned to Vincent and Des.

"Be good and stay in sight," she said, her words mostly directed at Vincent. Her eyes shifted over to Des at the next second though. "Keep an eye on him," she added.

"Of course, Mrs. Potter," Des answered dutifully, beaming.

Vincent's mother left a moment later, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries between his father and the elderly shopkeeper, they exited the apothecary as well.

No sooner had they left did Edie immediately start in her father's ear.

"I want to see the *dragons*," she whined.

"Oh honey, I told you that's in Gringotts, we were already there, remember?"

"Why can't we go *back*?"

"Because we need to shop for Vincent today," he said. "He's starting at Hogwarts soon. And besides," he added, "they wouldn't have shown you the dragons anyway. But we have pictures don't we? We can look at one of Great Uncle Charlie's albums when we get home, and your cousin Hugo brought some pictures over last time too..."

Once more, Vincent and Des fell behind, allowing his father to steer them towards Eeylops from a slight distance ahead. Again unable to be heard, they started speaking, though this time, it was Des who engaged him.

"Did you see that poster back there?" she asked.

"No," Vincent said truthfully, but he was already bracing himself. He knew *exactly* what she was about to go on about.

"It was another poster for my dad," she said pompously. "Yup, they'll announce him as Minister any day now," she added.

"So," Vincent said, shrugging. "Big deal. Your dad gets to sit behind a desk and look over

papers. That's what *we'll* be doing in a few weeks."

Des didn't respond at first, only smiling widely, unable to contain the look of glee at what she was going to say next. "When my dad is Minister," she teased, "he'll be able to throw *your dad* in Azkaban."

Vincent felt his face burn red. "But he wouldn't though," he said. "Because our dads are friends."

"Oh I know he wouldn't," Des said quickly. "But he *could*, if he wanted to."

Vincent again said nothing, unwilling to extend things; he and Des were always going at it like this, though this time, he sensed things drifting towards territory that was off limits.

"It's okay though," Des went on, "he would never throw *you* in there. Gryffindors don't even go to Azkaban."

"That's not funny!"

Vincent's father spun around upon his exclamation, his eyebrows raised. "Everything okay back there?" he called.

"Everything's fine, Mr. Potter!" Des called out to him, practically batting her eyelashes. "I was saying to Vince how great it would be if one of us got sorted into Gryffindor, what with its *rich history...*"

"Well I'm glad to hear you say that, Des," Vincent's father said, coming to a halt; they'd reached Eeylops. "Okay, do you just want to pop in yourself and shop around?" he added to her, as they caught up. "I'd like to have a chat with Vince anyway," he added.

"Of course," Des answered, practically twirling by him, then disappearing within the shop. Vincent caught a brief glimpse of the interior before the door closed, but as soon as it had done so, his father took over his field of vision.

"So what did she *really* say?" he asked, smiling, placing Edie down as he did so. She didn't run, however, as she did with her mother, instead only meandering over to the windows of the shop, where some of the owls were flashing their wings from within their cages.

"It was nothing," Vincent said quickly, but his father gave him a knowing look.

"Ah, it's okay Vince, you can tell me. I love her, but I had an eleven year old Malfoy for a friend once too, and I know you can get a pretty big attitude in that little package. Worth it, of course. But still..."

"It really wasn't anything," Vincent said, leaning himself up against the wall of the shop now. In truth, Des' words didn't bother him *that much*. He really didn't care if he went to Gryffindor; tons of his family had been in there, all of them except for his dad actually. But then...

"Dad...would you be okay with me being in Gryffindor?"

His father knelt, looking thoroughly taken aback at his words. "Vincent, of course I wouldn't mind. Why would you think that?"

"I dunno..."

"Your mother was in Gryffindor! And my parents too, everyone in your family-"

"I know, but-"

"And don't listen to that 'all brawn and no brain' nonsense either, your mother was a *very* good student, as was your Uncle James, and your Aunt Lily even made Head Girl-"

"I know," Vincent repeated. "I get it, I don't think it's bad to be in Gryffindor," he said, and he was being honest.

