

Albus Potter

and the Foulest Book

By Vekin87

Summary : The world around Albus is changing. Fear that hasn't been felt in twenty years is slowly starting to grip the wizarding world. Though there's no proof just yet, talks of war and rebellion lurk in the corners. Reginald Ares is abroad, and if the ministry doesn't take a stand and try to find him, the public will. But the outside world isn't all that's changing. Though his father assures him that this will be his most normal year yet, Albus enters his third year of Hogwarts with new classes and Hogsmeade visits, new staff changes that seem anything but trustworthy, and enough inner battles to make his head explode. But in between fighting with family and falling for his friends, he also learns the horrible truth. Ares isn't just hiding. No, his former headmaster is waiting. Waiting to do the very thing that he was imprisoned for trying to do years ago...

Chapter 1: Office Pranks

Matthew J. Hampton was having a very bad day at work. This was not uncommon, as working at a paper company tended to be dreadfully boring, and he was more than used to it by now. But this day was unusually bad. Everything seemed to have went wrong.

First his tire had blown out as he had been parking, and when he checked his trunk, he saw that the spare that he kept had mysteriously vanished. Then five potential buyers had canceled on him at last minute, causing him to spend hours cramped up in his office filling out paperwork. Matters had only gotten worse when he tried to call his wife to ask for a ride home. His cell phone, you see, which had been charging for hours the night before, had inexplicably died on him! He would have to walk home. All in all, he was more than pleased when he finished the last of his paperwork, and was more than ready to leave.

One look out the window told him how late it was, but just to be sure, he checked his watch. It was half past midnight. He gave a tremendous sigh before closing the window blinds and locking the door to his office. He glanced down the hallway that led to the elevator and saw that every cubicle was empty. Everyone else had gone home hours before. The only person left in the building other than himself was probably Ray, the janitor, a pleasant old man. He walked down the hallway, his briefcase swinging as he did so, whistling nonchalantly as he went. He supposed that he could always take the bus. If he was lucky his wife may even have set dinner aside for him. Things would look up by the end of the night, he was sure. He glanced at a window and saw his reflection. His short brown hair was ruffled and his beady brown eyes were drooping ; he was clearly exhausted. He would be looking forward to taking the elevator. He worked on the top floor, and would otherwise have a ten minute walk down the stairs to leave.

He approached the elevator and pressed his hand on the down button. He expected the eerie silence to be interrupted by the sound of the elevator moving upwards; expected to see the green light of the button pierce the pitch blackness around him. He was disappointed on both counts. The elevator was not working.

He felt his mustache quiver in frustration. He pounded the button with his fist once more. Then again. Still nothing.

It was those damn pranksters, he thought bitterly. Being a man of considerable stature and importance in the company had made him many enemies with his co-workers. Or his subordinates, really. It was not uncommon for them to put things in his coffee, or hide important memos from him, and they had known that he had been having a bad day..They had no doubt found a way to make the elevator stop working. Well this office prank was not

funny, he refused to walk!

Five minutes later however, his feeling of obstinance passed. He had pounded on the elevator button several more times, and had concluded that the stairs were the only alternative.

Heaving another tremendous sigh, and turned and his made his way to the staircase, which was (of course) on the complete other side of the floor.

And so, Matthew found himself spending another tedious five minutes walking around the floor until he reached the staircase, this time not whistling or swinging him briefcase. He was right about to take the first step when he saw something most peculiar. There was a man leaning up against the wall next to the stairs.

Matthew blinked. He was sure that the man had not been there a second before, but he supposed it was easy to see why he hadn't noticed him. The man was almost entirely covered in the shadows. The angle at which he leaned caused his face to be completely out of view, and he was dressed in black as well.

"Who are you?" Matthew asked, backing up several steps.

The man did not reply. Matthew saw that he was occupied. Though it was hard to see, the man was doing something with his slightly outstretched hand. Upon closer inspection, he saw that he was rolling a coin in between his fingers, back and forth.

Matthew snorted but still continued to stare at the mans hand. He saw that it was not a regular coin, but rather much larger, the size of a hubcap, and gold in color. It looked vaguely familiar. The man rolling the coin back and forth finally flipped it into the air and caught it. He gave his hand a little shake and opened it, and Matthew saw that the coin had disappeared.

"How did you do that?" he asked, completely forgetting that he was talking to a complete stranger who had already failed to answer him once.

The man snapped his fingers, and within seconds, was rolling the coin across his fingers again. "Magic," he replied in low tone.

Matthew swallowed. He was intimidated, yes, but he was not going to let this man know it.

"Who are you?" he asked once again, this time his tone much more firm.

The man straightened his posture, though his face remained concealed in the shadows. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said, "I just want to talk to you."

Matthew glanced at his watch but didn't even bother looking at the time. "Well it is much too late. I have to get home. If you were sent here to negotiate, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until tomorrow. You had all day. Now please move aside, I need to use the stairs," he said in what he hoped was an intimidating, forceful tone.

He stepped forward, but the man did not move.

"You can go," the man said, "After I've asked you a few questions."

"You will be asking me no questions!" Matthew barked. "I will be doing that! Who are you, and what are you doing on the top floor of this building at this hour!"

"I am looking for you," the man replied calmly.

"You are looking for trouble!" Matthew shouted, "And you have found it! I should have you know that this is your last opportunity to move out of the way! I am a black belt in multiple forms of martial arts, and I will not hesitate -"

But he was cut off by the mysterious mans sudden movement. He emerged from the shadows, and Matthew gasped at his appearance

Half of his face was perfectly normal looking, if not a little pale. The other half, however, almost made him vomit. It was just as pale, but not a single inch of it wasn't scarred. There were places where the skin was dented, places where the skin protruded in large bumps, and half of his mouth was so thin that it looked like it couldn't move. The man pushed his untidy black hair out of his face and stared at him.

For a split second, they made eye contact (if you call it that, one of the mans eyes was like a slit, incapable of being opened very far) and the next moment he had began speaking.

"You took a single karate class when you were in middle school, and you haven't been in an actual fight since high school," the man said.

Matthew stared at him, dumbfounded at how he had seen through his lie. And how very accurate he was as well.

"Wh- wh- who are you?" he managed to stammer out, still gawking at the mans disgusting appearance

"Are you Matthew Hampton?" the disfigured man said, ignoring his question completely.

Matthew nodded, still transfixed at the mans appearance "How did you -?"

But then it dawned on him. Now that the man had stepped from the shadows, Matthew saw

that he was not wearing normal clothes. He was wearing pitch black robes.

"You're part of my brothers crowd, aren't you?" he asked.

The man nodded. "I am a wizard, like your brother," he said.

Matthew attempted to regain his composure after this. "Well then I should have you know," he said, "That my brother is very high up amongst *your kind*. So I would advise to leave at once. Before you get yourself in trouble."

He was not lying this time, and apparently the man knew it, because he took a step back before speaking.

"I've already told you," he said. "I'm not here to hurt you. My name is Sancticus Fairhart. I knew your brother, we worked together."

Matthew was a split second from asking what exactly he did when he noticed something. Had he said 'knew'?

"What do you mean you knew him?" he asked.

The man known as Fairhart hung his head low. "Your brother is dead. Murdered."

Matthew felt his head spinning. This was all a dream. He had fallen asleep at his desk, and soon enough, he would wake up to find a stack of paperwork in front of him.

But he did not wake up. Fairhart waited in silence to let the information sink in. Matthew felt his body give out. He dropped his suitcase and collapsed, strangely landing in a chair that had not been there seconds before.

"D- dead?" he asked.

Fairhart nodded. "I'm sorry," he said, and he sounded sincere.

"H-how?" Matthew said, "Murder? I don't - he was - can't you kind prevent that?" he asked.

Fairhart crouched down so that he was on speaking level with the now sitting Matthew. "Only sometimes" he said grimly.

"Who?" Matthew asked, "Who murdered him? Why?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Fairhart said. "I have an idea, but that is why I needed to question you. Were you an Maury close?" he asked.

"We - we talked, occasionally -"

"When was the last time? Within this month?"

"Yes," Matthew replied, still absolutely stunned. "About two weeks ago, he called me. It was first time since Christmas."

Fairhart narrowed his eyes, or one of them anyway. "Did he seem...preoccupied? Like there was something else on his mind?"

"He didn't speak long. He seemed...unusual."

Fairhart continued to survey him, apparently deep in thought at how to ask his next question.

"Did he seem like there was someone else inside of him? Like he was two people?"

This was such a peculiar question that Matthew had to take a few seconds to ponder how much this man knew.

"Yes," he said after a moment, "Exactly."

"Did he mentioned any names? Did he mention the name Ares?"

Matthew shook his head. He would have remembered any names. Fairhart was now biting his lip - or half of it. He finally asked the question that he appeared most anxious to ask.

"Did he mention a door? A specific kind of door?"

Matthew nodded. "Yes. He kept saying that he had to open a red door."

Fairhart hung his head low.

"Are you going to explain to me how my brother died?" Matthew asked, "You clearly know."

Fairhart scratched his chin. He took a deep breath, then began speaking, "Your brother worked in a special department in the Ministry of Magic known as the Department of Mysteries. Another wizard - a wanted felon - used the Imperius Curse - a curse that allows you take over someones mind - to take control of your brother. How, we do not know. The curse weakens over time however, your brother was undoubtedly calling you for help, but was unable to separate his thoughts from the other wizards. This particular wizard - a very powerful one - needed him to open a certain door. When he realized that it couldn't be done, he killed him. I'm sorry."

Matthew blinked stupidly. "Who's job is it to stop this?"

"Mine," Fairhart said sadly, before pulling out a long stick that he Matthew knew was a wand. He recoiled at the sight of it.

"You - you said you weren't going to hurt me!" he stammered.

"This won't hurt. *Obliviate!*" Fairhart cried, brandishing his wand in one fluid motion.

Matthews eyes slid out of focus and turned mysteriously blank as he slid out of the chair. Fairhart knelt beside him and began speaking.

"Your brother died in a car accident. Hit and run. I am his Executor of Estate. By the time you come to meet with me for his will, I will have been fired and replaced with someone who has no idea who I am. You only know this because you received a call from your wife about it, which is what made you faint in the first place."

Matthew continued to stare up at the ceiling blankly.

"That reminds me," Fairhart said, and he waved his wand once more. "Your phone is working again. You may want to call your wife for a ride home, it's awfully late."

He stood up as Matthew began stirring, though he was still clearly confused. Fairhart vanished the chair with a wave of his wand, then with another one cried "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Something silvery shot from the tip of his wand, and seconds later it formed itself in a semi transparent bird, one that emitted a powerful silver glow.. Despite it's color however, it was easy to see that it was a crow. It flew onto Fairharts shoulder and began nipping at his ear, though nothing happened. The silvery crow was not solid.

"Send a message to Harry Potter," Fairhart said, "Tell him that he was right, about everything. Ares is after the Book, and he damn near got it."

The silver crow flew from off of his shoulders and passed through a closed window, leaving the hallway just as dark as it had been moments ago.

Matthew was now done stirring and had managed to pull himself up into a crouched position. By the time that he had picked up his briefcase and looked around confused, there had a been a loud *crack!*, and he was all alone.

Chapter 2: The New Head

Albus was flying. He felt his powerful wings beat from either side of him, heard the rush of the wind in his ears. He didn't know what kind of bird he was, but he was flying so fast that he could barely make out the grassy plains below him. Soon enough he was flying over mountains, still soaring higher and higher, soon there would just be the sky beneath him -

A bludger came out of nowhere. How had a bludger been hit so high? He didn't even have to time to think about it, it was coming right at his face! He flipped over in mid-air...

"Ouch!"

He wasn't a bird anymore. He had successfully dodged the bludger, yes, but in doing so, he had fallen off of the couch.

Albus untangled himself from the blanket around him and sleepily looked around. The dim light coming from the window told him that it was late in the morning, possibly even in the afternoon. He ruffled his already wild black hair with his hands and looked around, unfamiliar with his surroundings. Why had he fallen asleep on the couch again?

The sleeping figure a few feet away from him jogged his memory. Pale with a pointed nose and sleek blonde hair, Scorpius Malfoy was tucked away inside of his sleeping bag, fast asleep. A few feet further away, also on the floor (though with no sleeping bag or blanket) was his Uncle Ron, who was spread eagle and snoring loudly.

Albus laughed out loud and suddenly remembered everything. Yesterday had been his thirteenth birthday. And it had been one of his best birthdays ever. Not only had one of his best friends managed to come over, but after a delicious birthday feast (ending with a magnificently baked cake) there had been a several hour long pillow fight.

The teams had been entirely unfair, but Albus was sore nonetheless. On his team had been his brother and sister, Scorpius, his and his cousins Rose and Hugo. On the opposing team had been his own father, Uncle Ron, and his fathers godson, Teddy. It had been a grueling fight, one that had only ended well after midnight, when Uncle Ron had Spellotaped two pillows to each of his arms and battered them into submission.

He gave a wide smile at the thought of it and felt his mouth twinge in pain, no doubt from the

beating he had suffered the previous night. He managed to pull his aching body into a standing position and quietly tiptoed over the sleeping body of James, who, like his uncle, was passed out on the floor with not even so much as a blanket.

He entered the kitchen, giving a large yawn as he did so, and saw that his mother was busying herself with breakfast.

"Morning mum," he said sleepily as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

She turned around from the stove, her fiery red hair swinging over her shoulders as she did so.

"Well look who's awake," she said with a smile, "Any major bruises?"

"Not really," he replied, "But I think I'm missing a tooth," he added as an afterthought, feeling around in his mouth with his tongue.

"Well you can check later," his mother said, placing a plate of bacon and eggs down for him.

"I've made you a quick breakfast, then you need to shower and get ready."

"For what?" he asked through a mouth full of eggs.

"Chew and swallow," she said.

He swallowed the eggs without chewing, nearly choking, but still managed to ask once more,

"For what?"

"We have a guest coming today," his mother said, returning to the stove. "Is James up?"

"No, he isn't. Who's coming?"

His mother frowned and yelled loudly. "James! James!"

"I'm up, I'm up!" they heard someone call back from the living room.

His mother turned his attention to him once more. "The new Head of Hogwarts," she replied simply, tipping more bacon on his plate.

Albus' jaw dropped. "What? Since when? You never mentioned -"

"I most certainly did" she said, taking a seat at the table at herself, visibly exhausted. His mother was always cooking. "I believe you responded with, and these are your exact words here, 'K I heard mom, pillow fight.'"

Albus grinned sheepishly. He supposed that he should have realized that Hogwarts would have a new headmaster by now, as it had been more than two months ago that their previous one had left.

'Left' was putting it lightly of course. The previous headmaster had actually been forced to flee do to illicit activity inside of the school and, for more seriously, being linked to murder. Albus himself had chased him through the Forbidden Forest, but he had managed to escape. There had been no word of him, or his accomplice, Sebastian Darvy (Albus' now ex Potions Professor) since it had occurred, however. He vaguely wondered where they both were, but was cut off from his thoughts by his mothers voice.

"You've got an owl by the way," she said, and his head snapped upwards, "Two actually. I put the letters on your bed."

Albus grinned. He didn't even bother asking who they were from, he already knew. He pushed his plate away, muttered a quick "Thanks" to his mother and exited the kitchen.

Once back in the living room he nearly ran up the stairs, jumping over James (who had fallen back asleep) as he did so. He entered his room and saw, sure enough, that there were two letters on his bed.

He picked them up and compared them. They both had his name on them, though one was a ridiculously untidy scrawl, whereas the other one was much neater and larger. Thinking that he should open up Morrisons first, he tore the top off of the letter with the untidy scrawl and began reading what was almost an illegible piece of paper.

Al,

Sorry I couldn't make it to your party mate. Things are hectic over here. My sister called off the wedding with that bloke (and rightfully so, he's a prat), and I didn't remember what was going on until the day before. Did Scorpius make it? I haven't been in contact with anyone but you all summer. Lame.

Anyway, I did manage to get you a present, but I was late ordering it, so you might get this letter a bit late. Hope you enjoy it.

By the way, I'm going to Diagon Alley next week for back to school shopping, but I haven't even gotten my letter yet! Do you know if we have a new headmaster yet? Or even a new Potions teacher? Either way, write back and tell me when you're going so we can maybe meet up.

Happy Birthday

- Morrison

Albus smiled at the letter. Morrison was his other best friend at Hogwarts, and he was always good for a laugh. Indeed, hanging out with Scorpius may have rubbed off on him - they were both strikingly similar in how both were so sarcastic and quick witted. Deciding that he would right back after he learned who the new headmaster was, he turned his head towards the thin flat parcel that he had just noticed next to the letter.

He tore it open and smiled. New Quidditch gloves. With a small sinking feeling in his stomach, Albus realized that he may not even still be on the team, as he had been forced to miss the final game the previous year. He appreciated it all the same however, and made a mental note to try them out the second he was back on a broom.

Placing the gloves neatly on his bed, he turned his attention towards the other letter. He knew who this one was from as well.

Mirra Tunnels was another of his best friends at Hogwarts, though unlike Scorpius and Morrison, she was in Gryffindor house. It had been a rough patch to get to where they were in their friendship, what with arguing and spying and secret dungeons, but Albus was pleased with the result. They had never been better friends, and they had been writing back and forth to each other all summer.

He tore the letter open and began reading at once; her hand writing was much neater compared to Morrissions.

Dear Albus,

Happy Birthday!

I'm hoping that this letter makes it to you on time, I used my grandfathers owl and it's nearly as old as he is. Thanks for asking about my parents. Yes, they're out of Azkaban now, but everything is fine. I don't ever see them.

How are you spending your birthday? I remember you wrote a while ago that you wanted Scorpius and Morrison to visit, did either of them manage to go?

And by the way, when are you going to Diagon Alley? I haven't been in contact with anyone from our crowd much, even Rose has only written once, and I really wanted to meet up sometime before school starts. I haven't gotten the letter for Hogwarts yet though (I'm not sure if anyone has, what with us not having a new head yet) but I thought that perhaps Flitwick or someone by now would have at least given us our course books list. Hopefully when we get the list we'll get to meet up, but if not, I hope you're summer's going well!

Best Birthday Wishes,

- Mirra

Albus smiled and folded the letter up carefully. He was right about to begin writing his reply when he heard a voice by the door.

"How long have you been up mate?"

It was Scorpius, and he was looking very groggy. Albus turned to him. "Not long," he answered, "What are you doing up?"

"Teddy's up, he wants to know if we want to play Quidditch."

Albus smiled and held up his new gloves.

Much to the chagrin of his mother, who firmly believed that the new headmaster would be arriving any second for dinner, Albus opted to put off getting ready for a couple more hours. He instead spent the day playing Quidditch with Scorpius, his brother, and Teddy (all of who were considerably good flyers, especially his brother) while Rose and the younger kids watched.

After they were all exhausted from flying, they made their way back towards the Potter Mansion, broomsticks slung over their backs and beads of sweat trickling down their noses. "Why's the new headmaster coming to visit you anyway?" Scorpius said as they were walking. Albus shrugged, "I reckon it has something to do with my dad. Because he's so high up in the ministry."

"Do you know who he is?" Scorpius asked.

"Nope," both Albus and his brother said.

"Apparently dad knows him really well though," James said, "It's not exactly all business, they're coming for dinner aren't they?"

"Teddy knows who it is though, don't you Ted?" Albus asked him
Teddy Lupin, his father's godson who was nearly part of the family and considerably older, looked back at them as they were walking. "That's right," he grinned.
"Can you tell us?" Scorpius asked eagerly.
"Nope. Harry said you lot weren't allowed to know yet. You'll know soon enough though," he smirked.
"When," Albus moaned as they walked into the Mansion.
It was apparent, however, that they would indeed know so enough. They could hear the clatter of silverware in the kitchen, as well as his mother cursing furiously under her breath. Albus dropped his broomstick off in his room before entering the kitchen. His mother had indeed already set the table for dinner, he could see it in the dining room, and Albus could smell a delicious roasted chicken in the oven.
He took a seat at one end of the kitchen table, Scorpius sitting next to him. His mother turned around from the oven and made to say something, but stopped when she saw them. She heaved a large sigh. "Honestly Albus!" she said. "I asked you to get ready hours ago, and you ended up getting dirtier!" she continued, eyeing the mud on his robes.
"Sorry Mrs. Potter," Scorpius said, "We got carried away playing Quidditch..."
Albus watched his mother's expression soften. Somehow, Scorpius had managed to charm her the first day of his visit, and the rest of his family had followed suit. "I don't blame you dear," she said, waving her wand. Albus watched as several cups filled to the brim appeared on the table. "Albus knew better."
Albus rolled his eyes. "There's still time to get ready..." he started, but his mother batted his sentence away with her hand as if it were tangible.
"Hardly," she said, turning back to the oven. "The new head will be here any minute, could you call your cousins down for dinner? And carry these drinks out to the dining room table?"
Albus and Scorpius carried the drinks out, careful not to spill a single drop of pumpkin juice. He didn't have to call for his cousins however, as soon after his Aunt Hermione entered, leading a crowd of people to the table. Both James and Teddy had changed, Teddy even going as far as to morphing himself into a handsome man with short black hair.
"Harry said she'll be here any minute," his Aunt Hermione said, brushing her curly brown hair out of her face and taking a seat at the table.
"Well tell him to wait by the door," Albus heard his mother call back from the kitchen.
"Wait...did she say 'she'?" Albus muttered to Scorpius they too took seats.
"Sounded like it -"
There was a loud knock on the door, and Albus heard the thundering of footsteps, telling him that either his Uncle Ron or his father were going to get the door. He heard it open, and then heard his Uncle speak.
"Professor McGonagall!" he said breathlessly. "It's good to see you again!"
"Don't be a fool, Weasley, you can call me Minerva now," they heard a woman answer, her voice raspy, but still tart and strict. "And it's good to see you as well," she added, a little bit lighter.
He heard his father speak next. "Glad we could have you for dinner Minerva. And just on time too..."
Albus watched as three people entered the quiet dining room. His father first, followed by his Uncle, and then a woman who looked vaguely familiar to Albus.
He had not seen Minerva McGonagall for years, though he knew that she was a great friend of the family. From what he remembered, she looked about the same. Her skin was wrinkled and her snow white hair was tired back in a neat bun. She had a very strict look to her, though Albus knew that she was quite kind.
No one spoke for several seconds after they entered. It was finally James who broke the silence.
"McGonagall!" he shouted in disbelief. Albus knew why. Many people believed that James entering Hogwarts had been the deciding factor in the old Headmistress' retirement in the first place.
"That's Headmistress McGonagall!" his father reminded him strictly. "Or Professor, it doesn't really matter which." He turned his head so that he was now speaking to everyone at the table. "Well kids," he said, "The cat's out of the bag now. And back in Hogwarts."
Albus watched as the adults laughed at a joke that Albus didn't get.
"Anyway, kids, Professor McGonagall here has agreed to return to Hogwarts, for the next year

at least, as a personal favor to me."

"Do not think," McGonagall started, "That this means you will be getting away with anything, however," She eyed James, who seemed to shrink in his chair, "Old though I may be, I'm not quite senile yet. I'll have my eyes open."

Albus saw Hugo and Lily trade looks of terror, and knew at once what they were thinking. They would both be starting Hogwarts this year, and they clearly didn't know how strict McGonagall was going to be. Albus didn't think that they had anything to worry about however. But James certainly had a reason to shrink in his chair.

The chatter resumed at the table, and Albus watched Professor McGonagall take a seat at the middle of the table, next to his father. They immediately struck up a conversation, one that his Aunt Hermione was quick to enter.

Albus turned and saw his mother carrying a humongous plate that he knew was their roasted chicken. "Dinner is served," she smiled, wiping sweat from her forehead and placing the plate down at the center of the table.

Despite having company, dinner progressed as usual. The long table wasn't divided into sections, but small groups formed and created their own conversations, blocking everyone else's out. Albus was in a heated discussion with Uncle Ron and Scorpius about Quidditch.

"Look, I'm not saying the Kenmare Kestrels are a bad team," Uncle Ron was saying, "I'm just saying that they lack offense. Their beaters are fine, but what do their chasers put up? Fifty points a game?"

Scorpius swallowed a large mouthful of mashed potatoes before answering, "They average just above eighty, actually. Not bad considering their division. They play the Wasps five times a year, and Vance Troller is one of the best keepers in the league!"

Albus made to speak before his mother interjected. "When I was playing," she said, buttering her bread, "It didn't matter how good a keeper was, the chasers had all the pressure. There's three of them. The keeper is only ever not at a disadvantage during a penalty shot. Any team of chasers should clear a combined average of at least a one hundred and twenty, regardless of who's keeping."

Once more Albus made to speak, though he was cut off by Rose, who, as one could have expected, wasn't planning on contributing to the actual conversation.

"Daddy, can we go to Diagon Alley this week? I want to meet up with some friends."

"Mirra?" Albus asked.

"No, Charlie and Donny. They wrote me telling me they were going this weekend."

Albus frowned and turned back to his food.

"Who's Charlie?" his mother asked casually, then taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

"A friend from school" Rose said.

"A prat," Scorpius muttered at the same time.

"He is not!" Rose said coldly. "He's really nice and really smart! Just because you don't like him doesn't make him a prat."

"Why don't you like him, Scorpius?" his mother asked, smiling slightly.

Albus watched as Scorpius shrugged. "We got into a bit of a scuffle last year," he muttered.

"A scuffle?" Uncle Ron asked him.

"That's secret code for 'I got my ass beat'," Albus said, smiling as he cut up his chicken.

Uncle Ron and Rose both laughed, but his mother scolded him. "Albus, language at the dinner table!"

He saw Scorpius give him a quick, disdainful glance and knew at once what he was thinking. Albus had no reason to joke. During the same 'scuffle' he had nearly been knocked unconscious by Charles Eckleys friend, something which he was glad that his mother didn't know about.

"Well, we'll see about Diagon Alley," Uncle Ron said, after he had recovered from his hearty laugh. "You still haven't even gotten your letters for Hogwarts yet."

Down at the middle of the table, his father was having a very hushed conversation with Professor McGonagall and Aunt Hermione. He noticed that his father seemed to be the one doing most of the whispering, his aunt spoke scarcely and McGonagall seemed like she was waiting for him to finish before talking.

At the very edge of the table sat Teddy, James, Lily, and Hugo, the latter three of which were all laughing. Teddy had reverted back to his normal casual appearance, and was now shape shifting his nose to entertain the three of them, even going as far as to change it into a wolf like snout for several moments.

An hour or so later, after they had all been filled by a delicious feast (the second in two days, Albus reminded himself cheerfully) the plates were cleared of food and the chatter slowly died down. Professor McGonagall bade them all farewell and wished them a happy rest of the summer holidays before Albus' father offered to walk her to the door.

Albus stretched himself out and stifled a yawn, "I'm going to head to bed now," he said lazily. "Not so fast," his mother said, taking his plate from the table and carrying into the kitchen. "You're still filthy," she said when she returned, "Shower."

Albus groaned, though his mother continued. "Scorpius, you hop in after him, and then you can both go to bed. No pillow fights tonight, you'll get irregular sleep schedules."

"Aww come on Gin, pillow fights are the point of having friends over!" Uncle Ron argued, putting his feet up at the table.

"Feet," both Aunt Hermione and his mother said at once, and he took them off immediately.

"No, no pillow fights," his mother said, with such a tone of finality in her voice that even Uncle Ron didn't persist. "Shower," she added to Albus as he began stretching out once more.

"Fine, fine," he muttered as he rose from his seat. He left the dining room and could have sworn he heard Scorpius say, "I'll help you with the dishes if you'd like, Mrs. Potter."

Albus rolled eyes as he walked towards the stairs. He saw that Professor McGonagall had not left however. She was standing at the door, talking to his father. The conversation was so intense that Albus doubted very much if either of them knew that he had entered. He slowly approached the stairs and walked up, though he stopped at the final stair, where he knew was out of sight. He could still hear perfectly however.

"Once again, thank you so much Minerva," his father was saying in a very exasperated voice, "There's been so much pressure at the ministry about getting a suitable Head of Hogwarts -" "It's no trouble at all Potter, really," he heard Professor McGonagall reply, "I'm happy to help. the things I've read in the Prophet..."

"Don't worry about the Prophet," his father said, "They don't know what they're talking about, they're fifty percent rumor and fifty percent bold face lie."

"I hope so" she replied somberly. "Though I do not agree with your decision on our staff changes," she added.

He could not see it, but Albus felt that his father had tensed up the tiniest bit. "I know," he said, "And understandably so, what with my- my previous recommendations. But I assure you he is trustworthy..."

"Then I trust you Potter," McGonagall replied. "I must be leaving now. Thank Ginevra for the fantastic dinner."

"Any time," he said, and Albus heard the door close.

He saw his father turn to glance up the stairs, but he was already in his room before he could see anything else. He could put off showering for a bit longer, he thought. He still had two letters to write, after all.

Chapter 3: James The Great

Compared to his fantastic birthday and the highly informative day after it, Albus thought that the rest of his summer was turning out to be quite boring. He remembered a time during the previous year when he seriously considered not returning to Hogwarts, but now he found himself absolutely ecstatic at the thought of returning to the castle. Whatever he may have told himself, Hogwarts was just as much a home as the one he was in now.