"Then what's the issue?" his father asked him.

Vincent frowned. "Well...*you weren't*."

His father ogled him for a moment, Edith's eyes never more prominent than when he was at his son's level. "You're right, I wasn't in Gryffindor. I was in Slytherin. With Mr. Malfoy, and Mr. Morrison," he added, with a grin.

"So wouldn't you want me to be there too?"

"Oh Vincent it doesn't matter," his father told him. "You're going to *Hogwarts*, that's what matters. And besides, I told you before, didn't I? The sorting hat lets you choose anyway-"

"I know it does," Vincent said. "But if it doesn't matter...then why did you choose Slytherin?"

His father opened his mouth, as though he had an answer prepared, but closed it a moment later. He then seemed to ponder on the question, and after half a minute, he finally offered something.

"Honestly?" he said. "Because I wanted to be different. Because I came from a very large family, and they'd all been in Gryffindor, and accomplished so much. And I had very big shoes to fill, because your uncle was a very good student, and was very well liked, and, well, your granddad was hardly an unknown Gryffindor either," he added, and Vincent nodded, well aware of his grandfather's legacy. "And I chose Slytherin because I thought it would mean less pressure for me."

Vincent frowned; whatever house he was sorted into, he didn't want to decide on it due to terms like that. "Did you regret it?" he asked.

His father scratched at the back of his neck, apparently thinking about. "Did I?" he repeated after a second. "Sure, at times. Do I now? Not at all," he said.

"Really?" asked Vincent.

"Really," his father told him. "I had plenty of fun at Hogwarts, Vincent, and you will too, regardless of where you get sorted."

Vincent said nothing to this, as he was slightly skeptical of it. Rarely did his father speak of his adventures at Hogwarts, and never did Vincent perceive them as fun. True, he was always hearing exciting tales from Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Morrison, but it was difficult to picture someone as relatively boring as his father taking part in any of them; indeed, the only story that his father ever offered was about how he'd gotten the scar on his hand, but Vincent had realized a long time ago that whatever had truly happened had been quite mundane. In his youth he'd heard that the injury had been sustained during a Quidditch game in which he hadn't secured his gloves properly prior to a fall; and yet, Vincent would occasionally overhear his father telling his younger cousins something quite different; explanations ranged from poor handling of a Bowtruckle to not paying attention while dicing vegetables.

But still, he was not going to say this aloud, not when his father was being so earnest with him. And so, he merely reiterated his question, careful to ensure that it was covered from all angles.

"So you wouldn't be disappointed then?" he asked. "If I went somewhere-anywhere-other than Slytherin?"

He knew that it was a childish thing to ask, but he needed to be sure. True, his father was not some great hero, like his grandfather, or some man of power, like Mr. Malfoy, but still, Vincent had always gravitated towards his mother, just as Edie had to their father, and he felt as though something other than Slytherin would only widen that gap between them...

"Not in the slightest," his father answered. "Why, do you know where you want to go?"

"No," Vincent said quickly, and it was the truth; that was part of his dilemma. "I don't, and I feel like I won't until I get there-"

"Then don't worry about it," his father said, and he then briefly turned his attention towards the window that Edith was peering through. Des was visible, and speaking to the shopkeeper; there was a cage on the counter as well. "Vincent listen to me," he said, sounding somewhat serious now, and he actually gripped his son's shoulders. "I will never be disappointed with any choice that you make, so long as you made it thinking it was the right one. So when you put that hat on your head, all that I want you to think about is what's right for you. Not for me or for anyone else, do you understand?"

Vincent nodded. "I know," he said, and already, he felt much better; it was a reassuring thing to hear. His father seemed to pick up on this as well, however, and after a brief glance through the window to see how Des was progressing, he engaged him once more.