Thankfully, his last few weeks of the summer holiday were better than they could have been. Scorpius had asked his parents if he could stay until the return to Hogwarts, and they had let him, provided he that he went to Diagon Alley and got the necessary things and that it in no way imposed on the Potters. This proved to be a fantastic blessing, as having a friend in the mansion other than his two siblings was helping the days go by quicker.

Albus spent the next few days lounging around the house, playing Quidditch out in the field by the mansion, and sleeping as much as humanly possible. He had written back to both of his friends, but had not received word from them yet, making a planned trip to Diagon Alley near impossible. Word finally came two weeks before they were set to return to Hogwarts.

Albus and Scorpius were sitting in the living room, playing a very intense game of wizards chess by the fireplace as Rose and Lily watched, curled up in comfortable armchairs.

"Dammit!" Scorpius moaned as Albus moved his bishop across the board, taking the opposing

queen.

"Don't sweat it mate," Albus told him, though he was trying hard not to smile, "I didn't even see that move until you made yours."

Scorpius frowned and made to move his knight.

"That puts you in check," Albus told him.

Scorpius frowned again and made to move his rook next.

"So does that," Albus said, "From my bishop."

Scorpius grabbed at his hair. "The only move I can make will put me in mate next turn!" he exclaimed.

Albus shrugged, still barely hiding his smile. "Sorry," he said.

"I forfeit," he said hopelessly. "Rematch," he added, re-setting the pieces.

Albus smiled as he began putting pieces back on the board. Scorpius was very book smart, as well as one of the most talented wizards in their year. In over one hundred games however, he had failed to beat Albus at chess even once. Albus wasn't surprised though, he was well known in his family as a good player. He had even managed to stalemate his Uncle Ron once, an impressive feat considering that his uncle was usually regarded as the best in the family.

He was right about to make the first move when his mother entered the room. "Al," she said.

"Trying to concentrate Mum," he said casually as he moved one of his pawns up two spaces.

"Okay, but you have a letter," she said with a sigh.

Albus looked up from the game at once. "From who?" he asked.

"No idea," she replied, handing him the letter. "It's barely legible though, it took me an hour to make out who it was to. I thought it may have been one of James' girlfriends."

Albus took the letter slightly crestfallen, though he couldn't quite explain why. He was eager to hear from Morrison, after all.

He tore the letter open and used the light of the fire to read it, Scorpius reading it over his shoulder as well.

Al,

So our new Headmistress is actually our old Headmistress? Weird. Oh well, I hope she's nice. Can't be too bad if she's stopping by your house for dinner I guess.

Did you get your letter from Hogwarts yet? I did, I went to Diagon Alley yesterday with my mom. Sorry I didn't get to meet up with you, but I'll be seeing you soon anyway. Interesting thing though, if you did get your letter, did you notice that there wasn't a new Defense Against the Dark Arts book in there? I reckon Handit may have just given up on us. I didn't see a new Potions book either, so I guess we might not even have that class. That's cool with me though, I'll need the time. If I can get my hands on a decent broom, I might try out for the team this year.

Feel free to write back, but I don't know when I'll be able to return it. I'm spending the last week of the holidays in America with my dad, but I'll definitely see you on the first. Tell Scorpius and Rose (and Mirra, if you're writing to her) that I said hi.

Later-

Morrison

Albus folded the letter up, disappointed. "Damn," he muttered. He had wanted to go to Diagon Alley with his friend. Scorpius had already resumed sitting and had made his move.

"If you don't move soon, that counts as a win for me," he said.

Albus didn't get his letter until the week before term was to start, which was rather unfortunate, as this meant that he had put to up with Rose loudly complaining about how she couldn't meet her friends in Diagon Alley ("We can't go until we know what we're going for!" his Aunt Hermione had told her). One benefit however was that one quick scan of the course list confirmed what Morrison had wrote. Two books were indeed missing.

"Two new ones though" Scorpius said as they read over their letters in Albus' bedroom the morning that they got them. "*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*," he read off, frowning. "Blimey I've already read that" he said.

"Well I doubt you've read the other one," Albus told him, glancing up and down his own list.

"*How Muggles Manage, by Norman Parr*." He too gave a frown. "That sounds

fascinating," he said sarcastically.

Albus and Scorpius were both taking Muggle Studies this year as an elective, in addition to Care For Magical Creatures. This had seemed like a good idea at the time, as they had both wanted something easy, but if the class ended up being as boring as the course book sounded, it may end up joining History of Magic as a "Hangman period".

"What do you reckon Morrison got for Divination?" Albus asked.

Scorpius shrugged, still glancing at his list. "Probably something lame like *Twelve Easy Steps to Predicting the Weather*."

Albus laughed and was right about to comment how this was the second year in a row that they had been assigned a new Transfiguration book when he was cut off by a loud noise.

Someone had screamed. A terrified, ear-splitting shriek that seemed to reverberate all throughout the room. It was the sound of someone being tortured, Albus was sure of it. He recognized the voice instantly.

"James!" he shouted, and both he and Scorpius immediately exited the room and ran through the hall. When they reached the room at the end James was still screaming.

Albus knocked the door open so hard that it slammed shut again the second that Scorpius had managed to slide through as well. James was sitting on his bed, shaking horribly, an envelope torn open beside him.

"Are you okay?" Albus asked him, panting from how fast he had ran. James didn't answer him, but continued to shake slowly. Albus saw that he was holding something in his hand. "James?" he asked.

This time James slowly turned around. He had a look of pure horror on his face, and Albus saw, to his own immense horror, that James was holding a small crimson and gold badge in his hand.

"No way," he said. He was so distracted that he barely heard the thundering of footsteps behind him. Scorpius pushed them both out of the way as Uncle Ron kicked the door open, his wand pointing around the room.

"What happened? What happened, are you boys okay?" he asked. Then he too saw the badge in James' hand. He gave a yell of terror awfully similar to the one that Albus had just heard. More thundering footsteps, and then both Albus' father and mother had entered the room, both of them looking exhausted from running. Albus was now pushed to the side of the room; it was becoming extremely cramped.

"What's going on?" his father asked. James held up the badge, still at a loss for words. His father stared at it, mouth open, before speaking. "Prefect?" he said. "You made...prefect?"

"I... I guess" James said, still examining the badge in his hand. He looked repulsed by it, and Albus knew why. James hated authority.

"A mistake," Uncle Ron said suddenly. "Some poor kid doesn't have his badge..."

"It is not a mistake Ronald!" Albus' mother shot out quickly, and Albus saw that she was ecstatic.

The room became even more cramped as Lily, Rose and Hugo entered. "What's going on?" Rose asked, "Who screamed?"

She was ignored however, as the next moment Albus watched his mother swoop down upon James and give him a swift kiss on the cheek. "Baby, I'm so proud of you!" she said, and she truly looked it.

"I don't...I don't want..." James began, but his mother cut him off.

"Well what do you want?" she asked, smiling.

"I...what do I want?" he asked, still apparently disgusted at the badge in his hand.

"As a gift! For making prefect!"

"I don't...I don't want anything, I don't want to be -"

But now Rose had spoken again. "James you made prefect!" she asked excitedly, "That's fantastic, you have so much power now!"

Albus could have hit her. It was bad enough that James was very good looking, quite a talented wizard, and uncommonly good at Quidditch. Albus thought that telling him how much power he had might cause his head to explode from his ego, but alas, it survived. Seconds later, he was chatting excitedly about his new badge as his mother crooned over him.

"Oh, and a new broom?" he said to his mother. "Not a Lightnings Edge, like Al's, it's way too

expensive. But the Firebolt Version 3.0 is out!" he added gleefully.

"Well we'll have to go to Diagon Alley this week and get it," his mother said, "I suppose it's all for the best too, we have to go and get new books and robes anyway..."

James was not listening however, but was now staring at the badge in his hands with a wide grin on his face. It seemed that getting gifts and learning how much power he possessed had changed his mind extremely fast.

"Who on Earth would make James a prefect?" Scorpius muttered to Albus.

Albus shrugged, just as perplexed. "I...it's the Headmaster isn't it? Or the new Headmistress?"

He tugged on his fathers robes and muttered a similar question to him. "Why did Professor McGonagall make James a prefect?" he asked. "Is she insane?"

"I don't...maybe" he admitted. "I guess that maybe she thinks it will help him mature?" his father added.

Albus stared at his brother, who was now jumping on his bed, his shiny new prefects badge attached to his T-shirt. "Bow to King James!" he announced to the room. "And your lives will be spared!"

Albus rolled his eyes and looked up at his father. "Smart plan," he said.

After much complaining, several heated and hectic arguments, and one rude hand gesture (which James effectively hid before anyone could get a good look at it) it was agreed that James' prefect party was to be postponed until the day before their return to Hogwarts. The day after he had received the badge was instead used to go to Diagon Alley.

Albus found himself more excited than usual as he lined up next to the fireplace. He always enjoyed traveling by floo, but what he was really looking forward to was exploring Diagon Alley. If his hunch was correct, his father was going to be too preoccupied with shopping for Lily to care much where he went anyway.

"Okay, you know what to do, right Lils?" his father said to her as he poured glittery green powder in her hands. "Just say, clearly, Dia-"

"I know what to do dad" she said, tossing her red hair out of face, making her look more like her mother than ever before.

"Okay, Uncle Ron is waiting on the other side. Tuck your elbows in. And close your eyes. And hold your breath, the soot-"

"Dad!" she said firmly, before throwing the glittering powder in the fire. It immediately turned an emerald green. "Diagon Alley!" she announced clearly, before stepping into the fire and vanishing.

"Okay Rose, you next."

Rose threw a pinch of powder into the fire next, then proceeded to do the same as Lily.

"Okay, Hugo?" Albus' father asked the young boy with the same flaming red hair as his sisters. "You know what to do?"

Hugo nodded silently, threw a pinch of powder into the fire, announced his destination and left.

Albus watched as his father peered into the bag. "Just enough for four more," he said happily. "Scorpius, you next, then Albus, then James. I'll go last."

They did as they were told, and five minutes later Albus found himself in the Leaky Cauldron, brushing soot off of his robes happily.

"I can't believe you like that," Scorpius said to him, looking as though he was trying his hardest not to vomit.

"Okay, here's how this is going to work," Albus heard his father say as they all gathered around him in the dusty pub. Albus noticed that everyone, including Hannah the landlady, was paying attention as well. "I have to go in to work at three, and Ron doesn't have to be until four. So at three thirty, you'll all meet back here with him, understood?"

They all nodded their heads and followed him out of the pub, stopping every few seconds so that he could shake hands with people who Albus didn't recognize.

"Your dad always shake everyone's hand?" Scorpius asked him as a beautiful witch walked passed them, giddy at having shaken hands with the famous Harry Potter.

"Not always," Albus quickly lied. They followed his father all the way through the pub and towards a giant brick wall. Albus exchanged a quick smile with his brother. The last time they had went to Diagon Alley their father had forgotten which brick revealed the entrance.

Albus watched as father pulled out his wand and tapped a brick with confidence. Nothing happened. He sighed. "I knew I should have written it down," he said. He turned to the children. "Does anyone -"

"Three up, two across, three times" Albus said. He had remembered it from the year before. With a small jolt of nostalgia, he realized that the person that had said it was now in Azkaban. His father tapped the correct brick and the archway to the long and cobbled street was revealed. It was truly a thing of beauty, all of the shops and the noise of buyers bustling and haggling.

His father and uncle led them through the crowded street, and only stopped when they were outside of the book store, Flourish and Blotts. He turned to face them all again. "Okay, me and Uncle Ron are taking Lily and Hugo in to get all of their new books. Do you guys need anything new?"

"Some book about muggles," Scorpius said.

"And 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them' for me," Albus said.

"Well I need a book for Arithmancy as well," Rose said.

"Okay," his father sighed. "Well why don't you kids shop around here for all of that. We're going to take a bit longer, so much stuff to get. Afterwards just...hang around for me. You all have money right?"

They all nodded and held up bags of gold, Scorpius' having been sent by parents.

"Okay," his father said. "Tell me when you're all done."

"What about me!" James spoke up.

"Go to Quality Quidditch Supplies, I'll meet you in there later," his father said.

They spent nearly fifteen minutes in the crowded book store. Albus and Scorpius found their books okay (having taken the Muggle Studies books from a pile that looked untouched), but Rose's was far more difficult. They eventually had to ask one of the store assistants.

"I'm sorry," the teenage looking blonde wizard said. "We sold out of 'The Magic of Numbers' earlier today."

"Is there anywhere else where they sell it?" Rose asked him pleadingly.

"There's an Obscurus Bookshop that might have a few in stock," he said.

"Where's that?" Albus asked him.

"Just a couple shops down from Madam Malkins," he said.

They thanked him and went to meet Albus' father, who was talking to the cashier casually. It appeared as though it was Uncle Ron's turn to shop.

"Dad," Albus said, tugging on his robes.

He spun around. "All finished?" he asked.

"Kind of," Albus said, "Rose needs to go somewhere else to get a book. Obscurus Bookshop?"

His father frowned. "That's a bit far," he said, "And I have to meet James soon, he'll have a fit if he doesn't get that broom today."

He looked at all three of them as though sizing them up. He rubbed his chin a couple of times before speaking. Albus waited for the okay to be allowed to wander on his own...

"Okay, you three go to this bookshop," his father said. "Then get whatever else you need and meet me at the Quidditch Shop, unless we're about to go, then just head to the Leaky Cauldron okay?"

"Got it!" all three of them said.

His father continued staring at them however. "Scorpius, keep Al out of trouble," he said.

Albus frowned and saw Scorpius grin from beside him. "And Rose, keep Scorpius out of trouble, would you?" he added.

"I will," she said determinedly, as if she was agreeing to take on some sort of mission.

They left Flourish and Blotts seconds later, and as Albus could have predicted, an argument broke out almost immediately.

"Look we'll just dip into Scribbulus' Ink Shop first," Scorpius said. "I need new ink..."

"Absolutely not!" Rose said furiously. "We were told to go to Obscurus Bookshop first, so that's where we're going!"

"You're the only one who needs something!" Scorpius fired back, so distracted that he bumped into a witch who was complaining about the price of dragon liver, "And I need to pop in to Twilfit and Tattings too, I need a new set of robes."

"Twilfit and Tattings?" she spat out, "That's near Knockturn Alley!"

"So what?" Scorpius said, "There's nothing scary about Knockturn Alley, I've been in there loads!"

Rose looked as though she were going to explode out the outrageousness of his statement. Feeling as though he had better interject before it got out of hand, Albus quickly shouted out his own suggestion.

"Why don't...we split up?" he said hesitantly, desperate to end the argument that he was quite literally in the middle of.

"No!" Rose shouted loud enough for the entire street to hear her, and indeed, several people passing by glanced at them. "It's my job to look after you," she said.

Albus noted that it sounded even more degrading coming directly from her. "You're not looking after us," he said through clenched teeth. "You're just keeping us out of trouble."

"Exactly," Scorpius said, "And going to an ink shop and shopping for robes is hardly looking for trouble."

"We're staying together and going to Obscurus Bookshop first," Rose said icily, "And that's final."

For reasons unknown to even himself, this effectively ended both he and Scorpius' campaigns for freedom. Ten minutes later they were waiting outside of a dingy little blue bookshop while Rose shopped around inside.

"This sucks," Scorpius said, leaning against the wall.

"Yeah I know," Albus said. He had been so excited earlier in the morning, but that was all gone now. It seemed that the thrill of wandering Diagon Alley without parents left you once you were old enough to do it. "Still, we have Hogsmeade this year, don't we?" he said, trying to keep optimistic.

Third year students were permitted to leave the castle on certain days to visit the village of Hogsmeade, which had the distinct honour of being the only all wizarding village in all of Britain. Albus had heard great things about it from his brother and Teddy, especially about The Three Broomsticks pub and Honeydukes Sweetshop.

"True, true," Scorpius said, "Which reminds me, I have to get that permission slip signed. I'll send it to dad when we get back. What is taking her so long?" he added, "We've been out here for an hour!"

It was more like fifteen minutes, Albus thought, but he knew why Scorpius was frustrated enough to exaggerate. It was only one book, after all.

"I'm going in there to see what she's up to," Scorpius said a moment later, and Albus watched him enter the blue shop.

He leaned against the shop and sighed heavily. Crowds of people were bustling passed him, mothers holding on to their childrens hands so as not to let them stray, teenagers like himself poking their heads into random shops. He was just eyeing an elderly couple that looked quite confused as to their whereabouts when something else caught his attention.

A young boy of about five was being pulled away roughly by his mother. He had wandered into a dark alley and had been staring at something at the wall. It looked like a wanted poster of some sort. Albus quickly walked towards it, and seconds later found himself staring at a face that he knew very well.

It was indeed a wanted poster, and the person on it was the former Headmaster of Hogwarts. Reginald Ares. He looked in the poster the same as he did when Albus had last seen him.

Short black hair, beady grey eyes, a toothbrush mustache, and a look of utter boredom on his face. Albus read the caption beneath him with interest.

WANTED

Name: Reginald Ares

Reward : 800 Galleons

Wanted for : Endangering Minors, Being An Accessory To Murder, Thievery Of Ministry Property, etc.

Caution: Is Considered Highly Dangerous. DO NOT APPROACH If Seen. Report Any Sightings To Ministry Officials Immediately If Seen.

Albus skimmed over the poster and cringed at every word. Highly dangerous was quite correct, though now that he thought about it, he hadn't actually seen Ares hurt anyone in the Forest the previous year. Most of that could be attributed to Darvy.

As if on cue, his eyes slid a couple of feet to the left and Albus saw another wanted poster. He ignored the poster of Ares and eyed the picture of Darvy instead.

The first thing that Albus thought of was that it would be impossible to know that Darvy and Ares were brothers (or half brothers anyway) by looking at them. Darvys hair was long and blonde, frizzy at the sides, and generally just untidy. His eyes were bigger, almost bulging,

and they were a shocking blue that made him look nothing short of crazy. The biggest difference in their appearance however appeared to be their demeanors. Whereas Ares seemed indifferent in his picture, Darvy seemed like he was enjoying the attention. His picture kept grinning and winking, and seemed to be doing it's best to stay straight and not slouch off to the sides.

He saw that the price for Darvy was 600 galleons, as opposed to his brothers 800. Before he could read any further however, he heard his name being called.

"Al!" someone was shouting. He turned around from the poster and saw that Scorpius was at the edge of the alley, beckoning for him.

He took one more glance at the posters and hurried towards him. "What were you looking at?" Scorpius asked, peering around him to get a good look.

"Nothing," Albus said a little too fast. He couldn't quite explain why, but the posters had unsettled him. "Where's Rose?" he asked, looking around for her.

Scorpius sneered and pointed. Albus saw her in the distance, walking in between two people who he disliked very much. Charles Eckley and Donovan Hornsbrook both looked as though they had grown several inches during the summer, and Hornsbrooks' arms looked so thick that he might have been able to knock over trees.

"What?" Albus said. "What are they doing here, I thought they came here weeks ago!"

"I guess that they didn't get their letters until late either," Scorpius said, glaring at them with malice. It appeared as though Hornsbrook had just said something very funny, as Rose was tossing her red hair back with laughter.

"Did she seriously ditch us?" Albus asked him. "After all that talk about staying together?" Scorpius nodded. "They came up to us right after we left the shop. She said she was going to go and get ice cream with them, and to tell you that me and you have to meet her at the Quidditch shop in an hour."

"She said we had to stay together!" Albus spat angrily, "To 'look after us'," he mocked.

Scorpius shrugged. "I guess she reckons we did a lot of growing up in the last ten minutes. We can look after ourselves now."

Albus bit his lip furiously. "Whatever," he said, "Did they say anything to you?"

Scorpius shook his head. "Hornsbrook gave me a stare like he wanted to, but just asked her if she wanted to hang with them and left. He wasn't here to start anything."

I wonder why," Albus smirked, though he had a perfectly good idea. Eckley and Hornsbrook may be Gryffindors like James, but his brother wasn't giving them any special treatment. Albus knew for a fact that when James had learned about Hornsbrook punching Albus the previous year that he had pummeled him into the ground.

"Whatever, let's just ignore them," Scorpius said. "Ready to go to Scribbulus'?" he asked.

All in all, Albus didn't have a very good time at Diagon Alley, a mood that carried over for the remainder of the summer break. It appeared as though he was in the minority however. Lily was absolutely euphoric at having finally gotten all of her books (as well as a custom made wand by a wandmaker that their father new) and rushed off to her room immediately to begin reading. James was equally as happy. He boasted loudly about his new broom and told anyone foolish enough to engage him in conversation about how the Wimbourne Wasps had placed an order to get the exact same broom for the upcoming season.

His brothers new cockiness didn't sit very well with Albus. He was used to the constant boasting, of course, but the sad truth was that James could now officially back it up - he did have more power than the average student.

To make matters worse, the day of James' prefect party (and the day before they left to return to Hogwarts), Albus was in charge of setting up the decorations.

"This is stupid," he said irritably as he hung a large banner from the ceiling bearing the words "Congratulations James!". As he wasn't allowed to use magic, he had to stand on a chair and fiddle around with Spellotape.

"A little crooked," Scorpius said from ground level, turning his head sideways.

"Who's side are you on?" Albus said coolly, though at that moment there was a knock at the door.

"Albus could you get that!" his mother called in from the kitchen, where she was busy making yet another large feast. Albus had noted earlier in the day that it would be his third of the month - if he didn't watch himself he would end up looking like Uncle Dudley.

Albus sighed. How did she expect him to get the door while decorating at the same time?

"I got it mate," Scorpius said, and he left to get the door. Seconds later Uncle George walked

in with his two children, Fred and Roxanne. Fred, like Lily and Hugo, would also be starting Hogwarts the next day.

"Need help Al?" his Uncle George said.

"Yeah thanks. Is this straight?" he asked.

Uncle George gave his wand a casual wave. "It is now," he grinned.

Albus was about to thank him again when there was another loud knock.

"I'm on it," Scorpius said before Albus had even asked. He returned seconds later followed by Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey, both who greeted him before entering the kitchen

"Blimey, how many people are coming?" Scorpius asked, taking a seat in one of the comfortable sitting room chairs.

"No idea," Albus said honestly.

By the time the rest of the guests had arrived, Albus felt that even if he did he wouldn't have been able to count that high anyway. The entire Weasley family had shown up (grandad Arthur arriving last, having accidentally apparated several hundred yards away), as had the Scamanders, the Minister of Magic himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt, several other people whom his father worked with that Albus had never met, and even Mundungus Fletcher, an old friend of the family who Albus had only met two or three times. Indeed, more people had been invited to James' prefect party than Albus' birthday party weeks prior.

People seemed overjoyed at the thought of James being a prefect, but as with most other feasts, the conversation still ended up divided throughout the party. Albus spent most of the time near Uncle Ron, who along with Uncle Charlie was recounting various anecdotes for the younger children.

Once the anecdotes started to grow stale Albus moved around a little more, finally finding himself sitting at the same table as Scorpius and James.

"Way I see it, I'll become Quidditch captain next year," James was boasting, "That'll be two out of three. Then Head Boy my final year."

"I'd certainly hope so," Uncle Percy interjected, he seemed to have been eavesdropping the entire time. "Prefect is a valuable step, but yes, Head Boy is the real goal. You'll be hard pressed to find an employer who isn't impressed with that."

Both Albus and Scorpius rolled their eyes while James pretended to be interested in what Uncle Percy was saying. Moments later his father had came and sit down with them.

"You boys alright?" he asked them, pulling a chair out and taking his seat.

They both nodded. "Dad, were you a prefect?" Albus asked.

His father laughed and ran his hands through his untidy hair. "Please, with the trouble I got into? And my grades weren't exactly top of the class either. Your Uncle Ron got prefect though."

"Which confuses me to this day," came another voice, as Aunt Hermione joined them at the table, smiling. "I don't recall him giving a single detention, or even so much as a reprimand. I had to be the bad one."

"You were a prefect too?" Scorpius asked her.

"Oh yes. And Head Girl as well" Aunt Hermione answered him.

Blimey that reminds me" James suddenly spoke up, Uncle Percy having went to get more food. "I wonder who my partner is. I hope it's Madeline Waft. She's got a nice a pair on her."

Aunt Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "Erm...pair of braces that is," James added quickly, though Albus saw him exchange a wink with his father.

The party ended with a gigantic cake being served (a cake that Albus knew was bigger than his birthday cake, though he didn't mention this out loud) and everyone leaving after congratulating James one more time. Exhausted from the day, Albus retreated to his room quietly, looking at the banner one more time and seeing that somebody (he could only guess who) had changed it so that it now said "Congratulations James The Great!".

He collapsed on his bed and pulled the covers over himself. Tomorrow he would be going back to Hogwarts. He glanced over at his fully packed trunk and smiled. He was right about to close his eyes when he heard a knock.

"Come in" he said.

It was his father. Albus watched as he approached him and sat on the side of his bed. "Tired?" he asked.

"Yeah," Albus said truthfully. "What's up?"

His father shrugged. "I just wanted to see you now, because I won't be taking you to Kings Cross tomorrow. Have work early. Got all of your things packed?"

Albus nodded. "Yup, all ready to go back," he said.
His father smiled. "Excited?" he asked.
Albus nodded his head once more. "Ready for another year," he said.
"Good," his father replied, still grinning, "You had a rough year last year. But I promise, this one's going to be normal. Your most normal year yet, actually."
Albus smiled as his father patted his leg. He thought for a moment about telling his father about the wanted posters that he had seen, but decided against it. There was no point in worrying about it. If his father told him that this was going to be his most normal year yet, then he believed him.
His father bade him goodnight and left, and seconds later Albus had fallen asleep.

Chapter 4: A Very Weasley Sorting

Albus awoke the following morning to the sound of yelling. A lot of it. Hectic mornings were quite common at the Potter household, especially on the days that they were supposed to return to Hogwarts, but there was simply no getting around the fact that this particular morning was a hard one.

"Can't believe you - a prefect and you forgot to pack everything! How did you forget to pack everything!"

"I was up all night! The party -"

"Up all night and you didn't even pack your books? Was that supposed to be an excuse?"

Albus rolled over and threw a pillow over his ears. His brother and mother had been fighting for twenty minutes. He was right about to close his eyes again, maybe get an extra moment of sleep, when his blanket was torn off of him.

"Get up mate, you'll be next!"

Albus rolled over and saw Scorpius standing over his bed, completely dressed and clean.

"What time is it?" Albus asked.

"Nine thirty. We have to be there in an hour!"

Albus jumped out of bed so fast that he nearly knocked his friend to the ground. He hastily pulled on a random pair of jeans that he found on the floor. "Why didn't anyone wake me?"

"James forgot to pack some things" Scorpius said. "Everyone was worried about him."

"Forgot what things?" Albus asked, running his hands through his untamed hair.

"Everything" Scorpius said grimly.

They exited his room and saw that people were running up and down the stairs without so much as wishing a good morning. He could still hear his mother yelling from the floor below.

"No clothes either! When did you expect to do this? What did you want to spend your first day naked!"

"I thought about it..." he heard his brother retort.

Albus dodged Rose as she ran past him and nearly jumped down the stairs. He saw that she, like Scorpius, was fully dressed and ready to go.

"How many people stayed here?" Albus asked his friend.

"Just your Uncle Ron, but he and your dad and your aunt are all already at work. Your mum is taking us all."

"Aunt Ginny the ministry people are here!" he heard Rose yell.

Albus walked down the stairs and heard his mother mutter a word that he himself was most certainly not allowed to use.

"Tell them to wait a couple of minutes!" she hollered.

Albus entered the dining room and saw his brother and mother hastily throwing clothes into a bag. James' near empty trunk was right next to them. His mother's hair was tangled and she was looking quite frustrated. "Okay I'll do this," she told James icily. "You - you go and get your books and your other things."

James began muttering incoherently, but still left without so much as sparing Albus a glance. His mother looked up at him next. "Please tell me you're ready" she said hopelessly.

"Packed everything two days ago," Albus said, and he smiled at the look of relief on her face.

The ministry workers ended up waiting outside so long that they were eventually invited into the Mansion, and by the time that James was fully dressed and packed, they had an hour to reach Kings Cross station. They managed to march out of the mansion in an orderly fashion, but it took several minutes for them to adjust to the size of the single ministry car that they

had been sent.

"Okay, Albus, you first, than Scorpius, than Rose, than Hugo, than James," Albus' mother said as the Ministry workers (two of them, both with short black hair and sunglasses) levitated their trunks into the back of the magically expanded car. "Lily, sit up here with me and the nice ministry men."

"Why do I have to sit up -"

"Lily!"

Once they were all seated comfortably (or as comfortably as they could manage) the driver turned to Albus' mother. "Do we have permission to speed things up?" he said coolly. She bit her lip then looked back at all of the children. "Yes please," she said. The driver hit a small red button near the steering wheel, and Albus watched as they sped at almost one hundred miles an hour, swerving through busy streets and barely passing cars that seemed oblivious to what was going on.

"So," Scorpius said at a weak attempt to start conversation, "You and Lily are both starting at Hogwarts this year, huh?" he said to Hugo, "You must be excited."

Hugo looked at him. "We are. And so is Fred and Molly and Lucy."

Scorpius was about to say something else when the car turned sharply, making them all slide into one another. This became more and more frequent as the trip progressed, and by the time that they had arrived at Kings Cross station, Albus thought that his skull may have been cracked banging it against Scorpius' so many times. All in all, they were more than pleased to finally exit the car.

"Did we make good time?" Albus mother asked one of the ministry men as he pulled the trunks out of the back of the car, surprising many onlookers who simply couldn't understand how it had all fit.

The ministry worker checked his watch. "Half past ten" he said plainly, not even bothering to acknowledge that he gotten them there on time.

"See?" James said to his mother coolly, "And you were so worried about being late..."

She ignored him and instead ushered them all towards the barrier that would lead them to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. "Okay, James, why don't you go first?"

James casually leaned up against the barrier and began whistling. A second later, he had slid through.

"Rose, you next," Albus' mother said.

Albus ended up going through the barrier last, and entered the family circle just as his mother was giving further directions.

"Hugo, are you sure you're okay?" she was saying to the red headed boy.

"Yeah," he said.

"Are you sure? Not nervous at all? If you have any trouble you know you can go to my boys, they'll both help -"

"He's fine Aunt Ginny" Rose said, throwing her arm around her younger brother, "I'll look after him."

"And Lily?" she said, a little quietly.

Rose nodded, though Albus' mother still looked a tad bit nervous. Albus couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for her. This was going to be the first time that all three of her children were going to be away. He was snapped from his thoughts when she turned to him, however.

"And you're okay too?" she said.

"I'm fine mum," he said, "But I wanted to go meet with some people before we board."

She smiled at him. "Okay. Have a good term. Look after Lily. I've already got Rose on the case but the more the better..."

"I will mum," he said, and he gave her a swift kiss on the cheek before he and Scorpius left the rest of the family.

"So where do you reckon Morrison is?" Albus asked his best friend as they pushed their trunks around the station, greeting people that they knew.

"No idea," Scorpius said, waving to Dante Haug and Bartleby Bing, also from Slytherin house.

"The train maybe? It's quarter past already..."

"Okay, you check the train, I'll look around for a bit," Albus said. Scorpius gave him a clap on the back and left, leaving Albus to wander the station for his friend.

He spent the next five minutes asking around for Morrison, though no one seemed to have seen him. He was just walking back to the train when he finally caught a glimpse of his friend. His jaw dropped.

Morrison was leaning against a stone column near the train, grinning at him. He looked wildly different. His hair had been cut the shortest it had ever been, and his wide smile only helped to show off his fully grown mustache. Furthermore, he looked like he had grown more than a foot. He was slightly taller than James, and indeed, the same height as many of the older students.

Albus ran up to him as fast he could while still pushing his trunk. "No way," he said when he was in talking distance, "No. Way."

"How's it going Al?" Morrison said, and his voice was hysterically deep. Albus recalled how the previous year his voice had occasionally cracked, but he had finally grown into it. He sounded like a bullfrog.

Albus slapped his friend's hand (he was too much taller than him to give an actual high five) and then a brief hug.

"You...you grew!" Albus stammered out, shaking with laughter.

Morrison returned the grin. "Second summer in a row," he said, "One day I stood up on my bed, and my head just hit the wall. It was bizarre. And that's not the only thing that grew," he added, pointing at his full mustache. A Ravenclaw girl that was standing a few feet away heard him and, after not seeing what part of his body he had indicated, shrieked and walked away. Albus chuckled. "What time did you get here?" he asked.

Morrison shrugged. "Half an hour ago. I walked around for a bit. People don't recognize me now."

"I can't blame them," Albus grinned.

"Where's Scorpius?" Morrison asked, looking directly over Albus' head.

"He already got on the train," he replied. "But that reminds me, have you seen Mirra?"

He was quite eager to see one of his best friends, she had not written back from his last letter. Morrison glanced over his shoulder and searched for a couple of seconds before smiling.

"There she is!" he exclaimed, pointing at a girl who was right about to board the train. "Hey Mirra!" he yelled.

Albus watched as she turned, scanned the crowd of bustling students, and waved to them. Albus' jaw dropped for the second time.

She looked older, much older than she had when he had last seen her. Her hair was shorter now, a few inches off of her shoulders, though it was as raven black as ever. She had grown a few inches and her complexion had changed as well. Her skin was still pale and milky, but it had some strange glow to it now; she looked healthier than ever. And...dare he think it...more curvaceous as well?

She motioned for them to come and meet her, though it was several moments before Albus even moved. He ended up running to catch up with Morrison, nearly tripping over his own trunk as he did so.

She gave them both a large hug when she saw them, and Albus thought he smelled some sort of flowery scent in her hair. Not that he smelled her hair, of course.

"How was your summer?" she asked them both.

"Fine," Morrison replied casually.

Albus took a few more seconds to answer, but he eventually got around to it. "It was good," he said, "Yours?" he asked her.

"Fine," she said with a wide grin. "Could you help me with this?" she added, indicating her trunk.

Albus tried lifting it, but felt his back crack from the strain. It was awfully heavy. He went red with embarrassment, but was thankfully saved by Morrison, who picked her trunk up with relative ease and moved it onto the train. He then proceeded to do the same with his own and Albus'.

"Scorpius should be around here somewhere," Albus said, pushing his trunk through the train. He finally found his friend sitting in a compartment in the middle of the train all by himself, looking very lonely indeed.

"How's it going mate?" Morrison asked him as soon as he entered. Scorpius looked up and gave a wide grin.

"Morrison!" he exclaimed. "You're big!"

Morrison smiled and shook his friend's hand before Mirra gave Scorpius a hug as well. For a moment, it seemed as though all four of them would be sitting together, until Scorpius spoke again.

"Oh by the way Mirra, Rose stopped by. She said if I saw you to tell you that she's all the way

at the end of the train with a couple of your other friends."

Albus noted the bitterness in his friends voice and knew at once who he was referring to. Mirra seemed to pick up on it as well, as she gave the three of them a rather uncomfortable looking glance before saying that wanted to go and see Rose.

"I'll catch up with you guys when we get off the train." she said with a smile, before pushing her trunk all the way down the train, occasionally poking her head in to other compartments. Seconds after she left Morrison slammed the compartment door shut and collapsed into a seat.

"Blimey, she grew up, didn't she?" he said.

"Huh?" Albus asked quickly.

"She's as tall as you now!" Morrison said, "Maybe an inch off, actually..."

"Oh...oh yeah" Albus said, exhaling slightly.

Morrison and Scorpius immediately began catching up with each other about what had happened over the summer, but Albus sat in silence, his mind racing. What had happened back there with Mirra? He had always thought that she was pretty, but now he had actually found himself attracted *to her*. Had he smelled her hair?

He was cut off from his thoughts by Morrison however, who had dove into his trunk and pulled out a thin hardback book. "*The Secrets of the Future*" he read aloud, "I've already started reading it, I reckon I'm going to ace Divination. This stuff seems like absolute cake." Scorpius took the book from his friend and weighed it in his hands. "It's awfully light isn't it?" He then flipped through the pages, frowning as he did so. "And a lot of it's just pictures. This looks boring mate."

Morrison snatched the book back. "Of course it's boring, it's a book! Books are boring! No, it's the payoff that counts. Can you imagine knowing the future? I'll never have to worry about an unexpected assignment again!"

"I don't think it works like that..." Albus said, speaking up for the first time.

The topic of their extra classes carried them through most of the train ride, and it wasn't long before Hogsmeade was mentioned either. In fact, Morrison was just talking about he wanted to visit the Shrieking Shack when the compartment door slid open.

Albus, who had been expecting the elderly witch who pushed the trolley, immediately jumped to his feet and began rifling through his pockets for gold. It was not the witch however, and the next second he saw that James had strutted in, fully dressed in his robes, with his prefect badge prominently pinned right above where his heart would be.

"You lot okay in here?" he asked.

"Whose badge did you take?" Morrison asked, and he truly did look curious.

James looked highly offended however. "What do you mean 'Whose did I take?'. I'm a prefect pal, so unless you want a detention you can watch the sarcasm."

He then took a seat right next to Albus and stretched out. "I already checked in on the kids," he said.

"How's Lily?" Albus asked.

"Sitting with Fred, Hugo, Molly, and Lucy. I told them taking up the entire compartment didn't give them much room to make friends, but they seemed okay with it. I reckon that they're all just nervous about where they'll be sorted."

Albus took a moment to let those words sink in. He had not actually given much thought as to where his cousins would be sorted. Would they all go to Gryffindor? Or would one of them, at least one of them, choose something different as he had done?

"So what's it like being prefect?" Morrison asked James. "Dock any points yet?"

"I can only take points from my own house" James replied, stretching in his seat. "So there's really no point. I gave some Ravenclaw kid lines though. You get taller by the way?" he added, sizing Morrison up and down and realizing that he was bigger.

"A bit," Morrison said, smiling. "Who's your partner?"

James groaned. "Melissa Harkhill. She's nice enough, but she's not exactly a looker."

He was right about to continue when the trolley lady actually did arrive, and after buying a few chocolate frogs, decided it was best to scour the train for more people to assign detentions to.

"I still can't believe he got prefect," Scorpius said after he had made sure that the door was shut and secured. "I mean really, didn't he blow up a toilet one year?"

"Whatever," Morrison said, taking a large bite of a pumpkin pasty, "All this means is that we

got friends in high places".

James' new stature as a prefect carried the conversation through the rest of the train ride, and soon enough they were changing into their robes and departing from the train.

The first thing that Albus heard when he got off the train was a familiar bellow.

"Firs' years! Firs' years this way!"

Albus smiled and glanced over at Hagrid, whose towering figure was intimidating many of the first years who had gathered around him. Indeed, the only kids who didn't seem terrified of him were the four Weasley kids and Lily. Albus had a great deal of respect for Hagrid. Not only was he extremely nice and helpful, but he had saved Albus' life in the Forbidden Forest the previous year, something that Albus would never forget.

"Alright Hagrid?" he hollered to the giant, who turned around at once and flashed him the thumbs up.

Albus and his friends made their way towards the carriages, Albus peering into groups of students as they went. Hadn't Mirra said that they would meet when they got off of the train?

"There's a carriage over there," Scorpius said, pointing towards a carriage that was only carrying two people- Dante Haug and Bartleby Bing, the two Slytherins that they had seen earlier.

Albus reluctantly joined them in the carriage, still glancing around at other groups as he did so. He finally saw Mirra in a carriage two ahead of their own. She was sitting with Rose, Eckley, Hornsbrook, and a Hufflepuff girl that Albus was pretty sure was named Anastasia. Frowning slightly, he turned his attention to his housemates and faked a laugh at a joke that Bartleby had just told.

The carriage ride passed by slower than it usually did, and Albus was more than relieved to jump down from it and join his classmates in walking up the stone steps to the castle. He turned around to cast a look at the black lake, hoping to catch a glimpse of red that indicated family, but it came to nothing. The night sky flooded the air, and he couldn't even make out the boats, let alone the people in them.

They entered the brightly lit Great Hall, and after adjusting his eyes to the light, Albus was quite pleased to see that it looked just as beautiful as ever. He took his seat at the Slytherin table in between Morrison and Scorpius, and was happy to see that he was also sitting across from Atticus Sanders, a seventh year Slytherin prefect and the captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

Atticus had been quite cold towards Albus the previous year, when he had gotten himself banned from the final game of the season, but either he had forgotten this or the popularity that Albus had acquired had carried over the summer, because he was greeted rather enthusiastically by the Quidditch captain. "How's it going Al?" he said.

"Not bad. Just ready for another year," he replied as more and more students arrived at the table.

"I've already got a schedule planned for Quidditch practices," Atticus told him. "But we need tryouts first. We've got a few people who graduated last year."

"I'll be there," Albus said with a grin.

Before they could continue the conversation any further, the doors to the Great Hall burst open, and a group of timid looking first years followed Neville into the hall. Now that they were in the brightly lit hall, Albus could clearly see five red heads amidst the sea of children. Albus took the time following to scan the the high table for the teachers. Hagrid was sitting next to Professor Handit, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and he was sitting next to an empty seat that he could only assume belonged to Neville. He was just looking at headmistress McGonagall when a silence overtook the entire hall. Albus knew why. A three legged stool had been placed at the front of the hall, and on it sat the patched and tattered Sorting Hat.

The entirety of the hall waited in silence as the hat remained motionless for several seconds. Then, quite suddenly, the brim of the hat opened and it began singing.

Oh, you're here at Hogwarts, and now your time has come!

To learn and grow whether fast or slow, as well as have some fun!

*You may be wondering what I am
Or pondering what a talking hat may do!
And now I say I'm a Sorting Hat
And 'tis my job to sort each and all of you!*

*Now here at Hogwarts there are four houses
Each one with different traits and preference
And once you're sorted you will find
That the possibilities are all but endless!
Perhaps you are a Gryffindor?
Where dwell the strong and brave?
Or Slytherin may be your calling
Sly and cunning, with a power crave
Or maybe you're for Ravenclaw
Where your sharp wit will lead the way
If you're smart and learn with haste
Your brain will never go astray!
But if you're loyal, and that never wavers
Hufflepuff may be the house to savor
So step on up, so I can see your goals
I can read your minds, your hearts and souls
But heed caution to my song
I sort you here and I've not once been wrong
But in the end - before too long
You - and only you - will know where you belong!*

Everyone in the hall clapped loudly, a few people even whistled. The Sorting Hat bowed to each of the four tables before becoming still once more. Albus watched as Neville pulled a large sheet of parchment out of his robes and cleared his throat loudly.

"When I call your name," he said, "Go to the stool and place the Sorting Hat on your head. Baker, Wendy," he called out.

A short, slightly rotund girl stumbled forward and placed the Hat on her head. Moments later it shouted "GRYFFINDOR!"

The table furthest from his own erupted into cheers. Albus could clearly see one of his brother's friends greet the girl. Across from him was Rose, and two seats down from her Mirra, who was clapping vehemently along with the rest of her house. Albus found that he stared at the back of her head for much longer than was reasonable - two people were sorted without him even knowing it. It wasn't until "Curder, Jackson" was sorted into Slytherin that his concentration was broken.

The pale boy with dark brown hair took a seat a few down from him, and Albus greeted him along with his friends.

"Danderlin, Daniel," Neville called out.

Albus continued his tradition of the last two years and immediately struck up a conversation with Atticus. "The song changed," he said to him.

Atticus leaned over to hear him, the Ravenclaw table was cheering for Daniel. "Say what?" he asked.

"The Sorting hats song" Albus said. "It was the same for the last two years, and you said it was the same before that. Why'd it change now?"

Atticus shrugged. "I guess it changed because of the new head? Or old head actually, if you didn't know. Headmistress McGonagall was here before old Ares," he said, pointing up at her. She was wearing a thin smile and was peering down at the first year students from the high table.

"The Hat ended things a bit off, didn't it?" Scorpius muttered to him.

"Huh?"

"That last bit, about only you know where you belong? Kind of destroys the purpose of sorting doesn't it?"

"I don't know," Albus replied, "I think it's more like it just picks where we start out. Not where we end up you know?"

Before Scorpius could reply the Gryffindor table erupted into cheers, Hugh Morrowitz had just joined them.

Albus tuned in and out of the sorting, waiting for his sisters name to be called. Right when he thought that he was about to fall asleep from boredom he finally heard it.

"Potter, Lily!"

Albus sat up straight, as did every Slytherin and Gryffindor in the room. He knew at once why.

The Potters were a famous family. James went to Gryffindor, and he had went to Slytherin. This was the tie breaker...

Lily marched forward and placed the Hat on her head delicately. The hat fell over her eyes, but Albus could see the look of determination on her face all the same. The entire hall was silent. He crossed his fingers...

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The Gryffindors gave their loudest cheer yet, and Lily walked over to the Gryffindor table with a strut not unlike James'. Albus watched as James gave her a big hug, and then saw Mirra and Rose split up to let her sit in between them. Albus was right about to turn away when he saw Eckley lean over and give his sister a high five.

He felt anger bubble up inside of him. He became forcibly reminded of his first year, when Rose had ignored him and ridiculed him. Was he about to suffer from a similar situation? He buried his head in his arms while the Slytherins around him gave tiny groans. They were in a different boat however. They were upset that they hadn't received a popular student. Albus was officially separated from his sister. He hadn't thought of it all summer, but now that he did, he sincerely wished that his sister had joined him in Slytherin. Now, he was the lone Potter in Slytherin house.

"Cheer up mate," Morrison said, giving him a pat on the back, "You've still got a load of cousins to get sorted don't you? They can't all go to Gryffindor, they wouldn't fit!"

Albus raised his head from his arms and nodded. He could still hope that one of his cousins would join him.

The next few letters passed by agonizingly slow, though Albus noticed that it was strikingly similar to the previous year. Like last year, most students seemed inclined to go to Gryffindor, and the fewest to Slytherin. Albus knew why. To students who had wizarding parents that attended Hogwarts, both house's reputations preceded them.

Finally, a Weasley was called.

"Weasley, Fred!" Neville called out.

The red headed boy walked to the stool and placed the Hat on his head. Half a second later, it shouted "GRYFFINDOR!"

Albus groaned loudly as Fred joined the Gryffindors. This time he didn't even bother looking.

"Weasley, Hugo!"

A miniature Uncle Ron hastily ran towards the stool and made to jam the hat on his head. Before it had even so much as touched his hair however, the Hat bellowed "GRYFFINDOR!" This time Albus looked long enough to see Rose give her younger brother a hug. It seemed like they were running out of room at the Gryffindor table, because James had to bark at several younger students to slide over so that Hugo could sit.

"Weasley, Lucille!"

A girl that looked strikingly similar to Lily (her hair was slightly lighter) approached the stool and sat down. As Albus had expected, she walked towards the Gryffindor table seconds later.

"Weasley, Molly!"

Lucy's twin approached the stool and placed the hat on her head as well. Albus crossed his fingers once more. This was his last possible chance...

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Albus exhaled deeply in anger. Molly went to join her twin, though Albus stared fiercely at his own table, refusing to look back at the happy family gathering that he wasn't a part of.

"Bad luck mate," Morrison said somberly, "Sorry."

"Whatever," Albus grunted.

After the last person was sorted (Wanda Yelman joined Gryffindor as well) Headmistress McGonagall rose from her seat. The students that had been noisy (mostly those of Gryffindor, whom seemed ecstatic at having Lily and every Weasley join them) quieted down so that she could speak.

"Welcome!" McGonagall said loudly and clearly, her tiny spectacles glittering in the light of the candles at her table. "Welcome to Hogwarts! And for those of you who are returning, welcome back! I am Professor McGonagall, the Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. For those of you who do not know, your previous Headmaster was forced into an untimely retirement at the end of the previous year, due to being wanted by the Ministry of Magic! As I do not have that particular problem, I was available to take the position!"

Many of the students, Albus included, laughed, and those that didn't at least swapped grins with each other. One look at her thin mouth told Albus that the Headmistress may not have

been trying to be intentionally funny however.

"If you did not know," she continued, her voice even louder now, "I was previously the headmistress of this school for several years, and was a professor of transfiguration prior to that for several decades! I assure you, that I know how things are meant to be done at Hogwarts, and I will see to it that they occur. Here at Hogwarts we value education, and we treasure every great experience we have. I hope that this year you will leave with both!

"Before we begin our magnificent feast, I have a few small announcements to make! First and foremost, there has been some staff changes made. Due to your previous Potions professor also being forced into an untimely retirement, Professor Handit has offered to fill the position as Potions Master!"

Professor Handit waved his hand halfheartedly, though he was still seated. He didn't look as though he had offered at all. There was a great deal of muttering at this information amongst all of the houses. If Professor Handit was teaching Potions, who would teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?

"The position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor," McGonagall continued, "Will instead belong to Professor Fairhart!"

A man that Albus had not seen sitting at the table previously rose to his feet to greet the students. McGonagall made to say something else, but her voice was drowned out by the noise of the hall. Nearly everyone had either gasped or yelled. And Albus couldn't blame them. The second that Fairhart had stood up, his face had become visible to the students. Only partially hidden by his untidy black hair, half of his face was completely and utterly mangled. Where there weren't long scars there were large dents, and anywhere without dents the skin was protruding in large bumps, creating the ugliest thing that Albus was sure many of the students had ever seen.

Albus did not gasp or shriek however, as he had seen the face before. The previous year he had seen Fairhart at the Ministry of Magic, though he had not actually met him. Strangely, Albus felt instinctively cold towards him. Just a few months ago he had even accused Fairhart of being a leak in the Ministry of Magic. Though it proved entirely untrue, there was no denying that Fairhart looked the suspicious type.

Either Professor Fairhart was ignoring the yells or was simply used to them, because he was still standing, waving his hand happily at the students despite the looks of absolute horror on their faces. When he had finally sat down, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"In addition to teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Fairhart will also be head of Slytherin House. Professor Fairhart is also formerly an auror of the Ministry of Magic, and though he has little teaching experience, I'm sure that there is much knowledge that you can gain from him. I hope that you will treat him with the kindness and respect that you would give any other professor at this school.

"Now the usual reminders. Flying lessons are entirely optional; please see your head of House to sign up at your leisure. Quidditch Captains must submit a schedule to their head of house in order to host tryouts no later than by the end of September. The Forbidden Forest is also, as always, Forbidden. I look to our new Head Boy and Head Girl to ensure that this rule is kept by all students."

Albus could have sworn that she glanced at him as she said this, though before he could put much more thought into it, McGonagall had said something else.

"And now, the feast!"

The empty plates magically filled with a delicious assortment of foods, everything from roasted chicken to garlic mashed potatoes. Albus helped himself to a little of everything, hoping to eat away the pain of being the only member of his family in Slytherin for another year.

He didn't talk much during the feast, as most of the conversations around him focused on Fairhart's face anyway.

"Blimey that was disgusting!" Bartleby said, shivering a bit, "Think he could wear a mask when he's teaching us?"

"I wonder why he's teaching us at all?" a third year girl named Denise said, "The last auror that taught here was Ares!"

"Didn't you mention Fairhart to me last year?" Albus heard Scorpius mutter. He nodded his head.

"I thought he was the leak in the ministry. I was wrong, but I reckon that there's something off about him anyway."

As he said it he glanced at the high table and saw Fairhart. He seemed to be fitting in well

enough, both he and Professor Flitwick were laughing hysterically at something anyway. By the time that they finished eating Albus was feeling very sleepy, though his full stomach prevented him from walking too fast as they exited the Great Hall.

He was just mentioning to Morrison how tired he was when he heard giggling ahead of him. He peered around the large crowd that was shuffling themselves through the doors and saw the source of it at once. Mirra had giggled. Eckley had been tickling her while they walked. He felt just as furious as he had when Eckley had high-fived his sister, though he couldn't quite explain why. It wasn't as though he was antagonizing his friend in any way, he had simply been tickling her. Nevertheless, he felt his fist curl up into a ball.

"You okay mate?" Morrison asked him.

"Fine," Albus said quickly, "Just a stomach ache."

They descended into the dark labyrinth that was the dungeons and made their way towards the common room.

"Phineas," a student ahead of them said, and the door slid open at once to reveal the empty common room. The first years had not arrived with the prefects yet.

Albus and his fellow housemates entered their new dormitory, and he collapsed onto his bed at once. They had their first day of classes tomorrow, though he didn't think he'd be able to fall asleep at all.

"Night," both Morrison and Scorpius said to him as they pulled their hangings around their beds.

"Night," he replied back lazily, pulling back his own hangings and wrapping himself up in his covers.

So someone that Albus had once accused of being a leak in the Ministry of Magic was now teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, and his sister and cousins had joined Gryffindor, still leaving himself as the only Slytherin. He suddenly had a headache.

But that wasn't all that was bothering him. What had happened with Mirra? The previous year he had felt like throwing up due to how awkward it was around her, but this was different. She was so different now, though he had barely talked to her today. Eckley tickling her popped into his mind and he buried himself under his pillows. Surely he wasn't feeling jealousy? He and Mirra had always just been friends. They had joked around the previous year, written all summer, she had been one of the few who believed that Ares was up to no good, he had saved her life. Normal friend things. So what if she was funny and smart, and was pleasant to be around... and incredibly pretty.

"I don't like Mirra like that," he told himself, rolling over repeatedly to get comfortable. He tried pushing the thought from his mind so that he could get some sleep, but it wasn't until a long time after that his eyes finally stayed closed.

Chapter 5: Dark Magic

When Albus awoke the next morning it took him several minutes to realize why he was so refreshed. He knew that he hadn't fallen asleep until the middle of the night, what with being nervous about the following day of classes, amongst other things. Thus, he could not possibly see how he had gotten so much sleep. Only when he stretched out and flipped his blanket off of himself did he realize how this had occurred. Everyone else's bed was empty.

"Thanks for waking me" he said sarcastically to his friends at breakfast fifteen minutes later. He had managed to pull on his robes while leaving the common room, but his book bag was only half filled from the hurry that he was in.

Thankfully, as it was the first day of classes, extra time was given to students so that they could be given their schedules.

Scorpius gave a grin. "We tried waking you mate, but you were knocked out."

"And you kept drooling on your pillow" Morrison added. "We didn't even want to touch you."

Albus scowled and helped himself to a small plate of toast - everything else had been demolished by his housemates. "Did we get our schedules yet?" he asked.

Morrison nodded. "Head Boy just passed them out" he said, jerking his head towards a tall black boy from Ravenclaw who was indeed moving between the tables.

"So what do we have?" Albus asked, munching as little as possible on his toast to savor it.

"*We* have Care for Magical Creatures first thing" Morrison said. "*Then I* go to Divination,

to begin my journey towards complete and utter omniscience."

" Omniscience?" Albus asked.

" It means to know everything" Morrison said with a smirk, taking a sip of orange juice. " I already read that, I'm going to be miles ahead of the rest of the class. It's a word, you can look it up!" he added rather defensively.

" Okay I believe you" Albus said, stifling a yawn. " So if you go to Divination, then I go to -"

" Muggle Studdies with me" Scorpius said with a grin. " And I've heard nothing but good things about that class. Good, easy things."

Albus didn't have time to scan over the entirety of his schedule, as the bell rang soon after. He pushed his plate of half eaten toast away and began the trek down the grassy slopes to the grounds with his friends.

Albus was pleased to see that it was a nice day, bright and sunny though still cool enough so that the heat wasn't overwhelming. He hadn't heard much of Hagrids classes, though he hoped that if they were as pleasant as it was outside, Monday mornings would become something of a breeze for him. Muggle Studies, as Scorpius had mentioned, was supposed to be ridiculously easy.

" You think Hagrid's a good teacher?" Morrison asked him as they walked closer and closer to the clearing near his cabin, where the schedule had said to meet him.

" I guess so" Albus said. " I mean, he's been teaching for a while right? They would have sacked him if he wasn't any good..."

They arrived at the clearing a little before everyone else, though Hagrid was no where in sight. For several long minutes they waited, while the rest of their house eventually joined them, looking around perplexed as well.

" Who are we supposed to be having this class with?" Albus asked both of his friends, but he was answered almost immediately. Off in the distance he could see several Gryffindor students emerging from the castle, prominently among them a set of four.

Mirra, Eckley, Hornsbrook, and Rose were all walking so close together that they may have been holding hands, all of them laughing cheerfully. The Gryffindors finally reached the clearing and joined the Slytherins after a few moments, but no one until Mirra actually acted as though the other house were there. She left her friends the second that she had seen Albus and walked over to him with a sad expression on her face.

" Did you see our schedules?" she asked.

" Huh?" he asked, completely taken aback. He hadn't even realized that she had spoken, he had been eyeing her so intently.

" This and Potions are the only classes we still have together."

" What? Why?"

" It'll be all the new classes" Scorpius said, though Albus noticed that he continued to stare at the other Gryffindors. " It mixes things up."

" What class do you have next?" Morrison asked Mirra.

" Arithmancy" she said, smiling widely. " I've been looking forward to it all summer, actually. Both me and Rose are taking it."

She was right about to continue speaking when someone called her name. She turned and saw Eckley motioning for her to go back to him. She smiled and waved goodbye to Albus and his Slytherin pals before returning to Rose and the other Gryffindors.

For several more minutes both houses waited, muttering about where Professor Hagrid could be. Albus himself was starting to get a little edgy, more than ten minutes had passed by.

" Maybe he wanted us to meet him in the Forest?" he heard Eckley say loudly, and there was a murmur of agreement amongst the Gryffindors.

" Oh yeah, that's safe" Scorpius retorted, loudly enough for Eckley to hear.

Albus watched as Eckley made to respond, but was cut off mid sentence by the sound of a banging door. Hagrids cabin door had been knocked open, and the reason for his tardiness was immediately apparent. He was carrying two large crates under each of his arms, and he had struggled just to get through the door. With the entire class distracted, Albus took the time to quickly reprimand his friend. He elbowed Scorpius in the ribs; hard.

" Ouch! What was that for?" he muttered.

" Don't start with them" Albus said, tilting his head to the side to indicate Eckley. He was not afraid of Eckley (though maybe of Hornsbrook a little), but he also didn't want to instigate a fight on the first day of classes. He shuttered at the thought of what Mirra would think.