"You know Vince, I remember being your age. And I remember that feeling of not wanting to disappoint, or impose. I was so fortunate to have my family, to have people willing to look out for me, but it took me years to realize just how important that really was. Things may happen while you're at Hogwarts; you may have some bad days. I know I did. But I never want you to feel like you can't come to me or your mother. I never want you to feel like there's no one that can help you. Okay?"

Vincent nodded once more, barely able to contain his smile. Perhaps above all else, that was what he'd been worried about. It was strange; sometimes he had the distinct impression that his father could read his mind.

"That settled, then?" his father asked, and Vincent gave yet another nod.

"Yeah, all settled," he said.

"Good," his father said, rising, just as Des exited the shop, a burly cage in her dainty arms. Within it, a majestic eagle owl was staring ahead quite actively.

"All done, Mr. Potter!" Des announced, showing off her new pet.

"I see that," Vince's father said, beaming. "And who is this handsome fellow?"

"She's a girl," Des corrected smugly. "And she doesn't have a name yet."

"Well maybe we can go over some ideas, then," Vincent's father said, as he extended his arms to receive the relatively large cage. He then turned, prepared to lead them away from the shop.

"Are we getting my wand next, dad?" Vincent asked, the excitement from earlier returning, as he and Des hurried along after him, trying to match his father's gait.

"In a little bit," his father assured him. "We have some other supplies to pick up first though."

"Like what?"

"Well we'll be needing to get you kids some gloves for Herbology; if I recall, Professor Longbottom's gotten a little more risky with his first years as of late, and in my day the class wasn't exactly safe either. Did I ever tell you kids about the time I didn't follow directions handling a Venomous Tentacula? Here, just have a look at my hand..."

Chapter 24: Author's Note Character Sheet

Hello, readers,

It's been quite a journey, hasn't it? There were some snags, of course-editing issues, continuity errors, The-Hiatus-That-Must-Not-Be-Named-but we have reached the end of it all, and there is time, I think, for just one more correspondence between us. This author's note-which I believe to be my last for this series-serves multiple purposes, but the most important is to shed some light on the end of the series and to cement whatever sense of closure you may have taken from it. In this sense, this is not a typical note; there is still some story left to be told, and that is the intention of much of what follows this here. But first, above all else, there is gratitude to be spread.

I can't count the number of times I have given my thanks for all of the support that this series has received, and yet, I feel that one more is in order. I do this not for you, but for me-it is important to *me*, that all of you understand just how instrumental your readership has been to not just this series, but to me as an individual. Rarely have I really delved into the specifics of my identity, and even here, I will not bore you with the details. I have already said much of what needed to be said regarding my struggles in a video posted on my profile (and elsewhere) and I feel that the information contained within it is sufficient in explaining just *why* your support has meant so much to me. What I would like to address now, however, is the magnitude of it.

I was sixteen years old when I wrote the first chapter of *Albus Potter and the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist*. Today, I am twenty-three. I have spent seven years of my life-at various intervals-involved with this series, and I did so, truly, out of necessity. For all of the people in my life, I spent a great deal of these years feeling quite alone. This feeling was the result of issues that I do not wish to write about, nor, I am certain, you want to read-but they existed, and like so many others of my generations, I turned to the internet as a means of combating them. I extended a hand through my old, now broken desktop computer, and slowly, over time, a staggering amount of hands reached back. I spent so much of my youth wishing for normalcy, and today, as I sit here typing this, I feel blessed; blessed because I can now look back at those years and know just how truly surrounded I was. If you are reading this now, you are not just my friend-you are one of the closest friends I have. Though I may not even know your name, you are near and dear to me because you have shared in something with me that will never happen again; you shared in my growth into adulthood. If you have smiled, frowned, cringed, laughed, cried, or shouted in anger while reading this series, you have *done so with me*. You have connected with me on a level that very few in my life actually have. And most importantly of all, this act has not been exclusive to one event or one time frame, there is no window in which we have interacted on this level that has passed. Whether you have been with this series from its inception, have read it in the past week, or you are reading it ten years after this note is posted, you have shared in this life experience with me, and that,

truly, is I think the beauty of writing. And it is for that reason, that I thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you, for sharing this experience with me.