Scorpius started to say something back, but Hagrid had begun speaking.

" Gather roun', gather round!" he said. The entire class formed a crowd beside him, some of the students craning their necks to see what was in the crates, though they were much too high.

" Now, lossa' ya may remember me as the one who helped you cross over the lake in yer firs' year, or seen me 'round here as the Gamekeeper, but for those of yeh who don' know me, I'm Professor Hagrid" he said proudly. " An' Ima be teachin ya Care For Magical Creatures" he added.

The students all looked around at each other, unsure of what to say. Finally, they muttered in unison " Hello Professor Hagrid."

He beamed at them all, then patted the two crates, both of which Albus realized were now bigger than him. And rattling.

" Okay" he said. " I got a lot planned out for yer this year, but I thought we'd start with summat' small." He patted the two crates again. " Bowtruckles" he said with a smile.

" What's a bowtruckle?" someone asked.

Hagrid chuckled. " Well thas' what yer here to learn isn't it!" he said. He slid the tops off of the crates and reached his massive hand into one of them. A moment later, he pulled out a bowtruckle.

It was hard to describe, and Albus thought that if he had to assign it a different name it would be a stickling. It really did look like a foot tall stick with twigs for arms, and perhaps some bark around it's torso. It was fighting against Hagrids hand quite vehemently, the only two fingers on each of it's twig like hands sharply poking at Hagrids palm, though he didn't seem to notice. Nor did he seem to realize that it was making an odd squelching sound as though it was screaming to be put down.

" Bowtruckles are trickly lil' things" Hagrid continued, dropping it back into the crate. " They can be vicious, and they tend to gang up on yer. Best thing to do is to gain their trus'. Now yeh shouldn' actually be learnin bout these things 'till yer fourth or fifth year...but everything that they wan' me to teach is a bit borin'. No one wants ter play with Flobberworms."

Rose raised her hand from a few feet behind Albus. " Professor Hagrid" she said. " What class of danger are bowtruckles according to their Ministry of Magic certification?"

Hagrid scratched his bushy beard, a confused expression on his face. " Ermmm...C?" he said hesitantly.

Albus grinned while the rest of the class muttered. He knew for a fact that creatures were classified anywhere from one to five, not by letters, something that Hagrid evidently didn't know. Still, he seemed to know a great deal about the bowtruckles, as he pulled a large brown bag from his enormous overcoat and began sprinkling brown rice into the crates. The activity within the crates immediately intensified, and soon they were rumbling so fast that they almost fell over.

" Okay, yer jobs today is gonna be ter pick one of these here bowtruckles as your own, and gain its trust. I brought enough wood lice for all of em', you jus' gotta' feed it to 'em. The trick is not to give 'em too much right away, or they'll think they're bein' tricked, and not to give 'em too little, 'else they'll think your jus' messin' with him. If yer successful, next lesson when I open the crates they'll come to you. Who wants the first bowtruckle?" he asked, grinning at all of the students.

" I am so *not* doing this" Albus heard Morrison sigh from next to him as the crates began to shake even more fiercely. It seemed that they were growing more and more restless the longer they were kept inside.

" I'll do it" Albus said, stepping forward from the crowd.

" Way ter be brave Al!" Hagrid beamed, and Albus immediately hoped that Mirra thought that he was brave as well. He pushed the thought from his head as he marched towards the crate on Hagrids left. The class behind him muttered.

" So I just...reach my hand in?" Albus asked.

" Nah, I'll get you one" Hagrid said, and he immediately began fishing around in the crate. He leaned forward and whispered to Albus as he did so. " Don' worry, I'll pick yer a small one." He gave him a wink and withdrew a bowtruckle that was indeed smaller than the other one he had held up. He placed it in Albus' hands and watched as it scuttled across his arm and up his neck, finally settling itself on his shoulder. Hagrid pulled from his pocket a small brown bag

that Albus knew contained wood lice and handed it to him. " See?" he told the class. " Easy!" The rest of the class lined up in front of the crates to be given a bowtruckle and a small brown bag, while Albus walked to a corner and sat down, trying to feed his lice to the bowtruckle. Contrary to what Hagrid said however, it was far from easy.

It was as though Hagrid had accidentally sabotaged him in his attempt to do him a favor. The bowtruckle may have been half the height of the other ones, but this made it much quicker and harder to grab, let alone hold still. At only six inches high, it ran circles around him, completely ignoring Albus' attempts to feed it.

For the next fifteen minutes Albus did this, but he eventually gave up from exhaustion. He collapsed on the ground, the bag of wood lice abandoned next to him as the bowtruckle continued to squelch and eye him hatefully with its large brown eyes. He peered around and saw that other people were having similar problems, particularly the boys. Morrison was nowhere to be seen, but Scorpius was trying to pin his bowtruckle to the ground and force feed it. He could see Bartleby Bing trying to grab the bag back from his bowtruckle, and a few feet away from him Eckley was trying to wrestle his from around his neck.

The girls were faring far better though. Some of them couldn't quite keep absolute control of the tricky little twig men, but for the most part their bowtruckles seemed to trust them. Rose and Mirra in particular seemed to be well adept at it. They were both laying on the grass with their bowtruckles, who were now sitting still and eating from the clumps of wood rice that they had been given.

Inspired to do better, Albus rose to his feet and stared at his bowtruckle intently. He slowly placed his hand into his bag and pulled out a small clump of rice. " Okay, nice and easy" he said to himself. He slowly bent down and inched his hand closer to the bowtruckle's mouth - " Ouch! Dammit!" he shouted a second later. The bowtruckle, which already inexplicably hated him, seemed to think that he was playing some sort of game with it, as it dug its sharp twig like fingers into the palm of his hand so deep that he was now bleeding. He watched as it ran into the Forest, still making the squelching noise that he now understood was laughter.

Furious, he marched over to Hagrid, who was still standing by the now empty crates, humming as he watched the bowtruckles massacre half of his students. " How's it goin' Al?" he said

" Bloody fantastic" he replied dryly, holding up his bleeding hand.

" Ahh, yeah they can do that" Hagrid said, giving him an apologetic look. " I got some bandages in me cabin if yeh wan', they're right in the drawer under the stove."

Five minutes later Albus emerged from Hagrid's cabin, desperately trying to bandage himself. It was difficult however, as he only had one hand to do it, and he had bled so much that it was quite slippery. He stood in the corner near the edge of the forest, trying for fifteen minutes to wrap his bloody hand, but it was to no avail. Right as he was about to give up, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

" Need some help?"

It was Mirra. She had left her bowtruckle alone by itself, it was near Rose and was now so well behaved that it was sitting politely waiting for her to return to it.

" A little bit" he said with a smile.

She whipped her wand out. " *Scourgify*" she said, and the bloody bandages became clean again. He immediately went to try and wrap his hand but she knocked it away. " Better let me do that" she said. " I was watching you struggle" she grinned.

He smiled at her, and she closed her fingers around his wrist to keep his hand steady while she wrapped. He noticed how soft they were. And small. But comfortable nonetheless. There was a certain warmth about them...

" So what happened to your bowtruckle?" she asked.

" Huh? Oh, it umm...it went home" he said, jerking his head towards the Forest. She laughed. He only realized now how close she was to him. He glanced down slightly and saw her staring intently at his hand, trying to wrap it just right. Were her eyes always that shade of grey?

" The trick is to wrap it around your entire hand" she said. " And to put pressure on it."

" Huh?" he repeated. " Oh right, yeah."

" You did better than Morrison anyway, even if your bowtruckle did run off" she added, tilting her head to the side to indicate Morrison, who was laying on the ground a few yards away. Several bowtruckles had ganged up on him and had somehow pinned him down while they

crawled all over him ; his bag of wood rice lay forgotten next to him.

" Get them off me! Get them off of me!" he was shouting in his deep voice. Hagrid had noticed and was now running towards him.

Albus smiled and turned his attention back to Mirra, or more accurately, her grey eyes. He was still staring at them when she announced " All finished!"

He was so taken aback that he just barely realized that she had picked up her head so that they were now eye level.

For a split second, her grey eyes met his green, but he quickly turned his head to the side so as to avoid an awkward moment. He succeeded for the most part, but he thought that he saw Scorpius smirk at him from a few yards away.

" Go on, test it out!" Mirra said.

He regretfully removed his hand from her grip and waved it around. The bandages had indeed done their job, it was now secured and there wasn't a trace of blood. " Alright!" he grinned. " Thanks. What do I do if it comes off?"

" It won't" she said. " I made it pretty secure. Just next time, don't try and fix it yourself okay?" she giggled. " Just come to me and I'll fix up whatever you need help with. Easier that way."

Next time, I'll throw myself in front of a train he thought for one wild second. He reentered reality a moment later. " Thanks" he said.

He was right about to continue speaking when Hagrid called out for them. " Class is almos' over!" he hollered. " Put yer bowtruckle back in one of these crates, it don' matter the order. If they trus' you, they'll come to you next time!"

The class, minus Albus, hurried forward and placed their bowtruckles back in the crates, then proceeded to walk back up the grassy slopes to the castle.

" That was fun" Bartleby spat out as the Slytherin boys all walked back together. Everyone was so banged up that it was hard to tell who was injured the most, but Albus felt that if it hadn't been for his bleeding hand it would have been Morrison. He had cuts all over his face and there was a clump missing from his hair.

" That was horrible!" Morrison said, not catching Bartlebys sarcasm. " I like Hagrid, but really, bowtruckles!"

Albus nodded his head, though he was only half listening. What had happened back there with Mirra? Why had he been staring at her eyes like that? What was going on with him? Was what he had told himself last night untrue? *Did* he like Mirra as more than a friend?

" Alright, this is where we split" Morrison said a few seconds later, capturing Albus' attention again. " I'm off the other way, Divination is in the top of the other tower. When you see me at lunch, I will be a new man!"

He slapped both of his friends hands and left, calling back " Try to have fun in Muggle Studies!" as he went.

" We will" both Albus and Scorpius said at the same time.

Twenty minutes later however, it appeared as though no amount of trying was going to help them enjoy Muggle Studies.

Professor Verage was a very stout, very elderly woman with gnarled hands and a thin line for a mouth. Albus had seen her at mealtimes before, but had never thought much of her. And by the end of the year, he thought, he still wouldn't.

There was no denying that she was very kind, and seemed quite patient too. Indeed, she was a bit like a grandmother. But twenty minutes into her class and Albus knew that she was just as boring as Professor Binns.

" Muggle Studies isn't a branch of magic" she was still saying after half of an hour. She had done nothing but describe the class since she had taken role. " But it is one of the most useful things that a young witch or wizard can learn about. The muggle world and the wizarding world is ever merging, indeed we are both *one* world, trying to coexist together despite some having an advantage over others..."

Albus yawned and went to bury his head in his hands for the fifth time. He glanced around the room and saw that it, like the world she spoke about, was divided in two. There were the people who obviously didn't care about Muggle Studies, and had simply taken it because of

how easy they thought it would be (Albus and Scorpius among them), and the people who were sitting up straight, rapt with attention. Albus could only assume that they wanted to learn about muggles for whatever career they had in mind.

" Class is almost over" her velvety voice rang out. " I hope you have a broader understanding of the connection between ourselves and muggles, and indeed, how very important they are. Next lesson, we will begin our study of how muggles are able to manage things like transportation and cooking without using magic."

They left the class after that, most of them yawning and stretching all the way to the Great Hall for lunch.

" Well that's one good thing about Mondays" Albus said as they took their seats. " An entire period of napping if we're up all night Sunday."

Scorpius chuckled as he took a swig of pumpkin juice. " Did you hear what she was saying about how important this class is if you want to work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office? I'd rather be unemployed, honestly."

Albus nodded his head but didn't get the chance to speak.

" Hey Al!" someone had shouted from a few seats down. He turned and saw that it was Atticus. " Quidditch tryouts next Saturday! I'll pass around more info when I plan it out better" he added with a grin.

" I'll be there!" Albus yelled back. He was right about to mention how his friend Morrison was thinking of trying out when he realized something. Morrison wasn't there. He turned to Scorpius. " Hey, where's -"

He needn't have finished his sentence however. Morrison had just plopped down next to him, furiously slamming his Divination book on the table. Several other students even turned to look at him.

" How was Divination mate?" Scorpius asked, trying to hide his smirk.

Morrison turned to him at once. " Complete waste of time!" he barked. " Teacher's some old bat named Trelawney, and she is *dumb*."

He said this all very fast without breathing once, he was clearly ready to start a rant. Before Albus could so much as move his lips, Morrison continued.

" First off, it's ridiculously hot in that classroom, and we can't even open a window. Then she makes us drink hot tea! Tea! We're supposed to interpret our future from the *tea*. So we drink it, and then we start telling our partners what we see or whatever, and then she comes around to my cup and tells me I have something called the Grim. Some death omen that looks like a dog. At which point I inquired, how do *I* have the grim if *she* saw it! It shouldn't matter who's cup it's in. I saw a damn rabbit with wings! I checked the book that she handed out, that means a lucrative future! So I said ' No Professor, *YOU* have the Grim!' And then she has the audacity to tell me that she sensed that I didn't have the inner eye from the second I entered! So I told her at least I don't have two gigantic ones on my face! Honestly, she looks like a bug!"

He stopped there, but continued breathing very fast. Albus and Scorpius both simply stared at him. " Anyway" he continued. " How was Muggle Studies?"

Albus and Scorpius exchanged a quick look.

" Fantastic!" Scorpius said.

" Best class we've ever had!" Albus added.

Morrison buried his head in his arms.

The rest of the day went by without event ; Professor Flitwick merely gave them a short summary of some of the spells that he would be teaching them throughout the year. Tuesday and Wednesday went by similarly, completely void of anything interesting. It wasn't until Thursday that Albus had anything to focus on.

Their first Defence Against the Dark Arts class was to take place that afternoon, and he had to admit, he was curious as to how it would turn out. The strange thing was, few people were actually talking about it.

" It was alright" Damian Peesley told him at lunch when he had inquired about it. " I had him on Monday though, so I was pretty tired. But it wasn't really...a lesson. Hard to explain."

More curious than ever, Albus lined up outside of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom

with his fellow Slytherins, who were soon joined by the Ravenclaws.

" You look nervous" Morrison told him as they leaned against the wall.

" Nervous?" Albus said with a laugh. " I'm not nervous, I'm just curious. I told you before...there's something weird about this guy."

" You mean like the fact that he only has half of a face?"

Albus laughed, but stopped when he saw Scorpius running towards them. Strangely, he hadn't even noticed that he hadn't been with them.

" Where were you at?" Albus asked him.

Scorpius took a deep breath. " Got caught up" he said in between pants. " Talking to Rose. She wants us to meet them at the library before dinner."

" Who's 'them'?" Morrison said darkly.

Scorpius shrugged. " Just her and Mirra I guess. I doubt that they're stupid enough to bring Eckley..."

Their conversation ended as the classroom door opened. One by one, the students filed in. The classroom looked almost exactly the same as it had when Professor Handit had been teaching, even the desks looked untouched. Albus, who would normally sit in either the far back or very front in any of his classes, decided to instead sit in the very middle row, with Scorpius and Morrison taking up the seat on either side of him. As soon as the entire class had taken their seats, their attention turned to Professor Fairhart.

He was sitting on his desk, not in it, and he was smiling at them. Or at least, smiling as much as his face would allow. He seemed a tad bit uncomfortable, but for the most part pleasant. Albus was immediately reminded of how nice Darvy had seemed at first as well.

Once the entire class had settled in, Professor Fairhart began speaking in his crisp and clear voice. " Good afternoon students" he said.

" Good afternoon" they chorused back. Most of them anyway. Albus' lips remained quite closed.

Professor Fairhart shifted his weight a little on the desk before he spoke again. " As you already know from the feast, I am your new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. I confess that I did not attend Hogwarts in my youth, so I'm still adapting to this castle. The stairs in particular are tricky. So I, like you, am here to learn!"

If he had been expecting the class to act enthusiastically at this statement, he was surely disappointed. The students merely turned and glanced at each other before returning their attention to him. Nevertheless, he seemed undeterred, as he rose from the desk and resumed speaking.

" Before we get started - and we have a lot to cover in forty five minutes - are there any questions that anyone has?"

Nobody spoke for several seconds. Finally, Bartleby Bing rose his hand. Professor Fairhart saw it and pointed. " Name please?" he asked politely.

" Bartleby Bing" he answered. " And...erm...what happened to your face?"

Albus didn't know if he had been dared to do it, or if perhaps he was merely stupid enough to think that Professor Fairhart would willingly give that information away, but regardless the class had now seemed to stop breathing. Everyone was now waiting in anticipation, and Albus knew that they had all wanted to ask the same thing.

Professor Fairhart stared for a few seconds before giving a wide grin, which predictably stretched out his horrid skin even more. " Well I must admit Bartleby, I am shocked. Most classes haven't thrown that question at me until about twenty minutes in. You may have set a new record."

Bartleby, who had been sitting quite still in fear, let go a sigh of relief. Professor Fairhart kept the grin on his face as he gave his answer.

" I am well aware of my appearance" he said. " And I apologize if it distracts you during these lessons. I do not blame you for being curious, it is only natural, and I will tell you what happened to the right side of my face, just as I have told every other class that has asked.

Fire, students. For all of the wonderful things that it does, it is highly dangerous. I was unfortunate enough in my youth to play with fire, and the entire right side of my face was burned. I attempted to fix the damage myself, and as you can see...it warranted poor results. Let that be a reminder to you before you decide that fire should not be respected."

The class shivered at the thought of their faces being set ablaze. Still, they seemed more comfortable as they continued to ask questions.

" Can you see?" a boy from Ravenclaw asked. " From your right eye?"

" Name?" Fairhart said.

" Milton Parish" he responded.

" Yes, I can see, though it's slightly blurry and can't be opened fully."

" Does it still hurt?" asked a Ravenclaw girl with glasses. " Winona Soreeno" she added.

" No, not anymore" Fairhart answered.

This seemed to do it for the most part. Other students still seemed intrigued, as though they had questions of their own to ask, but their new professor clapped his hands together before anyone could ask anything else.

" Now that we know a little bit more about each other" he said. " I think we can start really getting in to the lesson portion of today's class. First question. What are we here to learn? What are we fighting against?"

The class went silent. The Ravenclaw girl, Winona, finally rose her hand and answered. " The dark arts?" she said.

" Fantastic!" Professor Fairhart said enthusiastically. He whipped his wand out so fast that Albus hadn't even registered it until after he had used it. With a quick wave, the words *The Dark Arts had* appeared at the top of the blackboard behind him. " Take five points to Ravenclaw!" he added.

Albus scowled. For someone who was trying to adapt at Hogwarts, Fairhart didn't seem to know how the point system worked. Teachers weren't supposed to just hand out five points for easy questions like that. He turned his head to his friends to see if they were as annoyed, but both of them seemed to have ignored it. On the contrary, they actually both seemed to be listening intently.

" The dark arts" Fairhart repeated, and he began pacing around the room. The students turned their heads to follow him. " What does that comprise of?"

A Slytherin named Melony raised her hand. " Melony Grue" she said. " And, dark magic?" Fairhart placed his finger to his lips and pondered deeply. " Dark magic" he said. " That's a vague term isn't it? What constitutes dark magic? Does anybody know?"

Scorpius raised his hand. " Scorpius Malfoy" he said. " Curses and hexes?"

" Curses and hexes! Now we're getting into specifics!" Fairhart said excitedly. With another wave of his wand, both words appeared on the blackboard directly beneath *The Dark Arts*.

" But I'm curious" he continued. " As to what makes curses and hexes dark. What is a curse?" he said.

Milton Parish, the Ravenclaw boy that has previously asked a question, raised his hand and immediately began reading from a text book. " A curse is defined as any spell -"

" Stop stop stop stop stop stop!" Fairhart said quickly, holding out his hand. " You're reading from a textbook?" he added.

Milton nodded.

" Which book? I didn't assign books."

He didn't sound remotely mad, but merely curious.

Milton began to shift in his chair uncomfortably. " Umm, one of our books from last year" he said.

Fairhart smiled. " You can put that away" he said, and Milton looked disheartened as he dropped the book back into his bag. " You're not in trouble" Fairhart said calmly. " This is my fault, I should have made this clear. We will scarcely be using books in this class" he said.

The class exchanged shocked looks. No teacher had ever asked for a textbook to *not be used before*

" Books are wonderful" Fairhart said. " To have knowledge printed on paper, to be read and learned at one's leisure, that is a truly great convenience. I cannot possibly stress enough how important reading is. But I don't want to hear from a textbook today, I want to hear from *YOU*. What do *YOU* think a curse is, Milton?"

" Ermm...a spell...that hurts someone?" Milton said uncertainly, and Fairhart widened his smile even further, though the students didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

" A spell that hurts someone" Fairhart said. " Like the killing curse?"

The class stayed quite still at this. Even Albus, who had been slouching for most of the period, sat up straight now.

" Is the killing curse dark magic?" Fairhart asked the class as a whole.

They all nodded. " Why?" he asked.

" Because it kills people" someone from the back row said, and the class, including Fairhart, chuckled.

" Well we can't argue with that logic" Fairhart said. " But now I wonder. Someone give me a spell. An easy one. A spell you learned here, first or second year.

" The hovering charm!" someone shouted out.

" Fantastic!" Fairhart said. " The hovering charm. *Wingardium Leviosa*. Fun little charm isn't it?"

The class nodded again.

" What if I told you" Fairhart began. " That the hovering charm is every bit as ' dark magic' as the killing curse is?

The class raised their eyebrows at him in doubt.

" Why not?" Fairhart asked, and at this, he stopped pacing and sat back down on top of his desk. " It can kill people, can't it?"

Albus frowned. For a split second, he had thought that this class was starting to become worth it. But he had now lost all interest. Professor Fairhart clearly had no idea what he was talking about. He went back to slouching, and the rest of the class seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as they continued to stare doubtfully.

" Oh, you don't think so?" Fairhart asked the class, and they all shook their heads uncertainly.

" I'm sure hovering pillows and books isn't taking any lives is it? But let's say I were to... oh I don't know, hover you off of a cliff?"

The class stopped shaking their heads. Fairhart waved his wand once more, and this time *Wingardium Leviosa* appeared on the blackboard right beneath *hexes*. It looked oddly out of place there. " Any more?" Fairhart said.

The next twenty minutes comprised entirely of Albus' classmates shouting out random spells and charms that they had learned in their time of Hogwarts, all of which, according to Fairhart anyway, could somehow be used to murder or inflict excruciating pain upon someone.

Whether it be the tickling charm being excessively used to make some stop breathing, or using *lumos* to blind them, everything from the color changing charm to quick step jinx had been added to the blackboard. Everyone but Albus had shouted out at least one spell.

Eventually, Fairhart held up his hand to stop them from shouting spells, disappointing many who still had suggestions. Fairhart took a quick glance at his watch.

" Almost time to go" he said. " I hope that this lesson has...broadened your minds a little more. We will indeed learn how to use defensive spells, but first, I want you all to better understand that there is more to magic. We must learn to control it before it can be used. The dark arts are dangerous, and should be respected as a formidable enemy. To protect yourself, you will need a better understanding of all magic, and how it ties into our creativity, our emotions. I'm going to let you students in on a little secret, a secret that many wizards my age have to yet to figure out."

The class waited with baited breath as Fairhart leaned forward to speak. " There is *NO such* thing as dark magic" he said. " Magic has no personality, no allies, no enemies. It is a reflection of ourselves, an extension of our bodies and minds. How a wizard chooses to use it... is dark or light. Offensive or defensive. Dangerous or not" he added, indicating the full blackboard behind him.

And just then, as though he had planned it out to the second, the bell rang and the students filed out of the classroom muttering excitedly.

" That was a pretty good lesson" Scorpius said as they walked down the first floor corridor.

" It was" Morrison said. " I have to admit, it really got me thinking. All those ' weak spells we know'...as if. We're pretty dangerous aren't we?" he chuckled.

Albus sneered. " Please, he should have given us some syrup with the load of waffle he just told us. No such thing as dark magic? Tell that to my dad and all of his friends out there

risking their lives against it everyday. They're not dodging and deflecting colour changing charms all day."

" Fairhart was an auror though wasn't he?" Scorpius said. " Don't you think he knows that?"

" Not a very good one though" Albus replied. " If they shipped him down to Hogwarts to teach. If he knows so much, how come he's not out there fighting dark wizards huh?"

" You know what I think?" Scorpius retorted. " I think he has a different way of doing things, and that reminds you of Darvy. That's why you don't like him *OR* trust him."

Albus scoffed and vehemently denied it. Morrison left for Divination seconds later, while Albus and Scorpius continued the argument all the way to Muggle Studies.

Albus was preoccupied all throughout the class. Professor Verage had launched into an explanation of gasoline, but Albus simply stared ahead blankly. He managed to avoid Scorpius' snoring long enough to think about what his friend had said to him. Is that why he didn't like Fairhart? Did he have a vendetta against certain teachers now?

By the time Muggle Studies was over, Albus had sorted his thoughts and came to a conclusion. It had nothing to do with Darvy at all, and Fairhart was indeed a bad teacher. This thought comforted him as they returned to the common room to do homework, and Albus was completely over it by the time that they met Rose and Mirra in the library.

As he had hoped, they were alone. Eckley and Hornsbrook had opted not to tag along it seemed. Mirra's face lit up when she looked up from an enormous brown book and saw Albus and his friends approaching.

He ignored his goosebumps. " Hello" he said to both his cousin and Mirra as he took a seat across from them. Morrison and Scorpius did the same.

" What are you working so hard on during the first week of school?" Morrison asked Mirra, leaning forward to try and read the book upside down.

" Arithmancy" she said. " Homework from Monday, due tomorrow" she said.

" Don't you have Arithmancy too?" Scorpius asked Rose. She nodded. " Did you do it?" She nodded again. Scorpius turned to Mirra. " So why don't you just copy-"

" No!" both girls shouted loud enough to have the librarian reprimand them.

" How will I learn?" Mirra whispered as loud as she could.

" How come you're not doing this in the common room?" Albus asked her.

It was Rose who answered. " Stupid party. They had Quidditch tryouts and they're so pleased with the new team that they just *had to make noise*. And the worst bit is, your brother didn't even do his job and stop it!" Rose added to Albus.

" Hey, I resent that" came a voice from a few feet away. They all turned and saw James walking towards them, his badge glittering in the light of the library. He pulled up a seat and sat with them. "I'm taking this thing seriously. The Hogwarts prefect code of conduct explicitly states that prefects need only break up a party in a common room if it's passed curfew hours, has alcohol served, or hinders the concentration of other students."

" Like me?" Mirra said with a grin, looking up from her book.

" Ahh sorry Mirra. I'll tell them to keep it down next time. I just came up here to get some peace and quiet myself actually. You lot enjoying your classes?" he asked.

The subject of their classes carried them through most of the conversation, and unfortunately for Albus, the subject of Fairhart returned with great prominence. Much to his chagrin, Mirra in particular seemed to think that he was a great teacher.

" He seems like he really knows what he's talking about" she said. " So what if his face is a little messed up?"

Morrison snorted and Albus knew why. ' A little ' was a bit of an understatement. Albus took this opportunity to throw a jab in. " Well for someone who lectures us on controlling our magic, he's no expert. Maybe he should have been thinking about controlling that fire, eh?" Rose looked at him. " What are you talking about?" she said.

" The fire" Albus said knowingly. " The one that *burned his face*."

Rose giggled. " Is that what he told you? He must know how gullible Slytherins are."

" Why what did he tell you?" Morrison asked.

Rose and Mirra exchanged glances. " He got attacked by a manticores" Rose said matter-of-

factly. " It was his own fault though, he even admits that he provoked it."
Now it was James' turn to laugh. " A mantichore? Come on Rosie, I thought you were smart?
Where the heck would he find a mantichore? And there's no way it would do *that* to his face.
Uncle Bill got attacked by a werewolf and his face doesn't look half as bad as Fairharts."

" Obviously Uncle Bills have healed over time!" Rose said dismissively.

" Oh, but Fairhart got his scars yesterday did he?" Albus said, which seemed to shut Rose up.

" Well he didn't get it in a fire either, you prat" James said.

" What?" Albus and his fellow Slytherins said at the same time.

James nodded. " He obviously figured that you lot were too young to understand. He told my class the truth. He had bad acne when he was younger and tried cursing it off. It only got worse when he tried fixing it by himself."

Even as he said it however, he seemed to realize how stupid it sounded. Albus turned from his brother, to Mirra and Rose, and back to Scorpius and Morrison, all of whom were glancing around at each other No matter how much they stared wordlessly however, it appeared that no one had the slightest idea of which class Fairhart had been honest with. The mystery of his mangled face, it seemed, would simply never be figured out.

Chapter 6: The Prefect Out Of Order

Why couldn't he stop looking at her? It seemed that every time that he saw her, whether it be in class, or the hallways, or even when they met in the library, Albus was simply incapable of averting his gaze from Mirra. Normally this wouldn't have been a problem, but as it turned out, staring aimlessly sometimes distracted you from the conversation at hand.

" Are you even listening?" Morrison shot out in Potions class one Friday.

" Huh?" Albus replied.

" I'm trying to tell you about what stupid Trelawney made us do yesterday..."

" Right sorry" Albus said, turning his attention back to his friend. " You were saying..."

He had been staring at the back of Mirras head for the better part of the period. Scorpius seemingly hadn't noticed his lack of attention, his head was buried in book for advanced transfiguration. Morrison on the other hand, who would no sooner read a book at his leisure than he would cut off his own arms, had spent the period trying to tell Albus stories about the abomination that was his Divination class.

" Now it's bad enough that these crystal balls are tiny, but she wants us to-"

" please!" Professor Handit's voice rang out from behind his desk, where he was skimming through an old Potions textbook. " I'm trying to figure this out! Please lower your voice!"

" Sorry Professor Handit" Morrison said lazily before turning back to Albus.

Potions had been one of Albus' favorite classes for the past two years - even if it had been taught by a murderer. He was uncommonly good at it, and found that the class was one of his more relaxing ones. This had changed when Professor Handit become teacher however.

The problem was, their former Defence Against the Dark Arts didn't have the slightest idea what he was doing. He had even admitted so on his first day of teaching them, and proceeded to spend the next hour and a half trying to write the steps to concocting a relatively easy potion on the blackboard. Albus finally took pity on him and helped him figure it out, but by the time that they had done so class had ended. Today however, Handit wasn't even bothering to try, but was rather preparing for his third lesson while the students had " free time".

Morrison finished his story just as the bell was ringing, and Albus found himself walking to lunch thinking about the same thing that he had been thinking about before Morrison had interrupted him.

Okay, I like her he said to himself. *But why do I make a complete fool of myself every time I'm around her?*

And the truly sad thing was that he wasn't exaggerating in the slightest. He tended to drop things whenever Mirra engaged him in conversation, he frequently lost his train of thought when she was walked past him, and those were among the least embarrassing things. He also realized that his voice had a habit of deepening when they talked, as though he were trying to be more mature, and on more than once occasion during Care For Magical Creatures, he had

found that his hand almost automatically jumped to his hair and tried making it even untidier than it usually was.

To make matters worse, Albus was at a loss of whom he could go to for help. His two best friends were instantly off limits - Morrison would make a joke of it and Scorpius would ignore it. He thought of telling his brother, but couldn't bear the smirk of smug satisfaction that he knew he would receive. James was always going on about how good he was with girls, and Albus knew that he would never live it down if he asked him for help.

His only other option, it seemed, was Rose. Albus thought that his cousin had a good heart, but he long since knew from their youth that she couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it, and as she was Mirra's best friend, it was a high risk. Still, she *WAS* a girl. Albus voiced his concerns to his friend at lunch, though he was careful not to say too much, of course.

"Do you think Rose would help me with something?" Albus asked them both as they took their seats at lunch.

Scorpius predictably shrugged. Morrison gave him an interested look however, and stopped piling ketchup onto his sausage patties to speak. "You mean with school work?" he said. "Because you know how she is, she'd never let you copy. We got Scorpius for that anyway though."

Scorpius nodded. "Need help with something?" he asked.

Albus shook his head. "No, I don't mean school work. I mean like, do you think she'd give...good advice? Like with girl stuff?"

They both eyed him suspiciously, though Scorpius spoke first. "Probably not" he said. "But you could always go to Mirra for that."

Albus hid his face to avoid blushing. "Yeah I guess" he said, though he had no intention of revealing his feelings to Mirra at all.

"Or maybe you could get some help from Fairhart?" Morrison said with a grin, and both he and Scorpius laughed.

Albus groaned and began eating his lunch. They had Defence Against the Dark Arts next, a class that Albus thought had slowly gotten worse each time that they had it. As he was quick to point out to his friends, Professor Fairhart didn't so much teach as he inferred. He frequently asked the class ridiculous unanswerable questions like "If there were no up, would down exist?", and gave them cryptic pointers like "Magic is everything that you need it to be, and nothing that it's supposed to be."

His reasoning, according to himself anyway, was that once the students grasped the concept of these questions and statements that they would have a better understanding of magic and how to use it defensively. Albus was not fooled however. These things were the unmistakable signs of a teacher who was biding his time until he figured out what to teach his students. His dislike for his new professor kept his mind occupied all the way to his class, which Albus supposed was good, as thinking of his situation with Mirra made his head hurt. Twenty minutes later however, Albus would have gladly taken the headache.

Fairhart's class was just as boring as ever, and Albus was forced to sit through it while his friends paid attention. For some reason, everyone else in his class seemed to enjoy it quite thoroughly, and Albus was left to try and let his mind meander unassisted as Fairhart droned on about what he called "emotional magic".

"Think!" Fairhart was saying. He was still sitting on his desk (he had not once sat in it), and his untidy black hair was still casually falling in front of his mangled face. His appearance had not changed once so far. "Think about the first time that you used magic! Why did you use it? It was subconscious wasn't it?"

The class nodded and murmured.

"Your instincts took over!" Fairhart exclaimed. "When you lose control- let your emotions take over- the same thing occurs. Some argue that though all wizards and witches possess an aptitude for the magical arts, some in particular have a stronger pull over their emotions. Imagine - for one second - that we could harness that subconscious power and use it consciously."

The class continued to stare, rapt with attention. Albus merely supported his face on his hands.

"Some of the greatest wizards of our time have acknowledged that one emotion in particular

has a pull over them. One that truly allows their power to manifest itself."

" Which emotion?" someone from Ravenclaw said. They did not bother stating their name. After only a few lessons, it had reached the point where nearly everyone had answered or asked a question, and thus Fairhart knew all of their names. Indeed, now that he thought about it, Albus may be the only student who hadn't said their name yet.

" I don't know which emotion!" Fairhart said, smiling widely, magnifying a grotesque appearance that the students seemed to no longer register. " You tell me! The first time that you used magic, can you remember how you were feeling? Anyone!"

Morrison raised his hand.

" Yes, Mr. Vincent?"

" I was angry!" Morrison said, banging his fist on the table excitedly.

Professor Fairhart clapped his hands together and pointed. " Fantastic! Anger! Perhaps the most common of all! Our rage consumes us! When we are angry, we have a problem, and all reasonable thought is lost. And when we have the ability to use magic... our solution is easily found. We use it, without willing it, and it accomplishes it's task. Another one! A powerful emotion! Anyone?"

" Pride?" someone asked.

Fairhart clapped his hands and pointed once more, this time at a Ravenclaw boy who had spoken so much that Albus knew his name to be Milton.

" Pride is tricky" Fairhart said. "But certainly effective. It differs for the wizard or witch, but I would hazard a guess and say pride is one of the rarer ones. But certainly possible. Pride is just as consuming as rage. To defend our own self honour, we can perform magic that we previously thought that we'd never be able to use. Any others? Any other powerful emotions that could drive a particular person?"

There was a silence for a few moments while the class thought. Albus yawned widely. A girl from Slytherin named Denise raised her hand. " Love?" she asked.

Fairhart gave his widest smile yet. " Ahh yes. Love. I doubt that you'll find a better answer than that. Love is a power that is too complex to manufacture, too mysterious to comprehend, and too dangerous to be completely controlled. Of all the emotions that we can feel, love is easily the most powerful."

Scorpius gave a tiny cough that may have indicated disbelief, but Fairhart continued on.

" Oh, many doubt it. And rightfully so, I suppose, for in addition to it being one of the easiest emotions for us to feel, it is also quite possibly the hardest to harness into true power. But the person who does manage to do so- the person who can tap into it's power at will- well let's just say that I pity the person who invokes the wrath of that individual. I pity them a great deal.

" Though it should be noted that other emotions are just as effective, just as useful. As previously mentioned, it depends on the individual, and in theory - assuming of course that the theory of our emotions controlling magic is correct - any emotion could be used as an anchor for this latent power. Fear, joy, sadness, I even know of one wizard who draws his power from shame. Ponder that the next time you're unable to perform a certain spell. Learn what drives you. Then channel it."

And with that final statement, the bell rang. Albus noticed that the bell always seemed to ring at the end of Fairhart's speeches, as though planned that way. Indeed, he thought it to be the only amusing thing about his lessons.

" Those just get better and better!" Morrison exclaimed as they walked back to the common room. " I wonder what my ' emotional drive' is. Anger, I bet."

" I don't know" Scorpius said, smiling slightly. " Is idiocy an emotion?"

Morrison scowled at him as they approached the blank stone wall. The person ahead of them gave the password, and Albus spoke up as they walked in. " Oh come, you don't believe that rubbish do you? Honestly, he makes us sound like super heroes. Magic is a science, it's not controlled by our emotions. Muggles have emotions to!"

" But lots of things don't function properly with muggles!" Morrison said. " And I grew up with them mate, believe me, they're close! Without magic, they get stronger when they're angry!"

" That's adrenaline" Albus said coolly. " Fairhart's just trying to make us believe that we have an 'inner power' because he knows he can't teach us how to use it!"

" Insecure because of Darrrrvy" Morrison said in a high pitched sing song voice. Both of his friends had not abandoned their reasoning behind Albus' coldness towards their new teacher. According to them, Albus being wary of Fairhart was entirely natural because of Darvy's

betrayal, though Albus refused to let their psychological baffle bother him. He knew exactly why he disliked Fairhart. It wasn't because of his face or because of Darvy - it was because he had no idea how to teach.

" Look sharp, Potter" someone said from one of the comfortable stone cut armchairs. He turned and saw that it was Atticus. " Tryouts tomorrow" Atticus continued. " Ten in the morning."

" I'm on it" Albus smiled, distracted from his thoughts. He entered his dormitory and stretched out on his bed, his two friends right behind him. " Didn't you say you might try out?" he asked Morrison.

Morrison gave a hearty laugh and sat on his own bed. " I say lots of things Al, that doesn't mean I do them!"

Albus awoke the next morning refreshed and joyful. Having missed the last game of the previous year, Albus was more than excited to get back on the pitch and play Quidditch with his team. All thoughts of Mirra and Fairhart pushed from his head, he was positively beaming a breakfast.

" Clear skies" he said merrily, glancing up at the bewitched ceiling as he casually poured syrup over his pancakes.

" You sure that you want to eat mate?" Morrison asked him through a stifled yawn. " You've got to be out there in an hour, you don't want to vomit during tryouts."

Albus shrugged. " I'll be fine. I wonder who else is trying out though..."

" How many spots are missing?" Morrison asked.

Both of them were distracted when Scorpius spoke up however. " Al, did you hear about this?"

As usual, he had the *Morning Prophet* propped up against his glass of orange juice.

" Huh? Hear about what?"

Scorpius passed the paper over to him. " There was a riot outside of the Ministry of Magic last week. Kingsley Shacklebolt's just released an official statement on it."

Albus expected to scour the paper for the article in question, but it ended up being on the second page.

Minister Of Magic Defends Auror Office

After almost a week of silence, Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt has given an official statement on the riot that occurred outside of the telephone booth that leads directly to the interior of the Ministry of Magic's main building.

" We are disgusted at the actions of both Ministry Personnel and of the citizens in question. The Ministry of Magic fully apologizes to anyone who was hurt during the riot. It should be noted, however, that the riot was occurring in clear view of muggles, and the Ministry officials present, including Mr. Weasley and Mr. Raytes, had no choice but to act swiftly."

The riot occurred the previous week in the early hours of the morning. More than fifty wizards and witches arrived outside of the entrance to the Ministry of Magic, carrying picket signs and screaming profanities about Harry " The Boy Who Lived" Potter.

" What?" Albus stared down at the paper in disbelief. Why were people cursing his father?

" Keep reading" Scorpius said.

Albus turned the page and continued.

The reasoning behind the riot is apparently Potters inability to catch Reginald Ares, highly dangerous ex - auror and former Headmaster of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry who has been on the run for more than three months now. Despite Potters claims that the Auror Office is doing everything that it can to ensure his capture, his recent sighting and evasion of Ministry Officials seems to show otherwise.

" I contacted the Ministry at about one, maybe one thirty in the morning" says Bradley Barker, the civilian who caught sight of Ares. " They didn't show up for forty five minutes, at which time he had already long since disappeared."

Forty five minutes is an awful long time, though members of the Ministry deny that it took this long, and continue to defend Potter vehemently.

" Harry Potter is doing everything that he can to find Ares, as well as his accomplice" says

Maximus Tothill, a fellow auror. " You have to understand that we receive calls about Ares every twenty minutes, and at the time Potter was investigating a different sighting in Bristol. The fear that is gripping the wizarding community is taking its toll on us, Ares is seen everywhere. Though this sighting proved to be viable, there is nothing to suggest that it received any less attention than any other sighting."

So is that the truth? Perhaps, but Potter has reason to defend and aid Ares. Though little is known on their mysterious past, top correspondent Rita Skeeter is brimming with cold hard facts -

Albus angrily threw the paper, accidentally knocking over Morrisons glass of orange juice as he did so.

" What was that for!" he exclaimed, hastily standing up to avoid it.

" Sorry!" Albus said, and he clumsily fumbled around with napkins in an attempt to wipe the orange juice up from the table.

Scorpius pulled out his wand and lazily waved it. " *Scourgify!*"

The mess evaporated at once, but now it was Scorpius who turned to him. " I take it you read the whole thing?"

Albus sneered while Morrison continued to fume. " A little more than half" he said. " I stopped at Skeeter. Everyone knows that she lies about everything. I don't get why people are picketing my dad though. Why are they even so scared of Ares if he's not doing anything!"

" I suppose it's what he *can* do, really" Scorpius said. " I mean, if he's so dangerous and hasn't been caught, that means he's something to worry about. Regardless of what his intentions are."

" His intentions are to hide" Albus spat out." Not much else he can do, the damn Wand won't work for him. And really, claiming that my dad isn't really trying to catch him...What are they playing at?"

" Don't blame the reporters mate" Morrison said. He had picked up the paper and was now skimming over it. " Blame those blokes with the picket signs. What actually happened at the riot?"

Scorpius answered him.

" Apparently a group of people were marching outside of the telephone box, hassling Ministry employees who were just coming in to work. A couple aurors- Albus' uncle included - got involved and some people got roughed up. Completely reasonable reaction though. Muggles were in the area."

Albus face was still red with anger. Those people were blaming his father like it was his fault that Ares and Darvy were on the loose. Accusing him of not actually looking for them. As if they were two mediocre wizards who could be found easily. He'd like to see those people with the picket signs try and catch them, rather than putting all of the blame on his dad.

" Whatever, I'm not going to let this bother me" he said suddenly, piling his plate with more pancakes. He had woken up in a fantastic mood this morning, and he refused to let anything other than his performance during tryouts change his mind on that. " Today's going to be a good day" he said firmly.

Half of an hour later, he was still saying it under his breath. He stood in a group of his fellow Slytherins at the center of the Quidditch Pitch. Atticus was pacing back and forth in front of them, apparently deep in thought at how to word his speech. After several moments, he finally spoke.

" I've been on this team since my third year" he said to the quiet crowd. " And I haven't won the Cup once. I thought last year would be it...but it wasn't."

Albus seemed to shrink a bit in the crowd, though no one seemed ready to blame him. On the contrary, they were all staring fiercely ahead. Albus noticed that the crowd for tryouts was much bigger this year. Indeed, it was almost the same size as the crowd in the stands. Albus glanced left at this thought and saw Morrison and Scorpius wave to him from a row in the center. Before he could wave back Atticus continued.

" This is my last chance" Atticus continued, still pacing. " So if I pick you, that makes you the best of the best. I'm not taking any risks this year. So if you don't get the spot, or you end up as reserve...well then I'm sorry. Now I've already got my two chasers picked out, because I

know I play well with them, but both beater spots are open, as is keeper and seeker. So sort yourselves into groups."

Albus immediately found himself joined by the smaller students in the crowd ; seekers tended to be lighter and speedier. He pushed the thoughts of what he had read in the Prophet from his mind- now was the time to concentrate.

" Okay, everyone but the seekers, move yourselves over to the stands. Seekers, mount your brooms. I'm going to release the snitch, and the first one of you lot to catch it gets the position. Understood?"

Albus and four other Slytherins, all of whom were just a tad bit bigger than him, nodded their heads. Atticus held up a small case and flew fifty feet into the air.

" Ready?" he called out.

" Yes!" they all called back.

Albus saw Atticus click the box open - a glimmer of gold emerged from it and began rising through the air. " Go!"

Albus kicked off from the ground hard. He felt the rushing of wind beside him, and immediately felt exhilarated. His broom was much faster than that of his opposition, it was now only a matter of finding the snitch. His eyes scanned the skies and he immediately saw it. He was not the first to do so however. Someone else was already accelerating towards it. He pushed forward and heard nothing- he was no going so fast that the wind blocked out all sound. He reached the hovering snitch right before his competition did. With one quick swipe, it was in the palm of his hand.

He heard clapping from the students in the stands, as well as Morrison whistling. Grinning ear to ear, he flew back down to where Atticus was. He noticed that he was wearing a similar grin. " Outstanding Potter" he said. " I had a feeling that you'd end up back on the team."

He shook Atticus' hand, then gave him the snitch. " So did I" he said merrily. He was about to say something else when he noticed who else was in the stands. Amidst the sea of Slytherins, there was a single Gryffindor. One with flaming red hair, who was clapping quite enthusiastically.

He smiled. He had not yet had the chance to speak to his sister since her sorting. They had waved to each other a couple of times, but their meetings were far too infrequent for them to have an actual conversation. In fact, he had not actually had the chance to speak to any of his younger cousins.

" I'll be back in a sec" he told Atticus, who gave him a clap on the shoulder before he began walking towards the stands.

" Beaters next!" Atticus called out.

A large group of burly older students shuffled past Albus as he approached his sister. She was sitting on the very bottom row, looking quite lost - it may have been her first time on the Pitch. He sat down next to her and smiled. " So what do you think of Hogwarts?" he asked. She grinned widely. " It's so big!" she said. " I got lost so much during my first week alone. Thankfully Rose and her friend Donny started walking me to my classes."

Albus winced at the affectionate term that she had used for Donovan Hornsbrook. For a moment, he contemplated telling his younger sister that " Donny" had not only punched him in the face, but had also been on the receiving end of James' assault. He decided against it at the moment before speaking.

" That's cool" he said through gritted teeth. " Nice of them to do that. How about Hugo? And Fred and Molly and Lu-"

" All fine" Lily cut him off. " They had to expand both dormitories though, because it wasn't just our family that got sorted into Gryffindor. More than half of the kids were."

" Yeah I noticed" he said dryly. " How's James?" he asked, trying to steer the conversation away from Gryffindors unequivocal popularity. " I haven't seen him around much."

" Me neither" Lily said.

" New girlfriend?" Albus inquired, glad this his brother was fully over the heartbreak that had occurred last year.

His sister shrugged. " I don't think so. I think it's the whole prefect thing. He's really taking it seriously. Patrolling the halls, reporting people, helping the teachers...it's weird."

" It's just a power trip" he told her. " He'll settle back down once Quidditch starts up."

" Yeah I guess" she responded. Albus noticed that she looked slightly worried about something however.

" Are you okay?" he asked.

Lily started to say something, but first looked around as though she wanted to be sure that they couldn't be overheard. " I wanted to talk to you about something" she said in a lower tone.

Albus leaned in to hear her. " What's up?"

" Did you see the papers? About the riot? About dad?"

Albus scoffed. " Don't even pay attention to it Lils" he said. " People are just blaming dad because he's famous, they think that'll it get them attention. And don't listen to that Skeeter hag either, she's all lies. Aunt Hermione told me herself that Skeeter couldn't write the truth if she tried."

" Aunt Hermione said that?" Lily asked, looking slightly more relieved. Albus knew why. Aunt Hermione was the smartest person in family - you could count on anything she said. " Okay good" she continued. " Because they're saying that the guy on the loose and dad used to-" " Potter!" someone said, and both Albus and his sister turned.

It was Atticus. He had rushed back to the stands to talk, but had slowed down upon seeing Lily, who was wearing a scarlet and golden scarf. He eyed her warily. " This is your sister right?" he said.

" Yeah" Albus answered, a little defensively. He recalled that in his first year he had been kicked off of the pitch by the captain of the Gryffindor team. He was not going to let his sister suffer a similar fate.

" Just checking" Atticus answered, a little relieved. " Had to make sure it wasn't spy. C'mon back to the field though, I've got a team to introduce to you."

Albus said goodbye to his sister and followed Atticus back to the center of the Pitch, where his new team was standing, the other tryouts having went to the stands.

All in all, Albus was pleased with the team, even if it was similar to the team from last year.

True to his word, Atticus had kept both of the chasers that had accompanied him the previous year. Patrick Parcher, who was now in his seventh year, also stayed on as a beater. Do to the other beater graduating, a fifth year named Holden Rawn got the position, and as the Keeper had also graduated, the spot was given to a fourth year named Stephen Nott. Albus was still the youngest on the team, but he took pride in knowing that he at least had more experience than the new recruits.

" So this is the squad" Atticus said, sizing his team up while the students in the stands filed out. " I've got a good feeling. I really do. This is the year that we bring the cup home. Party in the common room!"

The party lasted throughout the entire day, though Albus hardly participated. He had shunned his homework for the majority of the week, and most of it was due Monday and Tuesday.

Knowing full well that he probably wasn't going to get around to it tomorrow, he instead settled himself at one of nice stone cut tables and began copying Scorpius' work.

It was arduous, copying the positions of the planets for Astronomy and the correct wand movements for certain charms. This was even further hampered by the fact that Scorpius seemed to have been in a hurry when he was writing - his handwriting was nearly as illegible as Morrisons this time.

" Scorpius!" he called out into the party, though he felt that his voice may have been drowned out- someone had brought in a magically reinforced radio and was blasting the Wizarding Wireless Network - Sound of a Thousand Thestrals (a group that his brother was quite fond of) was debuting their new single. Thankfully, Scorpius heard him and appeared at his side, holding a glass of pumpkin juice.

" What's up mate? Here to tell me about Morrison?"

" No I - what?"

Scorpius jerked his head to the left and Albus saw Morrison sitting in one of the more comfortable armchairs talking to two attractive fourth years. Both girls were sitting on the arms of either side of the chair and were laughing merrily. It appeared as though he was using his older appearance as a conversation starter, as he stretched his legs out to show his height and even pointed at his mustache once.

" I swear it's fake" Scorpius said, taking a sip of his pumpkin juice. " I've never seen a thirteen year old kid with a mustache. It must be fake."

" Nah, he just went through his growth spurts early, you heard his voice" Albus said. "

Anyway, no, I need you to decipher this. Does that say ' west' or ' rest'?"

Scorpius bent down and squinted at his own work. " Looks like best. But don't copy it word for word!"

" I'm not!" Albus assured him, though even as he said it he glanced at his own work and saw that there were very few things not alike about them. " Just go" he told his friend. " I'll figure the rest out."

Scorpius rejoined the party, but in the next fifteen minutes he barely got any copying done anyway. There was just too much noise around. He reminded himself that Mirra had had the same problem when there was a party in her common room, and immediately remembered what James had said about how parties should be stopped if they were distracting the students. The Slytherin prefects didn't seem to care however, and eventually Albus resigned from his work and went to bed.

" It's only ten o'clock!" Scorpius called to him, but he shrugged and entered his dormitory anyway.

Albus lay in his bed moments later, trying his hardest to sleep despite the noise going on in the common room. Surely their head of house would come break the party? But no, their head of house was Fairhart, who had already proven his uselessness in Albus' eyes.

He rolled over and tried to block the noise out by thinking of other things. No matter what he started with however, he always ended on the same person. Mirra. Apart from saying hello in Potions, he hadn't even talked to her today. Was that bad? Why hadn't she started a conversation with him? Was she mad at him?

Don't be stupid he said to himself. She wasn't mad at him, there was no reason for her to be mad at him. He was blowing things out of proportion. Maybe...maybe she ignored him because she liked him back!

He grinned widely at the thought, but no sooner had he done so than the ridiculousness of it crossed his mind. *That* was blowing things out of proportion. So they hadn't talked. Big deal. maybe it had nothing to do with him. Maybe she was just tired. But tired from what? From being up all night? Talking to that pompous fool Charles Eckley?

Jealousy burned in his stomach at once. What was wrong with him? Why was he even thinking of this? What he needed now was to get some sleep. And yet that was impossible with the noise of the party. No, he didn't need sleep. What he really needed was a quiet place. A quiet place to sit and think.

Stricken by a sudden thought, he leapt from his bed and began rifling through his trunk. Book after book he pulled out until he found it. Nestled in the very corner of his trunk, he yanked until he was holding it in his hands. His invisibility cloak.

Albus was very fond of this cloak, very fond of it indeed. He knew that though rare, there were other invisibility cloaks in the world, but he always liked to think that his was just a bit more special. Perhaps it was because it had been passed down from his father, whom he knew for a fact had inherited it from his father. For a fleeting moment, he vaguely wondered how many generations this cloak went back. He thought it must have been three, maybe even four. In one motion, the cloak was tightly secured around him and he was completely invisible. The cloak would be essential in this excursion. Third through fifth year students had a curfew of nine o' clock, meaning that he was already pushing his luck, but what's more, the Room of Requirement - the room that he intended of going to for his peace and quiet - was all the way on the seventh floor.

He re-entered the common room, this time fully invisible, and saw that the party was still in full swing. Scorpius was leaning against the wall talking to Bartleby, while Atticus and his friend Patrick were in the center of the crowd dancing exuberantly with two seventh year girls. He walked by Morrison, who was still chatting up the two fourth year girls.

" Yeah I was going to try out" he said, giving a small shrug. " But the only spot I play is Seeker, and I wasn't just going to go and take my best friends position, ya know?"

They both nodded, but Albus merely snorted, causing Morrison to look around wildly before returning to his conversation. He reached the stone wall that led to the dungeon corridor.

Everyone was much too preoccupied to see it open and close, and soon enough he was walking through the labyrinth, enjoying the silence of the castle late at night.

He didn't exactly have a plan on what he was going to do once he reached the room, but he was excited nonetheless. He had scarcely used the Room of Requirement the previous year, and was eager to be able to put it to good use.

He reached the seventh floor in a matter of minutes, seeing no one but Peeves, who had been drifting along a corridor whistling loudly. He walked down the seventh floor corridor casually,

and was close to reaching the blank stretch of wall -

" Al?"

Albus spun around so fast that the invisibility cloak nearly slipped off of him. He managed to hold on to it however, and then peered into the darkness. Who had followed him? And more importantly, who could see him?

But then it all became clear. From the shadows, a small light appeared. James emerged, squinting and holding , in addition to his lit wand, a piece of parchment. Albus understood the situation at once. His brother was holding the Marauder's Map.

Knowing that his disguise was useless, he pulled the cloak off of himself.

" Al, what are you doing up?"

Albus hesitated. The Room of Requirement was his secret, he didn't want his brother to know about it. He thought of an alibi almost immediately.

" On my way to the bathroom" he said.

James frowned. " On the seventh floor? There's four more going up from the dungeons."

Albus grinned sheepishly. His first alibi had bought him enough time to think of his second at least. " All right, you caught me, I'm looking for the kitchens. I wanted a night time snack."

" The kitchens are in the basement, only accessible through a portrait of fruit" James said darkly.

Albus sighed heavily. " Well then I guess I'm going in the wrong direction then eh?" he said with a shaky laugh, though his brothers face remained stony.

" Why don't you tell me what you're really doing?" James said.

Now it was Albus' turn to frown. Why did it matter? He wasn't hurting anyone...

" I'm just wandering around okay?" he said, a little defensively. " I'm on my way back now..."

" You can't just go wandering around whenever you like" James said. " It's well past your curfew. You know better."

" I know" Albus said, narrowing his eyes slightly. It was one thing to be told to go back to his dormitory, but James had not done that. He had reprimanded him.

" What are you doing up?" Albus asked scathingly.

" Patrolling. As a prefect it's my job, and I have every right to do so."

" Whatever" Albus said, and he made to walk past his brother. James held out his arm however.

" Your cloak" he said.

" What about it?"

James eyed him. " I need to confiscate your cloak."

Albus stared at him, trying to let the absurdity of his brothers statement sink in. Was he actually going to take the cloak.?

" Very funny" Albus said, thinking that it must be a joke. " Look I'm on my way back now..."

" I'm not joking" James said, and he certainly looked serious. " Hogwarts' student code of conduct states that no third, fourth, or fifth year students, bar prefect or head boy or girl, is permitted to be outside of his or her common room after nine o' clock without adult supervision or the expressed permission of an authority figure. Prefect code of conduct states that if any individual is using a device as a means of violating their code it is to be confiscated. Furthermore, any student who -"

" Alright I get it, you read the damn book!" Albus snapped, in complete disbelief at what he was hearing. His sister had been right...James was taking this seriously. " But what about the Map then? That's not illegal?"

" There's no ban on any devices for prefects, so long as it doesn't harm anyone."

Albus sneered. " So this is what you do all night? Wander the castle and use the Map to catch kids who are out of bed? That's real cool James."

" Watch your tone!" James said, and for the first time in the argument, he seemed to have lost his composure slightly. " The Map isn't the subject at hand. You are using your cloak to directly violate a rule-"

" This cloak wasn't such a bad device when you were using it to sneak around last year!" Albus shouted menacingly. " Or did you already forget about that? You have the audacity to confiscate something that you used to use!"