This note will finish soon, with the second half of this post to focus instead on the events that I conceive of transpiring following the *20 Years Later Epilogue*. But before this happens, there is just one other thing that I want to point out, and while it ties closely to what has already been said, it stands on its own as well.

I want to tell you, whoever you are, that you are *amazing*. And I know that seems so ridiculous as a single sentence, I know that it's the easiest phrase in the world to roll your eyes at, and I know it's been crammed down your throat in more forms of entertainment than you care to admit. But it simply must be said, because I honestly cannot think of any other way to really articulate just how much you've done, and how much you can do. You often hear the expression "Every vote counts". In this case, the same can be said for every click. Though scrolling down a few hundred times and reading someone's story may not seem like much, these acts accumulate into something incredible; they contribute to a statistic, a set of numbers that has completely and irreversibly bettered my life. Think about that for a moment; you changed a person's life, who you've never met, just by reading a few stories. That is the power of social interaction. Never think, as I once did, that you don't matter. Never think that your actions aren't important. With the flick of a finger-the most minimal of effort, truly- you helped save a life. Now imagine what else you can do. If there is one thing that you take from this series, let it not be the content, but the knowledge of how truly powerful your interest and kindness is. Please, go and apply this. When you have the chance to do something nice, do it, and do so knowing that however small it may have seem, it can have a monumental effect. I have often been asked about whether or not I would like to charge some sort of fee for this series; this is it. Show others the same amazing kindness and attention that you have shown me-in any capacity- and you will have paid for this series numerous times over.

With these things said, I feel that this note can transition back into the series itself. As previously mentioned, there is a bit of story left; or at least, a bit of *my* story left. What follows is what I have dubbed the *Character Sheet*. Much as the epilogue gave you a glance of the wizarding world 20 years later, the Character Sheet provides general information on some of the more major characters of the series, including what occupations they take, what romantic endeavors they pursue, and the nature of their relationships in general. Additionally, aspects of the world following the war are explained. There are a few things of note, however; first and foremost, this list is not a full documentation of these characters' lives. Rather, it is an expanded look at the epilogue, and thus, all information that you see is relevant only up to 20 years following the end of the series. Furthermore, you will notice that there is *quite a bit missing*. You will see names with no established characters behind them, and other times, learn of characters that are unnamed. This is not an oversight on my part; instead, it is my admittance that I truly do not know what happens next. I have general ideas; a large, a vague outline of what has become of many of my characters, and many of J.K's as well (as interpreted within the context of my series). But the gaps are for you. I offer you

pieces, and nothing more; they are for you to assemble, should you choose to. And each in your own way, with your own completed picture at the end.

So this is where I say my good-bye. The *Albus Potter Series* has concluded, and what happens next is up to you. I wish all of my readers and their loved ones the very best, in health and in happiness, and I hope that you have enjoyed reading as much as I have enjoyed writing,

-Vekin87

The Characters of the *Albus Potter Series*, 20 Years Later:

Though he did not make Head Boy in his final year at Hogwarts, Scorpius Malfoy continued in his academic success, graduating and almost immediately entering the Ministry of Magic as a low-level employee in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He has since risen meteorically through the ranks however, and as of the epilogue, there is talk that he may soon become Minister of Magic; there is debate over this, though, as the Malfoy name is still tainted, albeit less so than it once was. Romantically, Scorpius ultimately fell in love with and married a woman named Catherine, whom he met at a political rally-she was raising picket signs against him. Together they have two daughters, Cressida, who is in her third year at Hogwarts, and Desdemona, who is entering her first. Scorpius and Catherine have since separated, though they remain very amicable, largely for their daughters, who they value above all else.