" That was last year, before I became a prefect, before I had responsibilities!" James replied, a little louder.

Albus gave a derisive laugh. " Oh, but that was the only time you ever broke rules right? You never blew up a toilet, or jinxed anybody, and got into a fight, or, oh, I don't know, set a

damn hallway on fire!"

Albus saw his brothers nostrils flare, and took a great amount of pride in seeing his ears turn red as well.

" Whatever I did in the past" James said quietly, " Is entirely irrelevant. I have a job now. And my job is to confiscate your cloak."

" And do what?" Albus spat. " Hand it over to McGonagall?"

" Confiscated items need not be turned in to Hogwarts staff unless proven dangerous.

Otherwise, they are to be -"

Albus cut him off with another scathing laugh.

" You know what I think James? I think you just love having power over people! You were always a bully, only now you think that it's justified because you have a shiny little badge on your robes! Well guess what, you've been bullying me for years, and it stops here! You're not getting this cloak, and you know why that is? Because dad gave it to me, and nothing, not even that shiny badge, can change that!"

He breathed heavily after his outburst, staring at his brother with one of the most contemptuous glares that he could muster. He had known right from the beginning that James was going to abuse his power, but that he was going to use it against Albus- and more specifically, to take his cloak - that was more than he could handle.

James didn't so much as blink when Albus had been yelling, though his entire face now matched his ears. He looked angrier than Albus had ever seen him. When he spoke however, his voice was still quiet, and it was easy to tell from his eloquence that he was still quoting the rules.

" Failure to comply and hand over the device will result in a detention-"

" Fine!" Albus shouted. " Give me the damn detention!"

" Fine!" James replied, and now, for the first time, he sounded openly distraught. " But just so you know, any member of the house Quidditch team who is issued a detention isn't allowed to play in their next game!"

Albus winced. He had forgotten about that, though he didn't see how. It had been a detention for fighting that had stopped him from playing in the final game last year. He imagined what Atticus would say if he were banned from the first game of the season. If you counted last year, that would be two in a row. He would be kicked off of the team for sure...

" And Lily told me that you made the team again" James continued. " So it's either hand over the cloak, and have it returned to you after a sufficient amount of time without breaking any rules, or you can miss the first match of the season."

Albus stared at him, still livid. " You're out of order mate, and you know it" he said quietly.

" Look, the cloak should be confiscated and you should miss the first game, just because of your attitude towards an authority figure. I'm doing you a favor because you're my brother!"

That was the last straw. Furious, Albus stepped forward and pushed the bunched up cloak into his brothers arms. " There!" he spat. " Confiscated! Happy?"

His brother remained silent, giving Albus the perfect opportunity to finish saying exactly what was on his mind. " And you can stop doing me favors by the way, because you're not my brother anymore! Now you're just a prefect!"

And with that, he pushed past his brother and marched down the stairs, taking care to make as much noise as he wanted despite the lateness of the hour. He didn't bother to look back once, and didn't care if his brother had anything to say. No, all that mattered now, as he walked back to his common room, was that he was completely outraged, and, more importantly, completely visible.

Chapter 7: Secrets And Strategies

"Okay, so for the last time, just to make sure, you're definitely not getting the cloak back?"

"Dammit Morrison, if I have to say it one more time-"

"Just checking!"

It was Monday morning, and they were sitting in the Great Hall for breakfast. It had been something of a shock for the students of Slytherin house on Saturday night, when Albus had returned to the common room and immediately went to bed, despite no one having seen him leave. As Albus had spent the entirety of Sunday in his dormitory, so apoplectic with fury that he even missed meals, he had not had the chance to tell his best friends about James'

betrayal up until now.

" I just can't believe it" Morrison added, a sad expression on his face. He mixed his porridge around with his spoon, but he seemed to have lost his appetite.

" Can't believe what?" Scorpius asked dryly, taking a bite of his bagel. " That James did his job?"

Albus stared at him. " You can't be serious? You're taking his side?"

Scorpius chewed slowly, then wiped his mouth with his napkin before speaking. " Look, I think it's a shame that you don't have the cloak anymore, but honestly, what did you expect? He's a prefect. Did you want special treatment because you're his brother?"

" I didn't say I wanted special treatment" Albus said darkly, a bit of the temper that he had yesterday returning. " But any other prefect would have let me off with a warning."

" Any other prefect wouldn't have seen you" Scorpius said. " Only James had the Map."

" That's beside the point-"

" Look it doesn't matter who was right and who was wrong and who should have gotten special treatment" Morrison butted in. " What matters is getting the cloak back. I'm sure if you just talked to your brother-"

Now it was Albus' turn to cut his friend off. He gave a shaky laugh before Morrison could finish his sentence. " I'm not apologizing for anything I said, and I'm not asking for the cloak back either. If he wants us to talk about something, I need him to come up to me, apologize for being a prat, return the cloak, and admit that he was wrong. Any order will do."

And despite both of his friends efforts to get him to reconsider, he refused to budge for the rest of breakfast. Only when the bell rang did the topic change.

" Any news on what Hagrid's got planned today?" Morrison asked.

Albus groaned. He had completely forgotten that they were going to be working with a new creature today. As much as he liked Hagrid, Albus had to admit that Care For Magical Creatures was quickly joining Defence Against the Dark Arts as one of the classes that he dreaded attending. They had managed to get through bowtruckles in two additional lessons, which had relieved him at the time. What followed next was a string of creatures that made Albus wish the bowtruckles would return. The crups (ferocious creatures that looked like dogs, only with forked tails) had kept Albus at a distance for an entire period with some of the most intimidating barking that he had ever heard. He had endured several small burns from a firecrab a few lessons later (Morrisons robes had even caught fire) and the last creature that they had studied, which looked like a cross between a pig and a demon, had smelled so bad that Albus nearly threw up twice.

What was more, though he didn't admit it to his friends, was that Care For Magical Creatures also seemed to be the class in which he was most likely to make a fool of himself in front of Mirra. Indeed, she had even jokingly offered to hold his hair back after seeing him come close to vomiting with the nogtails the previous lesson. Pushing the thought from his mind, he and his friends descended down the grassy slopes to the the edge of the Forest, where the Gryffindors had already gathered.

They arrived just as Hagrid was emerging from his cabin. He approached his students, grinning from ear to ear as he did so. The class began muttering, but their professor silenced them.

" Just sit tight" he said. " I gots a special surprise for yeh. These are rare, these are. Makes tha' other stuff look little baby kittens!"

And with that, he jogged into the dark and dense Forest, effectively terrifying every single one of his students. There were suddenly whispers throughout the crowd.

" What do you think it is?"

" Something illegal, I bet"

" Are chimaera eggs rare? He couldn't have one, right?"

The class continued muttering for several more moments, though Albus barely registered what they were saying. Standing in the back of the crowd, he was peering around people to surreptitiously glance at Mirra.

" What are you doing?" Scorpius asked him.

" Huh?"

He had not realized how obvious he had been, though he was thankfully saved from the awkward moment by Hagrid, who returned from the Forest holding two leashes - for two of the most dangerous looking creatures that Albus had ever seen.

They appeared to be a cross between boars, rams, and even a little bit of camel. They were

massive in size- shorter, but much thicker than the students, though the humps on their backs made them appear close to equal height. They were a deep shade of purple, and they were snarling and sniffing at the ground with their snout like noses. Albus didn't see how they could stand, considering the massive amount of weight that they were putting on their four skinny legs, but they seemed to be coping. Most interesting of all was the two golden horns protruding from their heads however- so shiny they could blind you and so sharp looking that they might cut through steel.

" Graphorns!" Hagrid said excitedly, while the class recoiled in fear.

The graphorns, though very powerful, seemed to be unable to escape from Hagrid. He was holding on to each of the leashes with one of his hands, and didn't seem to have any problem holding them still. Only once did one of them suddenly lunge forward, causing Hagrid to give a small pull to bring it closer to him.

" Powerful beasts, but fascinatin' all the same. These are rare, these are. Found on'y up in the mountains. Small group of 'em lives in the Forest though, no clue how they got there."

The students didn't quite seem to register what he had said however. Fascinating though they may be, the graphorns massive size had seemingly made every student interested in only one thing - staying as far away from them as possible.

" What do they do?" someone from Gryffindor asked.

" Good question!" Hagrid said. " Can anybody tell me what the horns are for?"

" Killing?" Morrison spoke up, and a few people laughed.

Predictably, Rose raised her hand and offered a more serious answer. " The horns of the graphorn, though extremely hard to get, are the most prominent ingredient in most antidotes, including the immensely difficult to make antidote for doxy poison."

Hagrid beamed. " I was actually lookin' more fer Morrisons' answer" he said truthfully. " But yer both right. Take five points ter Gryffindor and Slytherin!"

Morrison looked bewildered; it may have been his first time ever earning points. Before Hagrid could resume speaking however, one of the graphorns made a powerful attempt to escape, and Hagrid was forced to give a tremendous pull as the students all leapt backwards.

" Sorry bout tha" Hagrid said sheepishly. " Anyway, like Rose said, the horns are extremely hard to get. They've got powerful skin, more powerful than even dragon hide. It would take a powerful bit of magic to subdue 'em, and even then, it's got to be done quick, 'caue they get better fast."

" Wait, they take their horns when they're still alive?" Albus spoke up, a little shocked at the compassion that he was feeling for the creatures that were so dangerously close to impaling him. " And they just live without horns?"

" They grow back over time" Hagrid answered him. " But yeah, they take 'em while they're still alive. I don' think it hurts as bad as you think though Al, they got a high resistance to pain. It'd be summat like havin' a tooth pulled."

Just then, as though the graphorns understood what they were talking about, both of them lunged forward simultaneously, and despite Hagrids strength, he actually had to take several steps forward before he could pull them back. So forceful was his pull that the graphorns, still snarling, were forced to stand on their hind legs to not fall over.

The students screamed and moved back further, some of them even tripping over their robes in their hurry.

" Sorry!" Hagrid bellowed. " Los' control for a sec'."

A second had been all that was needed however, as the students flat out refused to go any nearer. Hagrid, sensing their fear, seemed to come to the conclusion that graphorns had been a bad idea.

" Okay, I'm gonna take these two back to the Fores" he said, still struggling slightly to keep a hold of the two beasts. " You lot jus' stay put!"

And without further ado, he entered the forest once more. The sounds of the graphorns snarling eventually ceased, and soon enough the students were muttering anxiously about what would have happened had the graphorns broken their leashes.

After five more minutes however, it appeared as though Hagrid was having a hard time finding the beasts' home, as he had still not returned. Several students sat down on the grass and rested, while others chatted aimlessly. Albus was just thinking about if James had told Rose what had happened when he heard her yell behind him.

" Albus Severus Potter!"

It was the second time that she used his full name when yelling for him, and the first time had

not been for a very good reason. He turned around on the spot and saw Rose fighting her way through a group of students. Mirra and Eckley were sitting down on the grass a few yards away.

"How dare you say those things to your brother!" Rose said the second that they were face to face.

Albus heaved a sigh. "Don't start Rosie..."

"No, I'm starting! You were caught out of bed, breaking the rules and you know it! What was he supposed to do!"

"Will you keep it down!" he barked back. "What did James tell you?"

She explained, briefly, what James had told her. It was, for the most part, an entirely accurate account. Indeed, the only thing missing was the invisibility cloak. Albus could only assume that James had not told her about it so that she wouldn't take it to McGonagall personally. The entire argument however, was correct word for word.

"Just leave it be Rose" Scorpius said. "They're brothers, they'll sort it out themselves..."

She silenced him with a look, and immediately continued attacking Albus. "The next time that you see James, you need to go and apologize! Lily's distraught, she feels like she has to take sides!"

"No one has to take sides!" Albus said. "Except you apparently! This doesn't concern you Rose!"

She opened her mouth, ready to tell him exactly how much it concerned her, but she was cut off by Mirra. She had walked over and moved in between them; Albus saw that Eckley was now accompanied by Hornsbrook instead.

"He's right Rose" she said, and Albus immediately felt a rush of gratitude for her. "This is between them. James didn't ask you to do or say anything."

Rose stared at her coldly for a second before replying. "Fine!" she said, and with that she marched off back to the side of the class that was wearing gold and scarlet.

"Sorry about all that" Mirra muttered once her friend was out of earshot.

He was so focused on her defending him that he didn't immediately register what she had said. He finally got around to it, though.

"Whatever" he said, and he noticed that his voice, as it now tended to do, had slightly deepened.

"To be honest though, I think you should try and sort things out with James. You too get along so well usually" she said.

"It's all a ruse" he replied with a shrug. "We really don't. We fight all of the time at home, it's just that here we're usually separated."

This was entirely true. His relationship with his brother did change dramatically when they were at Hogwarts. James was slightly more protective of him, and strangely, Albus didn't mind it nearly as much as he would at home. He supposed that it had felt good knowing that his brother would stick up for him.

"Well, ruse or not, you're here for nine or so months a year" Mirra said. "So I'd try and work things out if I were you."

Albus frowned and shrugged once more. He didn't want to make any promises that he couldn't keep. Mirra seemed to notice that their conversation was going nowhere, as she quickly started a new one.

"Excited about Hogsmeade next Saturday?" she asked him.

"Yeah. It'll be nice to get out of the castle, at least. Already have your day all planned out?" he asked, glad of the change in topic.

"Not exactly" she said with a grin. "I was actually thinking we could all go together?"

Albus froze on the spot, he was sure that his heart had missed a beat. Had she said 'all go together' or simply 'go together'?

"What...me and you?" he asked hesitantly.

She gave him a strange look. "Yes" she said slowly. "And Morrison and Rose and Scorpius..."

"Oh right!" he said quickly. "Yeah, that's what I meant. Me and you and everyone else...yeah."

"Well nothing's concrete yet" she said, glancing back over her shoulder. Rose had joined Eckley and Hornsbrook on the grass. "But if nothing else comes up..."

"Yeah, that sounds great!" he said. "Right guys?"

He turned to look at his friends and saw that they were not paying attention. They were

also both sitting on the grass, Scorpius attempting to help Morrison with homework that, Albus reminded himself, he had never gotten around to doing either. He made to mention this to Mirra, but just then Hagrid emerged from the Forest, panting heavily.

" Okay!" he said, taking a large breath. " I think we'll just *discuss* graphorns fer the rest of the lesson!"

Albus had already been excited for the trip to Hogsmeade, but he found that the mere thought of it now carried him through the next couple of days. Though it wasn't even October yet, Albus found himself struggling with his workload, so much so that his lack of sleep even affected his first Quidditch practice of the year.

" C'mom Al!" Patrick Parcher bellowed at him as he saved him from a bludger that the other beater had hit. " You could have swerved that one on your own!"

" The sun was in my eyes!" Albus said quickly, but the truth was that his eyes had almost been closed. He had gotten an hour of sleep the previous night.

" You look like you're about to fall asleep!"

Atticus immediately flew in between them. " Nice job Pat" he said. " You okay Al? Your head hasn't been the game."

" I'm just tired" he admitted. " Not a lot of sleep. Doing homework all night."

Atticus heaved a sigh. " Who cares about grades! That's not more important than Quidditch! You need to buckle down and get serious. Get your rest. Gryffindor has two new beaters this year, one in your year, and one in his seventh! And believe me, you don't want a bludger to the face from that one!"

" Alright" Albus said. " I'll go to bed early tonight."

Albus knew at once that this plan wouldn't work however. Homework was a big reason behind his lack of sleep, but he at least had Scorpius helping him. No, a lot of the times he was kept up by something else.

It seemed as though James was simply not going to cave, and Albus was beginning to grow nervous. His cloak had been confiscated days ago, and yet James had made no effort to apologize, let alone talk to him. Twice he saw him in the hallways, and both times his brother marched past him without so much as sparing him a glance. What's worse, he had the feeling that Rose was not the only one taking sides. His younger cousins also no longer waved to him in the halls, and even Lily only did it halfheartedly.

" Well, you should have expected this, to be honest" Morrison said, spreading marmalade on his fifth piece of toast at breakfast on Sunday morning.

" Expected what? My family to turn against me?" Albus asked bitterly.

" No, but them taking his side at least. They're all in Gryffindor, they all talk to him way more. They haven't even heard your side yet."

" Yes they did" Albus said. " James told them everything word for word except for the parts with the cloak. Whatever, I don't even care though" he added, though he knew that Morrison would see through his cold facade at once.

He returned to eating his bacon and eggs, though only to have something to do while his mind raced. He did not regret his attitude towards his brother- though admittedly, he felt that he may have crossed some sort of invisible line in claiming that they were no longer family. Just when he thought that nothing could possibly distract him from his predicament however, Scorpius spoke up for the first time during breakfast.

" Al, who was Fango Wilde?"

Albus choked on his bacon. " What?" he asked, sputtering and trying to clear his windpipe.

" Fango Wilde" Scorpius repeated, looking up from the *Morning Prophet*.

" He's the bloke that ended up being the leak in the Ministry remember? He was in the Forest with us last year, they caught him. Why?"

" Because your dad just released him from Azkaban."

Albus raised his eyebrows and and leaned over to take the newspaper from him, though Morrison batted his hand away.

" I don't think so!" he said with a scowl. " You're not knocking over my orange juice again! Scorpius can read it to you!"

" Okay fine!" Albus shot back, and he looked at Scorpius eagerly.

" There's not much to read" he said. " It just says that ' Fango Wilde, convicted of leaking

information from the Ministry of Magic to outsiders, was released from Azkaban today by Head Auror Harry Potter for cooperating and revealing the names of several witches and wizards who are said to be aiding Reginald Ares and his accomplice, Sebastian Darvy'."

" No way!" Albus blurted out, and Morrison quickly grabbed his glass of orange juice and plate of toast, as though afraid that Albus would pick them up and toss them. " My dad wouldn't do that! They must mean it was just his office!"

" It says ' Harry Potter' mate."

Albus stared blankly. What was going on? Why would his father do something like that? Why would he release a dark wizard from Azkaban, no less one who had once attacked his son? Scorpius resumed speaking, and it took all of the will power that Albus possessed to focus on his words.

" I've got to give your dad credit Al, that's probably the smartest decision that they could have made."

Albus turned to him, as did Morrison, who gave his friend a reprimand. " This isn't a time for sarcasm" he said. " Albus' dad really screwed up..."

Albus threw a furious glance at Morrison, but Scorpius held his hand up. " I'm not being sarcastic. Don't you see what he did?"

Albus and Morrison both shook their heads.

Scorpius sighed. " It's a *strategy*" he said. " For catching Ares and Darvy. Your dad knows that he can't find them on his own, they're too good at hiding. So he squeezed all of the information that he could out of someone - in this case, Wilde - and now he's using him as bait. Where's Wilde going to go? You think that they'll just let him back in the Ministry? No, he's got nothing to lose now, he's going back to Ares, and I'll bet a thousand galleons that they started tailing him the second they let him out of Azkaban."

Morrison grinned. " Genius!" he exclaimed. " They'll catch Ares for sure now! No more picket signs, right Al?"

Albus wasn't so sure however. Though everything that Scorpius said may have been true, there was still no getting around the fact that Wilde was dangerous. So what if he was being tailed? What's stopping him from murdering, torturing? He had nothing to lose right?

He recalled what his father had once told him when he was much younger. He had asked his father what an auror was, what he and Uncle Ron did for a living. *We find the dangerous people, Albus. We find them and we lock them up, so that they can't be dangerous anymore.*

But he wasn't just locking them up. He was letting them out too. Did the fact that Wilde could lead them to Ares make things different? If someone got hurt in the process, was it still worth it?

Albus spent the next few days in solitude, keeping himself shut up in his dormitory as he tried to keep up with his work. As if dealing with the loss of communication with his brother wasn't enough, he was now having dreams about his father, horrible nightmares that all seemed to end up the same way - with his father admitting that the Ministry of Magic was corrupt, and that everything that he had told Albus about justice and security when he was younger had been a lie.

" I didn't know you were so vehement about stuff like this" Scorpius said to him during Charms on Thursday. " I mean, it's just one person, and like I said, it's a strategy for catching-"

" I know" Albus said through gritted teeth. " And I'm really not usually bothered by it, my family talks about how the Ministry screws up all the time. It's just that this was my dad's decision. If Wilde hurts someone it's his fault."

" Boys, try and pay attention!" Flitwick squeaked from atop his pile of books, and Albus and Scorpius' conversation ended at once. " Now as I was saying, we're going to be focusing on a new kind of charm, one far more difficult than any other that you've attempted at Hogwarts thus far. Summoning is not normally taught until fourth year, but I think that so long as we understand the basics of it, come next year we will have a head start on its derivative, the slightly more complex Banishing Charm..."

Perhaps Albus was simply horrible at summoning things, but it seemed as though his constant

thinking of his father and brother was now affecting classwork in addition to homework. For an hour and a half the students tried summoning quills and book into their hands, but he seemed unable to do so.

Thankfully, other people showed that they were struggling just as much, as only Scorpius had managed to summon something, and even then his quill had stopped and dropped halfway.

"Remember to concentrate entirely on the object! It needs to be your sole desire! And then, say the incantation!" Professor Flitwick squeaked out.

"*Accio!*" the entire class cried, but alas, nothing happened. The bell then rang, signaling the end of the unsuccessful lesson.

"Wow that's tricky" Scorpius said as they exited the classroom, though he looked smug nonetheless.

Morrison was quick to agree. "That's probably the hardest thing we've tried in Charms. Think so Al? Al?"

Albus was not listening, his brother had just walked passed them, his eyes not even focusing on his brother for a single second.

The Saturday of the Hogsmeade visit came faster than Albus could have possibly hoped, as the previous few days had ended up being quite terrible. Hoping that the visit to the village would at least partially distract him from his family problems, he lined up with the rest of the students who were third year or above and prepared to leave the castle grounds.

"Remember!" Neville called out to the massive crowd of students. "No permission form, no leaving!"

A few students groaned, though for the most part, everyone seemed to have their permission forms.

Neville continued droning on about rules and where they were and weren't allowed to go. He was just mentioning the Shrieking Shack when Albus turned to Scorpius and asked him something.

"Have you seen Mirra?" he asked. He tried to make it sound casual, so as not to let his friends realize how important going to Hogsmeade with her was, but Scorpius didn't seem to pay it any mind. He simply looked around and shrugged.

"Well can you find her?" Albus asked a little eagerly. "She's supposed to come with us."

Scorpius heaved a sigh. "Fine" he said, and he and Morrison both began moving through the crowd of students.

Ten minutes later however, they had not returned, and Albus was growing anxious. Neville had checked everyone's permission slips and the crowd was slowly thinning. He finally saw Morrison and Scorpius walking towards him, both of them looking somewhat grim.

"Is she coming?" Albus asked.

They exchanged an all too familiar look - the look that they were both in on something that he wasn't. Then, they simultaneously shook their heads no.

"She's going to be busy" Morrison said.

"All day?" Albus asked, trying not to let how crestfallen he was show on his face. "Like, does she want to meet up with us later?"

They both shook their heads again. "All day" Scorpius said firmly.

"She said sorry" Morrison continued.

Albus frowned. "Well that's lame" he said. He didn't understand why she had waited until last minute to cancel. He had the strange suspicion that Rose was somehow involved, but hadn't Mirra stuck up for him against her?

"Well we'd better get going then" Albus said, disappointed.

His friends exchanged another glance. Irritated, Albus was right about ask them what they knew when Scorpius suddenly clutched his stomach.

"I don't know If I want to go mate" he said. "I'm not feeling well... I'd be better off catching up with some work."

"What?"

"Just not feeling well" Scorpius repeated. "If I get sick at Hogsmeade I can hardly enjoy it. Just better off relaxing here, really. Catching up on some work."

Albus looked at him in disbelief. "Okay, whatever" he said, shaking his head. "Morrison, you ready to go?"

"Ahh I don't know" Morrison said. "There'll be plenty of Hogsmeade trips. I don't want to

leave Scorpius behind..."

Albus stared at both of them, utterly perplexed as to their attitudes. They had both been excited to go to Hogsmeade, as far as he knew. Indeed, up until they went to search for Mirra, they had both been discussing it...

They exchanged another glance, while Albus merely continued to watch as the last few students left, leaving them almost alone in the Hall. "You're serious?" he asked them both. "You guys really don't want to go?"

"Next time" Morrison said, and Scorpius nodded his head in agreement.

And so it was settled; Albus spent the remainder of the day crammed in the common room, books spilled out across the tables as he and his friends did work. As nearly everyone else had went to Hogsmeade, they had the entire room to themselves. Albus noticed, however, that neither one of them seemed to be pleased with their decision to stay. They worked in silence, and Albus saw that Scorpius was writing halfheartedly, whereas Morrison had done little more than put his name and the date on a piece of parchment.

"Okay, what's the deal with you two!" Albus said furiously, slamming his quill down on the table, making both of them jump. "What's the real reason you didn't want to go to Hogsmeade?"

They exchanged, for the umpteenth time that day, a look of mutual understanding before turning to him.

"I told you, I'm not feeling well" Scorpius said earnestly.

Albus scoffed and made to say something else just as students came bustling through the common room, all of them muttering excitedly about their fantastic day.

"It's official" Bartleby said to Dante Haug, both of them beaming as they walked past the three of them. "Butterbeer is the greatest thing in the world."

"Did you get some fudge from Honeydukes?" one of the older students was saying excitedly.

"How about the Shrieking Shack, eh? I swear I heard someone screaming, next time I think I'll get a bit closer..."

Albus slammed his book shut and threw a contemptuous glare at both of his friends, then proceeded to march up to his dormitory.

What is going on today? he thought to himself as he collapsed on his bed and pulled the covers over himself. He knew that it was still early in the day, much too early to be going to bed, but it didn't matter- he wasn't tired. No, instead he found himself laying on his four poster bed in silence, thinking deeply. His brother was never going to talk to him again. Rose and his cousins seemed to be thinking along the same lines. His father was now doing things that went against everything that he had ever told him, and his friends were now keeping secrets from him!

He rolled over and buried his head under the pillows, a position that he was all too familiar with this year. He remembered something else that his father had told. *This is going to be your most normal year at Hogwarts yet.*

He groaned. Normal years at Hogwarts were nothing short of terrible.

Chapter 8: Renegades

Keen though he was to know what big secret his two best friends were hiding from him, Albus was forced to put it on hold over the next few days. His mind was still sagging under the weight of his disapproval of his father's decision, and without his brother to talk to, he found that Scorpius and Morrison were his only possible confidants. Not that they were very fond of this, of course.

"I just don't get it" Albus was still raving at breakfast on Friday morning. "I don't see why my dad would do something like that."

Morrison sighed. "Drop it" he said slowly.

"I'm not dropping it" Albus replied acidly. "This is a big deal, whether you want it to be or not!"

Scorpius snorted. "You sound like Rose" he said. He continued before Albus could curse at him. "And no, it's really not a big deal. No one's been hurt yet, and if you need any further proof that it was the right decision, I've been reading the prophet and there hasn't been a

single word about your dad. No more riots, no more picket signs. The public thinks that he knows what he's doing. You should too."

Albus folded his arms and glared at both of them, though they didn't appear to notice. Either that or they were accustomed to it, anyway. He continued eating his bacon in silence, and only when the bell rang did he speak to his friends again.

"At least we've got potions next" he said as they walked down the stairs into the dungeons. "I can finally ask Mirra what plans she had at Hogsmeade..."

He quickly glanced at both of his friends to check and see if they exchanged their usual look, and was not disappointed. For a split second, they had eyed each other anxiously.

Albus had not yet had the opportunity to talk to Mirra about her mysterious cancellation of going to Hogsmeade with him. The only other class that they had, Care For Magical Creatures, had been cancelled due to rain, and as such as he was eager to see her again. They entered the Potions classroom and he saw that the Gryffindors were already there. Mirra was sitting in between Rose and Eckley at the back table. Unsure of how Rose would react if he approached them, he instead settled himself in between Morrison and Scorpius and decided that would ask her later.

Professor Handit emerged from the back room at this moment, and to everyone's surprise, he appeared to be grinning, something that he had scarcely done in his previous lessons.

"Okay, I know we've had some rough patches in this class so far this year" he said. "I wasn't really prepared to teach it...but today I think I've done a good job. Cauldrons out, we're making a potion!"

The class cheered, they had had free time for the previous three classes while their professor tried to work out what he would be teaching them. The first time it had been fun, but after a while, Albus had the feeling that the class longed to have something to do.

"We're going to be making an antidote for ashwinder venom today. It's not particularly challenging, as I managed to work it out, but there's some tricky bits involved. Sort yourselves into groups of three or four now!"

Albus immediately spun around, expecting Mirra to approach him and ask to partner up, but was sadly disappointed. She was still sitting with Rose and Eckley, and Hornsbrook had made them a group of four. He frowned. As far as he could recall, this was the first time in the past two years that she hadn't offered to partner with him. Feeling slightly dejected, he turned back around and brought his attention to Professor Handit again.

"Directions are on the board!" he said excitedly. "You have an hour. When you're done, fill a flask and your names so I can have it marked by next lesson!"

He looked absolutely ecstatic at actually being able to assign them work. Albus scanned the directions on the board and saw that it was pathetically easy. Nevertheless, Morrison rose from his seat to get the ingredients, and they began working soon after.

Despite the potions' simplicity however, Albus found that he struggled with it more than he normally would. Morrison ended up using the time at hand to jot down Divination homework, leaving his two friends to pick up all of the slack, though Albus found that he simply couldn't concentrate.

"Don't!" Scorpius spat, stopping Albus' hand from dropping in knarl quills. "We don't add those until after the stir the lacewing flies!"

"Right sorry!" he said, putting down the quills and making a grab for the puffskein eyes.

"No!" Scorpius said. "Just...just let me do it."

Albus frowned. Potions was normally his specialty, and now Scorpius was taking the reigns. "Sorry" he said. "I just can't concentrate."

He cast a furtive look behind him as he said this, as that was where his inability to focus stemmed from. Mirra was stirring the potion while Hornsbrook and Rose chatted, and Albus saw that Eckley was whispering something into her ear, making her giggle and playfully hit him. It seemed as though she had been giggling for the entire period.

They managed to finish the potion just as the bell rang, and Albus watched as Scorpius filled a flask of their respectable, but not quite perfect, potion. After placing it on the tray the three of them marched out of the classroom, Albus going a tad bit faster to catch up with Mirra.

As the dungeons were narrow, he had to carefully dodge other groups of students in order to catch up with them. Hoping that Rose wouldn't make a scene if he tried to talk to Mirra in the hallway, he hurried past the other children and finally caught up with the group of Gryffindors as they were turning the corner. They were all walking very close together, and Albus saw, upon close inspection, that two in particular were very close. Mirra and Eckley were holding

hands.

His heart skipped a beat, maybe even two. He suddenly felt extremely lightheaded, and the noise around him seemed to subside momentarily. He ran his hands through his untidy hair and felt that his palms were sweatier than he could ever recall them being. Just when he thought that he might faint, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Come on mate, let's go to lunch."

It was Morrison. One look at his face told Albus that he had seen the same thing. Scorpius, who had been walking slower and was just now catching up, emerged from a crowd and saw the morose look on his friend's face.

"What's up?" he said.

Morrison ignored his question. "Come on, I'm starving" he said, and five minutes later they were all sitting at the Slytherin table.

Albus was staring down at his empty plate, trying and failing to hide his crushed face.

Morrison and Scorpius, who were sitting across from him, were also not eating. They were merely staring at him. Finally, Scorpius spoke.

"You okay Al? You look kind of down..."

Albus looked up and responded, though it was to Morrison that he directed his sentence.

"Where they holding hands?" he asked. "Mirra and Eckley, I mean?"

They didn't even bother exchanging a glance, though Scorpius hastily started piling his plate with mashed parsnips.

"Yeah they were" Morrison answered.

"So are they like...like going out or whatever? Like dating?" Albus asked.

Morrison stared at him for a moment before speaking. "Yeah. For about a week now actually."

"A week?"

"She went on a date with him to Hogsmeade" Scorpius said. "That's what she told us when we asked her last week anyway."

"Why'd you keep it a secret from me though?" Albus asked, his face burning. Did they know that he liked her? Was it that obvious?

"Just because we know that you don't like him" Scorpius said quickly. "I mean, we don't like him either, we found out by accident. Sorry..."

"And it's probably not even that big of a deal anyway" Morrison added. "I mean, they're thirteen years old! It's just a crush, really. Probably..."

But Albus was not listening, he had resumed staring at his empty plate, his entire world now crashing down. His father had released Fango Wilde from Azkaban...his brother was no longer talking to him...and now this. The girl he liked was dating Charles Eckley, the person at Hogwarts who he loathed most...

The rest of lunch, much like the end breakfast, was a quiet affair. No one spoke, which Albus was grateful for. He was lost in his own thoughts, and only the sound of the bell brought him back to reality.

They entered the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom five minutes later, and Albus was glad that it would be the last class of the week. He would have all of the weekend to mope. He settled himself in the back row with Morrison and Scorpius, both of whom normally rejected this, as they wanted to sit up front. Today however, they didn't seem to mind. The all sat in silence as the rest of the class entered, Fairhart sitting atop his desk as he usually did.

"Good afternoon students" he said.

"Good afternoon" the class said, all except Albus anyway.

"Today we'll be focusing a little bit on what we talked about earlier in the year..."

Albus immediately began tuning the professor out, something that he now did every lesson. He did not want to hear Fairhart's rabble about emotions and theory, especially not today...

How could she be dating Eckley! he said to himself. Had she already forgotten the previous year, when he had fought Scorpius, another of her best friends? Did it not matter to her how much Albus loathed him? How much *both* of his friends loathed him too?

What does he have? What makes him so damn special?

Well, he was popular. He was always surrounded by people anyway. Whereas Albus mostly only talked to Morrison and Scorpius, Eckley was almost always seen with different people, sometimes even older students. Indeed, the only people that he continuously hung out with were Hornsbrook, Mirra, and Rose.

Rose he thought bitterly. She had something to do with this. He recalled reading her diary in his first year, she practically worshiped that pompous fool. She probably got them together.

But no, that couldn't be it. Mirra made her own decisions. She didn't need her friends to decide things for her. Not even her best friends. Was she not one of Albus' best friends? Had she told him that she liked Eckley? The next time that they talked, would she even bother telling him that she had a boyfriend?

He was torn from his thoughts by Scorpius, who was answering a question.

" You said that dark magic didn't exist" he said.

" Correct!" Fairhart said. " I'm glad that you remembered. Do we all remember my first lesson?" he asked.

The class nodded and murmured yes.

" Good!" he said excitedly. " Today's lesson will be of a similar mold. We will be discussing the dark arts, and, more importantly, those who use them- and why. First question! What is a dark wizard? How do we know that they're ' dark'?"

Somebody in the front row raised their hand. " From the magic that they use?"

" But I thought that we established that magic was neither dark nor light?" Fairhart responded.

No, you established that Albus thought disdainfully. He hoped that picking at Fairhart's inability to teach would at least cheer him up a little bit.

Somebody else raised their hand. " You said that all magic could be dangerous..."

" Indeed I did!" Fairhart said. " And I said that every spell should be considered ' dark magic' as much as the killing curse was! Now what if I told you that the killing curse wasn't dark at all!

Then you'd be contradicting yourself Albus said to himself with a hint of a smile, something that he had failed to muster all day.

" Is killing always wrong?" Fairhart asked. " Is it never warranted?"

The class did not have an answer for this. No one raised their hand anyway. Fairhart seemed to take their silence as a reason to continue.

" Today's lesson will have to do more with your opinions, more with your *ideas*, than any other. I have told you that we will be learning things in this class that, when understood completely, will be invaluable to your abilities to confront, and defeat, the dark arts. The first step in stopping something is understanding it. Today, students, I'm going to give you a bit of a history lesson."

The class seemed to hang on every word. Albus was the only one who refused to sit up straight. The idea of Fairhart teaching them history was just silly. What, did he aim to take Professor Binns' job just as he had taken Professor Handits?

Fairhart stood up and began pacing, signaling that his story was about to begin. " Let's go back in time" he said. " Who here knows what a Death Eater is?"

A couple of students raised their hands, Scorpius included. Fairhart picked him to answer.

" A Death Eater was a wizard who supported Voldemort" he said.

" Not exactly" Fairhart said. " Though close. More accurately, a Death Eater actually worked for him. Did his bidding. There were many who supported him who were never branded with the Dark Mark. Does anyone know what the Dark Mark is?"

This time, Scorpius was the only one who raised his hand. " The Dark Mark was a symbol fired into the sky by a Death Eater to signify that a murder had occurred. It was also put on someone's forearm to show that they were a Death Eater. When Voldemort touched his mark, they would be summoned to him."

" Absolutely correct!" Fairhart said.

Many students, Albus saw, turned around and looked at Scorpius suspiciously. Albus knew that the Malfoy name was a bad one, and personally thought that Scorpius had shown little tact in revealing how much he knew about Death Eaters. He seemed to notice as well, as he slumped in his seat and started sweating at the attention that he was getting.

" Don't be nervous!" Fairhart said. " Don't be ashamed! It is good that you are so well

informed! It is *always* good to be informed."

He stopped speaking and scratched his chin, apparently unsure of where to take his story next. "It's time to do a little math" he said. "They say that more than one hundred Death Eaters were arrested or killed during the Battle of Hogwarts. *One Hundred*. And yet, many got away as well! What do you think happened to the wizards and witches who fled the battle after Voldemort was defeated? You think they turned themselves in?"

"They were caught!" someone said.

"Were they? How were they caught? When they're not wearing masks, how do you tell a Death Eater apart from a regular wizard. Indeed, how do you tell a 'dark wizard' apart from another wizard?"

"The mark!" Milton Parish from Ravenclaw said. "They arrested the people with the mark!"

"Oh, you'd think so, wouldn't you?" Fairhart said. "But no, not everyone with a Dark Mark is a 'dark wizard' and not every 'dark wizard' has a Dark Mark. Many wizards and witches were placed under the Imperius Curse, they could not control themselves! Yet they had the Mark! And many- hundreds of wizards were not in Voldemort's inner circle, they did not have the Mark, and yet they murdered countless innocents, tortured countless muggles. Parents killed. Children's lives ruined..."

"Confusion. Panic. Anarchy. The first time that Voldemort fell enough people were acquitted of their crimes so that when he rose again, he already had a small following! So what does the Ministry do? Voldemort has fallen. Death Eaters, wizards who were just bad but were never addressed as such, are running amok. There is no proof that they were not confounded or imperiused, and plenty of wizards got off on mere technicality. Some were never sent to Azkaban do to cooperation. Giving up the names of their partners in crime..."

Albus cringed at this. Though it may not have happened right after the war with Voldemort, his father had just released Fango Wilde for doing just that. Indeed, he wondered if Fairhart knew this...

"So the Ministry won't arrest people, not everybody" Fairhart continued, and the class was now not even blinking, not even breathing it seemed, they were so immersed in his words. "Hundreds of murderers are now walking the streets of Britain. Some have fled the country before they are found out. The Ministry of Magic refuses to put someone in Azkaban unless they are absolutely, one hundred percent positive that person performed acts of terror, or supported Voldemort, of their own accord. Do you know how hard it is to be one hundred percent sure of that? What does that tell you about our Ministry?"

"That they're corrupt!" someone shouted out.

"No" Fairhart replied, holding up his finger. "Not corrupt. Misguided. Their morals have made them inefficient, particularly the Law Enforcement branches."

Albus felt as though this were a personal jab at his heart. His father was Head Auror after all. And was Fairhart not an Auror too? Who was he to complain about inefficiency?

"So now this brings us to the key part of our little history lesson. There are witches and wizards, dangerous ones, who have avoided incarceration. And yet, they can kill again. Who's going to prevent this? Who's going to stop them? This was the state of our world after Voldemort fell. Dangerous people now had no leader to rally behind. Scary right? So what happened in the years following Voldemort's fall? Well I'm going to tell you."

The class stared hungrily at him, eager for information. Even Albus, despite still feeling the personal attack against his father, was interested. For a few moments, he forgot Mirra. But only a few.

Fairhart resumed sitting down atop his desk and searched carefully for how to word what he was going to say. After several moments, he spoke.

"Does anybody know what a Renegade is?"

The entire classroom, even Scorpius, shook their heads no. Fairhart continued.

"I thought not. The term was thrown around heavily before you were all born, I doubted that any of you would know what it means, in wizarding terms anyway. A Renegade is a term applied to a wizard or witch who, despite what the law says about being 'innocent until proven guilty' took it upon themselves to murder or incapacitate wizards or witches accused of, though never proven of, using the dark arts during the war. In lamest terms, Renegades are wizarding vigilantes."

He paused briefly to let the class soak this information in, then resumed speaking.

" The day before Voldemort was defeated he was just as powerful as he had been any other day. Hours before it happened, he was still the darkest, most feared wizard of all time. And he was killed seemingly overnight. People awoke the next morning to learn that the source of their fear was gone. Voldemort's fall inspired these people like nothing before it. This miracle gave them a revelation. If Voldemort could be stopped by someone who was not an auror, then what was stopping them from catching dark wizards themselves? Suddenly, the fear was gone. Suddenly, the Death eaters who were never arrested were the ones being terrorized. Terrorized by the public."

" Fact. In the four years following Voldemort's defeat, more Renegades were arrested than Death Eaters. And who were these Renegades? I'll tell you who they were. The man who watched his wife be murdered...and saw the Death Eater who did it, the Death Eater who wasn't in Azkaban because of lack of sufficient evidence, and murdered him in cold blood. He was a Renegade. He was put in Azkaban, probably still there. That woman, that sweet woman whose children were tortured and killed. And she found the wizard who did it, wasn't even a Death Eater, and she killed him so that no mother would ever have to feel the pain of losing their children to him like she did. Azkaban. Time and time again, these men and women were placed in Azkaban, and that rallied more and more of them."

" It started weeks after Voldemort's fall. Two wizards saw a man who they had seen torturing muggles during the war. They killed him and were sentenced to Azkaban. Half of the public claimed they were no better than the Death Eaters themselves. The other half? Called them heroes. The media bought into it, it became a movement. There were groups of them, even. I recall one particular group, named themselves 'Wands and Redemption'. They consisted of some of the most brutal Renegades known at the time, more than half are in Azkaban now. They'd kill you if you were even so much as *suspected* of using the dark arts. It didn't matter if you did or didn't. It didn't matter if you were under the Imperius Curse. If you looked like the person who had watched someone be killed, hadn't even actually done it, they'd kill you on the spot. Ministry could have confirmed his innocence the next day. And this went on for years. Voldemort died. The war continued."

The class stared at him, mouths wide open. No one had ever heard these things before, nor had they expected to hear it when they entered the classroom, Albus was sure...

" Are there still Renegades today?" someone up front asked.

" Oh yes, not active, but there are. Many Renegades were never caught, some of them even started wearing masks in the later years. I believe the last case of a Renegade being charged and found guilty happened around fifteen years ago, they haven't been active since then. No, eventually it died down. But some Renegades...some are just as hunted today as some Death Eaters. And not all of them were caught too. No, there's a small group of wizards and witches the Ministry never found guilty and who the Renegades never caught. Renegades and Death Eaters. Both killers. Both walk among us today."

He stood up and began pacing again at this, as though he wanted to wrap this particular conversation up. There was only ten minutes left in the class.

" This was a dark time in the wizarding world. The Ministry would not want me talking about it, let alone elaborate on it, believe I know, I work there. Nor would your parents I think. But it is essential that you know this, because now I must inquire something of you. Renegades used the killing curse, for what they believed was a just cause. Is the curse still 'dark magic'? Is killing still part of the dark arts?"

" Yes" Albus said, before he could stop himself. He had found the entire conversation engrossing yes, but he knew what point Fairhart was trying to make and he disagreed with it. His father had told him, years ago, that there were dark wizards in the world, and that they did bad things and killing was one of them. Killing was bad, no matter which way you spun it. Fairhart smiled at him, and the rest of the class turned to look at him. " Mr. Potter!" he said. " I believe that this is the first time you've spoken in my class all year! I've nearly marked you as absent a few times! You've stated your opinion, please explain it."

" Killing is wrong" he said simply.

" I daresay you'll find that few disagree with you" Fairhart said. " I think that it takes a powerful wizard to use the killing curse. But it takes an even stronger one when to know what gives them the right to use it, and to use it for the right cause. You don't think that there's a right cause Mr. Potter? You think that the Renegades were wrong?"

" The Renegades killed because they thought it was the right thing to do" Albus replied. " The Death Eaters knew it was wrong."

" Perhaps" Fairhart said. " But now I ask you Mr. Potter, and I pray that you are never in this situation, what would *you do* if given the option? If a man has murdered five hundred, and you had the opportunity to kill him before he could murder five hundred more, you would not do it? You would let him continue to kill?"

Albus felt his face go red. He had been in that situation before, or at least one close to it. The previous year he could have killed Ares, he had the Dragonfang Wand in his hands. And he had chosen not to do it. And yet...he had struggled. The wand had told him - no *he* had told *himself*- that he needed to take Ares' life. Who knows what would have happened had his father not shown up?

He decided to dodge the question. " It doesn't matter" he said. " It doesn't matter who's doing it for what reason, killing is still wrong."

The class was looking back and forth between Albus and Fairhart now, eager to see who caved first. Albus felt his temper rising. Fairhart was not just arguing with him, he was arguing with his father too. What gave him that right? Who was he to deny what his father, the man who had defeated the darkest wizard of all time, had said?

" So then the Renegades belong in Azkaban? And the wizards who were never confirmed as Death Eaters, let alone as users of the dark arts in general, they don't? They're allowed to walk free?"

Albus felt himself shaking with fury. Fairhart was twisting everything that he said. When he didn't speak, Fairhart continued.

" Albus makes a very good point" he said, now addressing the class. " The act of killing goes against nature. Who are we to decide who lives and who dies? And yet, this decision can often save as many lives as it takes. The killing curse is often described as part of the dark arts. But you are not facing the killing curse, you are facing the person using it, the person who may just feel justified in doing so -"

" So Voldemort wasn't so bad after all, huh!" Albus yelled out, rising from his seat before he could stop himself, and the class gasped. He even saw Morrison mouthing wordlessly at him. " He had a right to kill those innocent people, because he felt justified in doing it! That's what you're say-"

" One hundred points from Slytherin!" Fairhart barked, and the class gasped once more. Fairhart's face, the side that wasn't mangled anyway, was now a bright red, he looked furious. It was the first time that he had lost his composure all year. " How dare you! I never said - I've never claimed- I never will...*how dare you!*"

Albus knew that he had crossed the line, but he could do little else than stare, his face equally red.

" You were not alive!" Fairhart yelled. " You know nothing, *nothing* of the atrocities committed...the families torn asunder...I was making the point that killing was justified when used against men like him...*how dare you!*"he repeated.

The bell rang at the next second, and the class shuffled past Fairhart as fast as they could. Albus expected to be told to stay, but he wasn't. Fairhart merely sat behind his desk while Albus quickly exited the classroom.

No sooner had he left then Morrison addressed what had happened.

" Mate...what was that all about?" he said, a bewildered look on his face.

" I don't want to talk about it" he muttered back through gritted teeth. The truth was, he knew why he had picked a fight with Fairhart. He had been trying to vent his anger and frustration over Mirra, and all that it had done was lost Slytherin one hundred points.

They walked down the hallway in silence, though the people around them were muttering about his outburst. Scorpius spoke as they turned the corner.

" I think one hundred points was a little much" he said, clearly trying to make his friend feel better. " Maybe you should go and talk to him and clear-"

" No!" Albus shouted, loud enough for the entire hallway to hear him. Then, without thinking,

something that had occurred quite frequently today, he inarticulately shouted a slew of curse words that made several people gasp. He had hoped that yelling would make him feel better, but alas, it did nothing.

"Detention" came a voice that he barely recognized from behind him.

He spun around on the spot and saw James standing behind him, his prefect badge perfectly visible, his arms at his hips. He had never looked more like an authority figure. Albus realized that this was the first word that his brother had said to him in weeks, but he was far too distracted to mention this.

"What?" he said.

"Detention" James repeated, his cold eyes not even blinking. "Student code of conduct forbids profanity, vulgarity, or any form of obscenity from being said loud enough for other students in the general vicinity to hear it. Normally I would let someone off with a warning...but don't expect any favors" he finished icily.

Albus stared at him, mouth wide open, though unable to speak. Even Morrison and Scorpius seemed to be at a loss for words. And without further ado, his brother pushed past him and continued down the hall as though nothing had happened.

It did not take long for the news to spread. Within the hour, everyone seemed to know that Albus Potter had screwed over his house again. Though still early in the year, losing one hundred points was bound to make it nearly impossible to come back and win the house cup. What was more, his detention banned him from playing the first match of the season, which, Albus thought bitterly, meant that he had been better off taking it weeks ago. At least then he would still have the cloak, anyway.

He meandered through the halls of Hogwarts for the next two hours or so, completely void of a destination. Scorpius and Morrison had returned to the common room to leave him alone, which he was grateful for. He was just about to bang his head against a random wall when he heard his name.

"Potter!"

He turned and saw that it was Atticus. His heart sunk.

"Potter, what's this I hear about you being banned from the first match of the season!" he asked, now face to face with him.

"I got a detention" Albus muttered back, trying not to make eye contact.

Atticus threw his arms up in the air. "How? Why?"

"My brother" Albus said, hoping that at least James could end up taking some of the blame for this. "He was way out of line really...gave me detention for cursing."

"*Cursing?*" Atticus said, astounded. "Your a teenager, of course you curse!"

"Student code of conduct says-" he started lazily.

"Well bully for the code of conduct!" Atticus said. "Go sort this out with Professor Longbottom! Detention for cursing...stupidest thing I've ever heard..."

And so, Albus departed from Atticus and went to the third floor to meet Neville. He could not fathom how his Herbology professor could possibly help, but as trying was better than nothing, he knocked on the door to Neville's office and took a deep breath.

"Come in."

Albus entered and saw Neville sitting at his desk. His office was small and cramped, and smelled strongly of fertilizer. He could see numerous potted plants, some of which were actually moving. Neville looked up, he appeared to have been writing something. "Albus?" he said. "How can I help you?"

Albus closed the door behind him. "Hi" he said. "Erm...I wanted to talk to you about something real quick?"

Neville quickly organized the papers at his desk, then became much more business like. "Yes?"

"Erm...James gave me a detention earlier" he said, unsure of if that was the right way to start.

"Yes, James is a prefect" Neville said. "I believe Professor McGonagall did that to see if it would help him mature. Was this detention randomly assigned? Was there a purpose to it?"

"Well" Albus started, and he started scratching the back of his head, if not for the mere purpose of occupying his hands. "I cursed out loud" he said. "And James gave me one." Neville frowned. "I'm sorry Albus. Profanity is a legitimate reason. Most times, you can be

given some lee-way if it's a first time offense, but James did have the right to do that. Indeed, he was obligated to."

" I know" Albus said quickly. " But I'm on the Quidditch team, and now I can't play the first game. Is there anyway that I could serve a normal detention, instead of that being my punishment?"

Neville frowned again. " Nothing in my power" he said. " I'm sorry. The most you could do is go to your Head of House and see if he could assign you a normal one. As the prefect was from my house, I have no say in the matter. I'm sure Professor Fairhart would be willing to help you."

Albus groaned. " Is there no other way?" he said desperately. Fairhart had already taken one hundred points from him today. He did not want to see him again.

" I'm afraid not" Neville said.

Albus left Neville's office feeling even worse than he had before. He knew that Fairhart would never do him a favor, especially not after the fiasco that had just occurred. Feeling that it would be best to not inform Atticus of this disappointment right away, he neglected to return to the common room. He instead spent the rest of the day in the Room of Requirement, refusing to even join his housemates for dinner.

He knew that he could not hide all day however, as if he were caught in the halls after hours things would only turn worse. He finally re-entered his common room just before nine o' clock, and saw, to his immense relief, that it was empty. Almost empty, anyway.

" Where've you been?" Scorpius said once he had entered. He was sitting on one of the comfortable armchairs by the fire, a large book open on his lap.

" Room of Requirement" Albus said sulkily. " Morrison in bed?"

Scorpius nodded. There was a moment of silence, and then he spoke. " So...bad day huh?"

Albus groaned and took a seat in the armchair across from him. He did not need Scorpius' sarcasm, not now. Feeling it would be best to not answer, he stared into the fire, ignoring his friend's question.

" Look mate, I know it doesn't matter, but a lot of people don't blame you for the hundred points. Everyone says that's way too much. Fairhart was bang out of order-"

" It's not just that" Albus said grimly. " Today was the worst" he added, and he truly meant it.

" No chance of playing Quidditch?" Scorpius asked. " Atticus mentioned you were going to talk to Professor Longbottom-"

" It's not that either" Albus said, still staring into the fire. Losing one hundred points hurt, as did being unable to play Quidditch. And James giving him a detention out of pure spite was a low blow. But no, those weren't the worst thing. It was something else that he would be losing sleep over tonight. The thought that Mirra was dating Eckley. The thought that right now, at this very moment, they were in their common room holding hands...and laughing together...and kissing...

" Is it Mirra dating that idiot?" Scorpius said suddenly.

Albus turned to him, ready to voice what he had been keeping inside all day.

" It just doesn't make any sense!" he blurted out. " What's so good about him?"

" Well I hate complimenting the kid as much as you do" Scorpius said. " But he is popular, and supposedly attractive, and all that."

" But he's an ass!" Albus responded. " He bullied us last year! And he's always saying those arrogant things, and bragging and boasting...she shouldn't be with someone like that! She should be with someone-"

" - Like you?" Scorpius finished for him.

Albus pretended to not understand what he had meant. " What are you talking about?" he said.

Scorpius rolled his eyes and closed his book. " You know exactly what I'm talking about, and if you don't, then you're the only one who doesn't."

Albus stared at him. Of all the people that he considered confessing his feelings for Mirra too, Scorpius had been the least likely. Morrison at least would try to ease the situation...but Scorpius' sardonic attitude sometimes got the better of him. But still...he was one of his two best friends...and he had started the conversation...

" I like Mirra" Albus said. " A lot. Like, *really a lot*."

" I know" Scorpius said. " Pretty much everyone who knows you knows. You made it pretty obvious."

Albus scoffed at him. " I did not!"

" You most certainly did!"

" Name one time!"

Scorpius put his hand to his chin, mockingly suggesting that he was in deep thought. " Oh, I don't know, maybe when you dragged us into a dungeon filled with lethal mist to save her!"

" That was to save the wizarding world!" he replied indignantly.

" Or how about how whenever me and Morrison had an idea last year, it was stupid, but when Mirra said it, it was brilliant!"

" She makes more sense than you guys! She's better with words-"

" Or how about how every time you've been near her this year you've stared at her until she looked back, then acted like you weren't looking?"

Scorpius said this particular one with a smirk, and Albus now understood. He *had* seen the way Albus had looked at her when she was bandaging his hand. And he had seen it every other time too...

Albus buried his head in his hands. " Does everyone really know?" he said.

Scorpius shrugged. " Pretty much. She probably doesn't though, now that I think about it. You guys are such good friends. She probably thinks of you as like a brother or something."

Albus did not know the intended effect of this statement, but it made him feel fifty times worse. A brother?

He heaved a sigh. " What do I do?" he asked hopelessly. " She's with Eckley..."

Scorpius snorted. " Al, they're thirteen. You act like they're getting married, like they're going to live happily ever after together. This is just a crush. Only a mutual one. Lots of people get their first crush at thirteen."

" Who's yours?" Albus spat, and Scorpius ignored this question, though he went slightly pink.

" Look don't focus on it so much. You're still her friend. And this thing won't last forever."

" So you think I have a chance?" Albus asked quickly.

A very pained expression appeared on his friend's face. He looked as though he were struggling with how to word his sentence. " Honestly" he said. " No, I don't."

Albus hung his head, defeated.

" Sorry" Scorpius said.

" Why not?" Albus asked.

Scorpius frowned. " Take a good look around mate."

Albus stared at him, then actually glanced left and right.

" Notice anything?" Scorpius said.

Albus continued to stare blankly. " What am I supposed to be seeing?"

" You're in the Slytherin common room!" Scorpius practically shouted. " Of course she likes Eckley! She has every class with him, eats breakfast, lunch, and dinner with him, she's always with him. You have two classes with her. You barely see her otherwise. When's the last time you went to the library to meet up, eh? You're in an entirely different house, and the worst one to be in too! Trust me mate, my entire family's been in Slytherin, and when you're in Slytherin, you either date someone from your own house, or you're single."

" That's not true!" Albus replied, sweating profusely.

" It is" Scorpius said sadly. " When's the last time you saw a Slytherin and Gryffindor holding hands? There's still bad blood with our house mate, *especially* with Gryffindor."

" I wouldn't care" Albus said through gritted teeth.

" But would she?" Scorpius said. " She didn't come to Hogwarts expecting friends mate. She didn't come here expecting to make it to her third year. She's pretty popular over there in Gryffindor. You think she'd throw that away?"

Albus hung his head once more, lost for words.

" There's just too many things in the way" Scorpius said. "Sorry. But you have to let it go before it gets worse. Someone had to tell you..."

" I'll talk to Morrison about this tomorrow" Albus said, rising from seat and walking up the stairs to his dormitory. He didn't want to talk to Scorpius anymore. He didn't want to hear about how he could never get Mirra to like him back, he didn't want to hear about how there were too many things in the way. But as he closed the dormitory door behind him, he knew that everything that Scorpius had said had been the painful truth.

He collapsed on his bed, unable to sleep. He didn't hear Scorpius enter all night.

Chapter 9: Patented Potter Pick Up Lines

Albus wasted no time in telling Morrison everything that he had discussed with Scorpius at breakfast the next morning. This was particularly tricky, as Scorpius was sitting next him clicking his tongue the entire time. Throughout the entire conversation he was careful not to show that he had disregarded his friends' advice, yet at the end, he simply couldn't help it.

" But he's wrong about everything right? I still have a chance right?" he finished desperately, while Scorpius groaned and muttered under his breath.

Morrison waited until he had cut up every piece of sausage on his plate before speaking.