Morrison Vincent struggled somewhat following his graduation of Hogwarts, unsure as to what his career aims might be. Realizing that he was always best at aiding others in this regard more so than himself, he eventually became a career counselor, guiding young wizards and witches by helping them to understand what they want to do with their lives, and pointing them in the directions that would bring them success. Romantically, he and Melonie dated on-and-off for several years, though they have since settled down together and married. They have no children, with Morrison preferring to pamper his nieces, nephews, and the children of his friends, and Melonie feeling that she "couldn't raise two at once".

Mirra Tunnels went on to become a Magizoologist who, though by no means a household name, is quite respected within her field, especially for her extensive work with Bowtruckles and Bowtruckle aggression, which has become her specific area of expertise. She has two children with her husband Albus; a boy, named Vincent, and a daughter, Edith, named for her late grandmother.

James Potter went on to play Quidditch at the minor league level, though he eventually retired and now serves as a popular Quidditch analyst and editor for *The Golden Snitch*, a monthly Quidditch magazine that features in-depth articles and commentary on the sport. Despite his bachelor ways, he did eventually marry, a woman named Madeline, who works as a Curse-breaker at Gringotts. Together they have three children, all boys.

Lily Potter achieved great success at Hogwarts, making Prefect and Head Girl in her final year. With many career opportunities available to her, she moved around quite a bit, though eventually she settled in as an upper management position at the Improper Use of Magic Office. She also married, a bit later than her brothers, and has one daughter, named Emma.

Rose Weasley went on to work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, a position that she became more interested in after the passing of her paternal grandfather. She married twice-though the first one was short lived. She and her second husband, Benjamin, live happily with their twin sons, who are only a year away from entering Hogwarts themselves.

Hugo Weasley never fully recuperated from his injury, though he has made strong strides. Following his graduation from Hogwarts, he travelled abroad with his Uncle Charlie, taking an interest in the study of dragons. Though he has had several long-term relationships, he has yet to marry.

Fango Wilde, true to his word, never returned to the country and was not seen again. His current whereabouts remain unknown, though a few years ago a rumour spread-unverified-that he'd been killed in the United States during a violent encounter in a pub. No one knows for sure.

Charles Eckley went on to join the Ministry of Magic in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, setting in as a prominent member of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. All three of his brothers survived the war (though Clyde did sustain a nearly fatal injury, which he still lives with) and Charles is now married. He and his wife have one son, who is entering his first year at Hogwarts. In terms of his relationship with the Potter-Weasley family, he is largely amiable with most of them, with he and Albus having a sort of Christmas-Card relationship. He remains very good friends with Mirra and Rose, however.

Donovan Hornsbrook did return to home to his mother, though not much is known about his current life; he is, however, known to still be in Britain. He is no longer in contact with much of his fellow Hogwarts alumni, including his once best friend, Charlie. His father however, Hank Hornsbrook, left the country under unknown conditions following the war, and has been seldom heard from since.

Melonie Grue did go on to work at St. Mungo's as intended, though as a Mediwitch rather than a Healer. She stayed in close contact with many of her fellow Slytherins, with her friend Denise Toils serving as her Maid of Honor in her marriage to Morrison Vincent.

Lance Disona went on to achieve a great deal of success in the Ministry of Magic, working in, interestingly enough, the same department as Scorpius. Additionally, he kept in close contact with James following Hogwarts, and though still not quite on good terms with *everyone* involved, he has since reconciled with much of Albus' group, including Rose, and is occasionally seen at gatherings as a guest of James'. He has children

currently in attendance at Hogwarts as well.

The Ministry of Magic, over time, did indeed return to its form as a head governing body, though with a much larger emphasis on rebuilding than preparation for war. Additionally, Azkaban has been rebuilt-with some modifications-and the Executioner's Veil has been returned to the Death Chamber, where it is still studied to this day.

Warren Waddlesworth remains a famous name throughout the wizarding world, with the majority, to this day, deeming him the most responsible for the defeat of Sebastian Darvy and the Dark Alliance. Additionally, despite Waddlesworth's economic woes in his final weeks, he did leave behind whatever gold he had left-still a large portion, by any standard-to the Ministry, with his will specifying only that the money be used "for the people". With this in mind and guidance from some young up-and-comers in the Ministry, the last twenty years have seen the formation of the WWRP (Warren Waddlesworth Restoration Program), a Ministry subsidized program that functions to rebuild many of the communities destroyed during not just the most recent war, but previous ones as well. Towns such as Lambshire have already been rebuilt, and while places like Kakos will take more time, the project is showing no signs of slowing down.

Likewise, other accompanying programs have shown promise as well. The IBF (Isla Blackwood Foundation) was one of the first programs started by a young Scorpius Malfoy, which sought to provide assistance for young wizards and witches who'd lost parents during the war, and which, to this day, continues to help underprivileged magical youth in general.

The true identity of the "Silver Wizard" has never been fully explained; while opinions vary among the people, less than ever before believe it to be Harry Potter, with some considering it to be a Ministry conspiracy, and most believing that the Silver Wizard is still alive, albeit inactive. The term itself has entered the magical lexicon, and to this day is sometimes used in reference to any current mystery, scandal, or bout of misreporting.

Reginald Ares, following the war, became one of the more polarizing figures in recent history. Poll results are largely mixed; he is considered a tyrant at worst, and a revolutionary (albeit a radical one) at best, with the views varying mostly due to things like age and socioeconomic class. There is, however, at least a consensus that Ares was not as responsible for the war as his half-brother. Whatever his public perception, though, "Red War" was eventually given a proper burial, complete with a very quiet, relatively unknown ceremony. His former mentor, Harry Potter, was one of the few in attendance.

Sebastian Darvy, despite his failings, did achieve the notoriety that he desperately sought-though not quite to the extent that he'd wished. His name is rarely mentioned among that of other dark wizards such as Voldemort and Grindelwald, and much of his infamy is associated more with his army than with his own wizarding capabilities.

Hogwarts, of course, ultimately reopened, though Minerva McGonagall finally retired for

good not long after, preferring to spend her last days in the comfort of her own home.

With Professor Flitwick turning down the offer, there is now a new, unnamed Head of Hogwarts...

Hagrid also retired, his age eventually catching up to him. He remains a treasured guest at the Potters however, and is actually seen quite frequently-possibly because Harry had a hut specially built for him on their grounds, ensuring that he always has a place to stay.

Ron Weasley has since retired as an Auror, preferring to divide his time now between his family, and helping in the management of his brother George's chain of joke shops.

Hermione, on the other hand, continues to work in the Ministry, still an important and prominent figure; indeed, her outward support for Scorpius Malfoy has been a large contributing factor in bringing him attention for a potential bid for Minister.

Harry Potter remains Head Auror, continuing in his service to the Wizarding World by doing what he knows best; stopping dark wizards. His actions during the end of the war with the Dark Alliance have also helped in restoring his popularity, though despite all of this, he has aged into a man of simple tastes; he and his wife Ginerva remain happily married, and enjoy in doting on their grandchildren, while Harry himself has also taken up tenpin bowling as a hobby.

And finally...

Albus Potter continued to grow in his talents with Potions, becoming a master of the art and teaching it at Hogwarts for several years in adulthood. He has since left the post, however, now devoting his time to partaking in Potions at the academic level; he is one of the largest contributors of research in many different aspects of the discipline, and is very well known within the Potions community. He lives with his wife, Mirra, and together they have two children; a boy, Vincent, entering his first year of Hogwarts and named for his good friend Morrison (who lost the title of Godfather to Scorpius in a game of Exploding Snap), and a daughter, Edith, who is several years younger. Additionally, the second portrait of Severus Snape resides in their household, in the attic, where Albus has ensured the former Headmaster all of the privacy he desires. Nevertheless, he sometimes pays the portrait a visit-roughly once a month or so-to discuss the current going-ons of the Potions world, which his namesake seems to enjoy.