Taking a small bite, he answered.

" Nope, he's pretty much dead on. Sorry mate."

Albus' heart sunk. " There's nothing I could do?"

" Nothing that wouldn't risk making it worse" Scorpius piped up. " Of course, don't just take our advice. I'm sure James would be willing to help you if -"

" No!" Albus spat maliciously. The injustice of his detention, in addition to having the cloak taken weeks prior, had officially ended any relationship that he had with his brother. And no matter how much his friends may insist, that was final.

" I'm not going to him" he added. " And don't talk about him in front of me either!"

His bad mood about his brother carried him all the way through breakfast, and only when he returned to the common room did realize the other reasons that yesterday had been abysmal. The other students were refusing to even so much as look at him, and when they did it was only to sneer and make biting remarks about how many points he had lost them the previous day. As it was a beautiful Saturday morning, they attempted to sit in the shade by the lake and catch up on homework - but here too he was ridiculed. Eventually, they settled in the the comfort of Hagrids cabin.

" Sit down, sit down!" he said to the three of them, jubilant at having visitors. He was wearing his typical pink apron, and Albus could hear the tea whistling in the kitchen as they sat at the round wooden table.

Morrison began speaking at once. " Any of that fu-"

Hagrid placed an enormous tin of treacle fudge down in front of him before he could even finish his sentence. " I reckon that there's summat' in that fudge" Hagrid chuckled. " Way you shot up!"

Morrison laughed and nodded, his mouth so full already that he couldn't speak. Hagrid turned to Albus, who was staring sadly at the wall.

" You alright Al?" he asked. " I heard that you haven't had the best first month..."

" Who told you that?" he asked.

" Your sister."

" Lily comes down here?" Albus asked, shocked. He supposed that he shouldn't be however, he would have had no way of knowing. He hadn't talked to anyone in his family in weeks.

" She pops in for tea ever' now and then. Told me abou' your spat with James."

" He started it!" Albus said before Hagrid could go any further.

He gave a small chuckle. " It don' matter who started it Al, it's normal. I've known a lot of brothers, and that's how they are. I think claimin' that you weren' family any more over did it a bit..."

Albus tensed up a bit, but refused to give in. " Well he just gave me a detention yesterday. For *cursing*" he added blandly.

" Well detention for that is a bit severe" Hagrid said, scratching his beard, and Albus felt a small twinge of satisfaction. " But like I said, brothers will be brothers. You're bound to go through these rough patches..."

" And he's turned everyone else against me too!" Albus quipped up, eager to capitalize on Hagrid agreeing with him. " My cousins don't even wave to me in the halls!"

" Ahh, I don' think that they're takin' sides Al, I think you jus' see them less. And if it makes yeh' feel any be'er, Lily isn't siding with him. She just wants you two to sort thing out."

Albus frowned, unsure of how to press his point further. Deciding it was best to abandon this

portion of the conversation, he thought of other things to discuss. Unfortunately, all that flew through his head was Mirra and Eckley. He knew there was something that had been bothering him...

Scorpius came to the rescue. " Hagrid, what do you think of the riot outside of the Ministry of Magic? And the people blaming Al's dad?"

Morrison gave his friend a bemused look, though Scorpius merely shrugged. " I want to know what Hagrid thinks..."

" Honestly?" Hagrid said, still scratching his beard. " I think it's ridiculous. That's just what people do though, blow things out of proportion. It'll blow over once Ares and Darvy are caught. He'll be hailed as a hero again, and rightfully so."

Albus came very close to mentioning his distaste at Fango Wilde having been released, but opted against it in favor of a question instead.

" People are so terrified though" Albus said. " What's the worst that Ares can do if he stays hidden? And if he comes out of hiding, I mean, he's not stronger than my dad right? What reason do they have to be so scared of him?"

Hagrid stared at him for a moment before speaking. " People have different reasons for being scared Al. But don't worry about it, don't even think about it. I know it's hard, what with that Skeeter skank spreading rumors..."

Albus thoroughly enjoyed listening to Hagrid verbally abuse Rita Skeeter, so much so that they didn't leave his cabin until it was dinner time. His glum mood returned later in the day however, and by Monday morning, he was back to his slump. He merely sat at the breakfast table, watching his friends eat as he supported his face on his hands.

" Care For Magical Creatures today" Scorpius said, peering through the paper.

Albus sighed. " What do I do?" he asked no one in particular. " Mirra's going to be there...I haven't talked to her since I found out about her and Eckley..."

" You do absolutely nothing" Scorpius said. " Because it's not that big of a deal."

" It is a big deal!" he shot back.

" But you can't let her think it's a big deal" Morrison added wisely. " So just act normal around her."

" I can't do that" Albus said, moving his untouched scrambled eggs around on his plate with his fork.

Morrison frowned at him. " Well I suppose that you could always...you know. Go for it?"

Albus raised his eyebrows. " Go for what?"

" Well her and Eckley is still just a crush. She's not in love with the guy, she's thirteen. You could try putting the moves on her, you know. Get her to like you instead."

" That's going to complicate things and you know it!" Scorpius said. " What he needs to do is play it cool!"

But Albus didn't want to hear what Scorpius had to say, because what Scorpius was saying wasn't going to help him to get Mirra to like him back. Morrison however, was being helpful.

" So what do I do?" Albus asked Morrison, hungry for information. " How do I get her to like me?"

Morrison stretched and cracked his knuckles, clearly enjoying the idea of having things worth saying. " Easy, you charm her. Smooth talk her. Give her some Patented Potter Pick Up lines!"

Albus stared at him, appalled at his terminology.

" Some patented picker upper what's?"

" Patented Potter Pick Up lines" Morrison said slowly and clearly. " I heard your brother use the term before"

" Don't talk to me about him!" Albus quickly spat.

Morrison rolled his eyes. " Fine, I heard one of your siblings who wasn't your sister use the term before. It's just things that you say to get girls interested in you. Guaranteed to get Mirra thinking of you as more than a friend."

Scorpius smacked his head with the palm of his hand. " You give the worst advice I have ever heard" he told Morrison. " Pick up lines? To a best friend who's dating someone!"

" Take it or leave it" Morrison said, leaning back casually. " You going to eat that?" he added to a first year who hadn't touched their sausage links yet.

Albus bit his lip, thinking hard. It was a risk, but how did he know that it wouldn't work? His optimism got the better of him.

" So what do I say exactly?" Albus asked his friends.

" Let's try a practice run first" Morrison said. " Get a girl to like you now, or at least talk about

you. Who knows, it might even get Mirra a little jealous" he added with a wink. Scorpius rolled his eyes and muttered something that sounded like " disaster".

" Okay, pick a girl from our house that you like" Morrison said.

Albus frowned at him. " I don't really like anyone except for Mirra..."

" Well then pick someone pretty!" Morrison said eagerly. " How about Denise?"

Albus looked down the table. At the very end sat Denise, the curly haired girl who Albus rarely talked to. She was somewhat pretty, and she was one of the few who had yet to throw a scathing remark his way about losing so many points. However, she was sitting with several older students.

" Ermm...she's sitting with a lot of people" Albus said.

" Don't worry" Morrison said. " You're not insulting her, you're complimenting her. Give me your hand."

" What?"

" Give me your hand!"

Albus rolled up his sleeve and held his hand out, seeing now what Morrison was doing. He had removed a quill from his bag and was writing something in the palm of his hand.

" What are you writing?" Albus asked, slightly unnerved.

" One of my 'sure thing' lines" Morrison said simply. " Don't move your hand so much! And don't look at it until you go over there, you'll over think it. Just go up to her, sneak a peak and read it off."

Albus removed his hand from Morrisons grip and looked at Scorpius, who was staring at the ceiling. He anxiously rose from his seat and walked towards Denise, who was chatting with a girl who may have been her older sister.

" Hey Denise" he said, and he noticed that his voice did not deepen as it did when he was talking to Mirra.

" Hey Al!" she said, a little uncertain at why he was approaching her at breakfast.

He took a seat next to her, squeezing himself in between two fifth years who threw dirty looks at him. He took a quick glance at his hand, and his heart plummeted. Morrisons handwriting was a bad as ever. He desperately tried reading it off.

" Have you- Have you lost weggit?" he asked her, his face burning.

She stared him while some of the older students laughed. " Weggit?" she asked. " What's a weggit?"

" Weight!" he said triumphantly, glad at having finally deciphered the word.

" Wait for what?" she said, confused. The bell rang at the next moment. " By Al!" she said, and she got up and left him at the table.

Ten minutes later, Albus was forced to listen to his friends laugh hysterically as they trekked down the grassy slopes that would lead them to their first class.

" Did you see the look on her face!" Scorpius said, panting. Though he was still against Morrisons advice, he seemed to have enjoyed watching Albus make a complete fool of himself.

" She had no idea what you were talking about!"

" I don't know how you screwed that up, to be honest mate" Morrison was saying, still shaking somewhat. " I mean, I gave you pure gold-"

" You gave me pure garbage!" Albus spat out at him, his face still not having returned to its normal color. " And work on your handwriting!"

" Potter!"

" Oh what now-"

It was Atticus. He had evidently followed the three of them out to the grounds, and judging by the sweat pouring from his face, he had hurried to meet them. He wiped his forehead with his wrist before speaking.

" Practice Wednesday afternoon" he said.

Albus gave him an incredulous look. " I can't play" he said. " Why would I prac-"

" Yes you can, I've worked it out" Atticus cut him off.

Albus felt excitement bubble up inside of him. How could this be true? How could this miracle occur?

" How?" he asked. " I have a detention."

" I talked to Professor Fairhart" Atticus said, and Albus felt the hair on his neck stand up straight. " You'll serve a detention with him tonight, half past six. Two hours. You can thank me later."

But Albus was not in a thanking mood. He was standing quite still, trying not to imagine what

punishment the man who had deducted one hundred points from him could have in store.

" Did he- did he say what kind of stuff I would be doing?" he asked nervously.

Atticus shook his head. " Nope, just be at his office at six thirty, not a second later. And don't get any more detentions!"

Albus waited until Atticus was completely out of earshot before speaking to his friends.

" What am I going to do!" he asked frantically.

" About Mirra or Fairhart?" Morrison asked.

" Both!"

" Well let's handle one problem at a time" Scorpius said, indicating the group of Gryffindors that were right behind them.

They all met near the Forest, speaking about what creature Hagrid in store for them. Albus did his best to stay in the very center of the crowd of Slytherins, hoping that this would help him avoid Mirra. It amounted to nothing however, as they caught a glimpse of each other almost immediately. She waved to him. He acted as though he hadn't seen her and turned his attention towards Hagrid, who was hurrying towards them carrying a crate.

" Nothing big today" he said sadly, and the students all let out sighs of relief. " Jus' got some flobberworms. Planned on summat' a bit better, but it fell through. Yer job 'ill be ter feed 'em..."

It was easily the most boring lesson of the year thus far, though admittedly, everything else had been quite exciting, even if possibly dangerous. Each students was assigned a flobberworm, which simply crawled on the grass at an immeasurably slow pace, eating the lettuce that students pushed into its mouth.

Albus couldn't help but feel as though fate had given him a break however. The work was far from arduous, but mundane enough for him to think deeply while doing next to nothing. He merely lay on the grass, pushing lettuce into the worms mouth as he tried to ignore the fact that Mirra kept waving at him and trying to get his attention. He tried not looking over there too often however ; Eckley had his arm around her.

" How do we know if they're dead?" Morrison asked him, staring at his immobile flobberworm on the ground. " He's not eating anymore..."

" Hey Al!" someone said from behind him.

He sat up straight and saw that it was Mirra. Morrison quickly scooped up his flobberworm and walked away clandestinely.

" I haven't talked to you in forever!" she said.

He sat up straight and met her gaze." Well...this class was canceled last week so...yeah."

He knew that he was making very poor conversation, but he really didn't care. He was eyeing Eckley, who was talking to Rose and Hornsbrook a few yards away.

" Yeah, I know" she said, apparently confused at the coldness in his voice, which he had barely masked. " Listen, I'm sorry we never met up for Hogsmeade last week, I told Scorpius and Morrison -"

" Yeah I know it's fine" he said quickly, and he thought that he saw the smile slide off of her face.

" It's just that something came up" she said. " Maybe next trip we could hang out though? Catch up? It sucks not having as many classes with-"

" I'm kind of trying to concentrate on this" he said, pointing at his flobberworm, which was slowly inching towards his finger.

" Oh" she said, and she looked truly dejected. " Okay. Well then...well then I'll see you later I guess?"

" Mhm.

" Okay...bye."

Albus returned to his flobberworm, not bothering to watch as she walked back to her precious boyfriend. He had not realized it until she had approached him, but for some reason he was mad at her. He felt someone kneel down beside him and saw that it was Scorpius.

" Real smooth" he said.

Albus ignored this and managed to feed his flobberworm in peace for the rest of the lesson. Mirra did not attempt to speak to him for the remainder of the lesson, indeed, he noticed that she barely spoke at all. She didn't giggle at all like she had during their last potions lesson, and whenever he managed to catch a glimpse at the group of Gryffindors she was also quiet. He felt oddly confused. Half of him was guilty. The other half somewhat satisfied.

Class ended with Hagrid collecting the flobberworms and sending them off on their way. All in

all, he supposed that the lesson could have been worse. All that he needed now was to get through Fairharts detention.

" One down" both of his friends said to him as they entered the castle, and he nodded his head glumly.

Albus spent the rest of the school day hoping that it would go by slowly, as if prolonging his detention enough would result in it's disappearance. Sadly, this only seemed to speed time up, and as everyone left the Great Hall satisfied from dinner, he was forced to begin the walk to Fairharts office.

" Good luck mate" Scorpius said as he waved goodbye to them.

" Just whatever you do, don't look at the clock" Morrison said. " Makes things go by much slower."

" See you after I'm done with the idiot" Albus called back to them.

A minute later he was outside of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. He caught a glimpse of his watch and saw that he had still had five minutes until he actually had to be there. He leaned his head against the cool glass window of the door and began counting the minutes away, his mind full of thoughts of Mirra, of Eckely, of his brother and his cousins, of his father and Fango Wilde...

" I'm keeping an eye on them. All three."

Albus stood up straight and looked around, then realized that he had heard Fairhart speaking through the door. Who was he talking to? He pressed his ear up against the door and managed to catch a few more words.

" If he is after it, he's definitely hit a block of some sort. Now is the time to lure him out."

Feeling that the only thing that could get him in more trouble would be eavesdropping, he quickly knocked on the door.

" Come in" he heard Fairhart say.

Albus opened the door and saw Fairhart sitting at his desk, entirely alone. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought that he saw something silvery, possibly a bird, fly out of -

no- *through* the window. Perplexed, he turned his attention back to his professor.

" Good afternoon Albus" Fairhart said curtly.

" Good afternoon" he mumbled back.

Fairhart scratched his head, his hair dangling in front of disgusting face as he did so. Albus felt his blood boil.

" I really have no idea how these detentions work" Fairhart admitted, snapping Albus out of his thoughts. " I suppose you could just mark some papers?"

" Huh?"

Albus had been expecting something far worse than merely marking papers. Fairhart handed a stack of papers and an answer key. " Just match the letters up" he said. " There's twenty questions on each, subtract five for everyone they got wrong. Do you need a quill?"

" No...no I've got one" Albus answered.

He sat down at a desk in the back and began marking the papers. Whatever he may have told himself, he kind of enjoyed it. He recognized a few of the names, and came very close to deducting points from his brother, who had earned a perfect score. He decided not to sink to his level however, and instead continued to mark the papers in silence. He occasionally glanced up and saw that Fairhart appeared to be deeply immersed in a paperback book, and strangely, the picture on the cover wasn't moving.

He finished marking the papers and approached the professor once more. Fairhart took the papers and handed him a new stack and answer key. " Could you do the seventh years now?" he asked.

" Sure" Albus replied, unsure as to why he was being asked. Was he not serving a detention?

He once more sat at a desk in the back and marked papers, bewildered as to why Fairhart was being so kind. Was he afraid of another argument? Of another outburst? Or had he simply placed it all in the past, despite it having occurred only days ago?

He returned to Fairharts desk with a stack of completely marked papers minutes later, and this time, his scarred professor glanced at his watch. " Still an hour left" he said. " Ermm...are you supposed to serve both hours? How does this work?"

Albus started sweating. He could take advantage and leave now, Fairhart had no idea how timed detentions were done at Hogwarts. And yet, this detention had not been so bad. And he

would get in more trouble if he lied.

" I still have an hour left" he said. " Anything else you need me to do?"

Fairhart scratched the back of his head once more. " Not really" he admitted.

Absolute silence. Albus stayed standing, while Fairhart merely sat behind his desk scratching his chin, both of them unsure what to do next. Finally, his professor spoke.

" Butterbeer?"

" What?"

" Do you want a butterbeer?" Fairhart said, reaching underneath his desk and pulling out two bottles. " They're a popular drink at the Three Broomsticks. Delicious, actually. I happened to stock up on the last trip."

" Umm...sure?" Albus said, and he took the bottle.

" There's a table in the back, you don't have to stand" Fairhart said, and he led Albus through a door that took him to his office.

There was indeed a table, a medium sized round one. There was little more however. Apart from a very small bed and a closet, there was single shelf with numerous strange looking things on it, including, Albus realized, a sneakoscope. He took a seat at the table across from Fairhart and popped open his drink. He took a single sip and knew at once that Bartelby had been right. Butterbeer *WAS* the best thing in the world. It was foamy and sweet and tasted a bit like butterscotch, but by far the most appealing part of it was the warmth that spread from his toes to his head. He felt as though he would never be cold again.

He watched as Fairhart took an enormous swig and wiped his lips. " Hits the spot every time" he said.

More silence, this one even more uncomfortable than the last. He recalled the previous year, when he and his friends had went to speak to Darvy. That had been uncomfortable too, but at least he had trusted his potions professor. With a small twinge of annoyance, he remembered Scorpius saying that he disliked Fairhart because of Darvys betrayal.

" I wanted to apologize to you Albus" Fairhart said quite suddenly, and he nearly fell out of his chair in shock.

" Apologize?"

" Yes, apologize" Fairhart said. " This year, I have taught my students how important it is that we control our emotions, and on Friday, I lost my temper with you. I feel hypocritical, to say the least. I also feel as though I may have said something that directly caused your outburst. I understand that it easy for my views to be misconstrued."

Albus said nothing, he was still letting these words sink in. Was Fairhart apologizing to him? He regained his composure quickly however.

" I'm sorry too" he said. " I was out of line...saying what I said about...about Voldemort."

Fairhart smiled at him. " You are your fathers son" he said. " I can see that you share your ideas of what is right and wrong with him, as is only natural. Whether our ideas conflict or not is irrelevant, we are each entitled to our own opinion. When I teach however, I teach what I think, what I have experienced."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "Voldemort killed my parents during the second war. Not directly of course, they were merely residents of a town that he massacred for fun. But nevertheless, I am as against his regime as the next wizard. I hate the idea that my words are being misinterpreted to show him support Hearing what you said... made me lose control."

" I'm sorry" he repeated. And he truly meant it. " About your parents. And about...what I said."

" It is fine" he said politely.

" I felt like you were taking a shot at my dad" Albus admitted, surprised at how easily he was speaking. Had he not despised Fairhart the previous day? " Talking about how the Ministry is wrong."

" Your father is a great wizard, and a better man" Fairhart said. "You do not work in the same office as someone and not get to know their beliefs. Do not think that he does not agree with me on certain things however. He himself has told me that he feels that our Ministry is unreliable, and, at times, inept. And do not think that aurors are the only one's who make decisions. You'll find that frequently both me and your father have expressed our dislike for certain decisions that the Ministry as a whole has made. I hope that you create your own opinion on the matter Albus. Has the Ministry done anything that you dislike lately?"

Albus immediately started to shake his head, but then thought of Fango Wilde. Thought of how many people could get hurt, all because he had been released. Thought of how his father had been the one to do it...

"Someone got released from Azkaban" Albus said. "Because of my dad. It was in *The Prophet*. And he was dangerous too, and he let him go because he gave up names. I don't agree with that."

Fairhart smiled. "You are referring to Fango Wilde" he said. "And I completely agree with you, though, I should tell you, I feel that your father had a few more reasons for releasing him. But yes, I know all too well how dangerous Fango Wilde can be. I was not enthusiastic about his removal from Azkaban."

"You know him?" Albus asked, suddenly remembering something. The first time that he had ever seen Fairhart, they been talking. Indeed, he even thought that they had been arguing... "Oh yes I know him" he replied, and he took an enormous swig of butterbeer. Albus saw that his bottle was now half empty. "We used to be best friends."

Albus choked on his butterbeer. "What?"

"We were best friends" Fairhart said simply. "A long time ago."

Albus merely stared at him. He did not know either of them well, but he could not imagine the two of them being friendly with each other at all, let alone best friends. "What happened?"

"Oh, it's a long story, perhaps you will hear it one day" he said. "But that friendship has ended."

The silence returned, and Albus noted that it was unbearable. For a few moments, he had let his guard down and confessed something to Fairhart. He longed to continue speaking. After a minute of more silence, he finally said something.

"Your face wasn't really burnt was it?" he asked. "Because you told something different to other people."

Fairhart smiled once more, then inclined his bottle as though giving a toast. "Caught me" he said slyly.

"Why'd you lie about it?"

Fairhart stared blankly ahead before speaking. "Two reasons. First, I think that it is important that children know about things like playing with fire or provoking dangerous creatures. Telling them that my face is a potential result for these things is sure to make them think twice about doing it. For some of my older students, those obsessed with body image, I make things a bit more personal. Tell them not to worry about things like acne. If one person listens, it's worth it. And second, my face is my business."

He said his last sentence with a definite tone of finality. He seemed to realize this, as he added to it. "Though I don't blame people for asking. Perhaps I will tell someone one day. Perhaps even you" he added with a grin.

Albus took a sip from his butterbeer before taking a look around. They had both gotten to know each other a great deal in a very small time, and quite suddenly, he regretted the statements that he had made about Fairhart's inability to teach. He glanced at the shelf and picked a peculiar object to discuss. His eyes settled upon a small stone basin.

"What's that?" he said, pointing at it.

Fairhart leaned forward to get a good look at it. "That is a pensieve."

"What does it do?" Albus asked, trying to simply make conversation.

"A very good question" Fairhart said. "I will try to explain it simply so as not to confuse you. A pensieve is an object in which we pour our memories into, so as to see them from a different perspective."

"Wait, you put...memories in there?"

"Yes. Well, records of the memory. It is impossible to remove a memory from one's mind, the mind is much too complicated and powerful. Sometimes, however, when a memory stays on one's mind, that is to say, when it is all that they can focus on, you can remove it. The memory itself still stays within the mind, and can be remembered at any time, but it no longer remains one's primary focus. For people who frequently have a lot on their minds- things that they can't help but think about, it is sometimes very useful to be able to remove these memories, or the records of them anyway."

"So that's where you store your memories...the one's that you don't want to think about as much?"

" No, memories can be stored anywhere, most prefer glass vials. The true magic of a pensieve is that it allows us to delve into these moments and see them from a new perspective. We see things in the pensieve that we may not have noticed in our recollections. A useful tool for surveying certain situations."

" Do a lot of people use them?"

" No, I wouldn't think so. Not only are they very rare, but some don't feel comfortable removing their thoughts, and especially not to evaluate them from a different view. No, most people are content with what is on their mind at that exact moment. I think you'll find that the only people that use pensieves are those that have way too many things to focus on at one moment, and need to sort things out accordingly."

Albus stared at the stone basin, in awe of its magical power. Suddenly, he was full of questions, questions that he would have never dared ask during class. " If someone has their memory wiped, can they ever get it back?"

" Memory charms can be broken. No spell can ever make the mind completely forget something that has occurred. It's too powerful. When one's memory is 'wiped', the recording of one's particular memory is altered. The core memory itself remains fully intact, tied to the mind by experience and emotion. If someone dies and your memory of them is erased, the grief that you felt for them remains present. With enough searching, they can be remembered. That is how people who lose their memories retain their personalities. No spell can erase the first time someone was afraid. The first time that they were in love."

Albus shifted a little bit in his chair. Fairhart certainly knew a lot about the mind. He suddenly remembered his father, two years ago, in the headmasters office, mentioning legilimancy, the ability to read someones mind. And he had even said that his friend Sancticus could do it!

" You can read minds!" Albus exclaimed. " You're a legilimens!"

Fairhart let out a loud laugh. " I don't see how you got that from what I said, but yes, you are essentially correct. Though of course, the mind can not actually be *read*. When penetrating one's mind, the most that you can do is hear phrases and see flashes. The mind does not think in complete sentences, it isn't worried about grammar."

" So you could be read- you could be penetrating my mind right now?"

" No, it normally requires eye contact. A certain connection. Extremely talented legilimens can do so from a considerable distance, but it is impossible to penetrate one's mind from very far away. I for one would need to meet your gaze for a few moments before I could pick anything up, and even then, I wouldn't want to. I rarely use the ability, only on auror business."

" Is there any way to block it?" Albus asked, suddenly uneasy.

" It has a counter part, yes. Occlumency. The act of shielding the mind. This requires a much more powerful mind, it is a much more obscure branch of magic. I myself am not half as good at occlumency as I am legilimancy."

" Why not? Aren't you using the same skills?"

" No, not exactly. In theory, it requires a skilled mind and raw talent. Some are naturals, others can practice forever and never learn the techniques. But we naturally try to invade the minds of others, hence why legilimancy is easier. We do it every time we look at them and make presumptions about them. An occlumens needs to hide his emotions, needs to block all feelings from his mind, so as not to let them be registered by others. I pity the person who can only invade the minds of others. I envy the one who can control himself and stop that from occurring."

Albus stared blankly ahead, shocked at how much he had learned. Is this what he had been ignoring in his lessons?

" And now *I* have a questions for *YOU* Albus"

He looked up and saw that Fairhart had taken another swig of butterbeer. He did the same.

" What?"

" You are very quiet in my class, bar your outburst, though you've seemed quite down recently. What's been bothering you?"

His first thought was James. His own brother giving him a detention, and confiscating his cloak. He thought of his cousins taking James' side on the matter, regardless of what Hagrid had said. And then he realized what had been bugging him the most recently. Seeing Mirra with Eckley had not made things worse, it had created an entirely separate problem all its

own. And he had been so cold to her just a few hours ago...

Should he tell this to Fairhart? He had inquired...he did want to know. He recalled his friends' joking about him going to Fairhart over girl trouble. He almost laughed at how the situation had come true.

" I'm...I'm kind of having girl trouble at the moment" he admitted.

" Ahhh" Fairhart said wisely. " The worst kind of trouble."

" Yeah" Albus said, burning up slightly. " I like this girl, and she's kind of...like with someone." Fairhart frowned. " I'm sorry Albus, that's a truly disheartening feeling. Are you friends with her?"

" Good friends" he said. " Great friends actually."

" But the boy she's with...how is he?"

" What do you mean?"

Fairhart sighed and started moving his lips, obviously trying to word things correctly. " Is he...a douchebag?"

Albus chuckled. He had never thought that he would hear a teacher say something like that, though now that he thought about it, this was Fairhart's first year as a teacher. He didn't even know how detentions worked.

" Yeah, he is. But for some reason she likes him. She doesn't...she sees me like a brother. But I guess she saw him like a boyfriend."

" Well I'm assuming that they're near the same age as you" Fairhart said. " Don't expect it to last."

" It's not about lasting though" Albus admitted, and he was shocked at how much he was saying. He had never felt so willing to tell these things, not even to Scorpius or Morrison. He supposed he felt some sort of strange connection with Fairhart. Suddenly...he felt trustworthy.

" It's just that things are different. I don't know how to act around her, I was so cold towards her today. I want us to stay friends, but I'm worried that I'll end up staying in that...that zone. I want her to like me back without making it seem like our friendship isn't important anymore. And I don't know how to do that" he finished sadly.

Fairhart gave another frown. " Have you tried some Patented Potter Pick Up Lines?"

Albus threw his arms up in the air. " Where did you learn that?"

Fairhart laughed. " I heard your father use the term. Giving advice to someone else in the office."

Albus rolled his eyes, but found that he was smiling. Indeed, he had smiled more during this detention than he had smiled in the last few days.

" But seriously Albus, I don't know your exact situation" Fairhart said. " But I think I can give you some advice."

" So what do I do?"

Fairhart leaned forward. " You do nothing. You stay her friend. The last thing that a girl wants is to have her best friends and her boyfriends not get along. They don't want things complicated, and you can't make it so. You need to establish how important your friendship is. Don't even worry about getting her to like you right now, focus on being there for her. Let her know that whatever happens with her romantic life, she'll always have you to talk to.

Then...maybe she'll start seeing you as *that guy*. Get you out of that zone."

" You think that'll work?"

" I cannot be sure" he said. " But it's better than being mean to her. Don't try and win her. Just make sure that you don't lose her."

Albus nodded his head. He knew what he needed to do. He couldn't let Mirra' relationship with Eckley get in the way of their friendship. He could not guilt her or trick her into liking him. He had to show what kind of friend he was.

" Thanks" he said.

" Any time" Fairhart said.

They sat in silence for a few moments, until Albus finally asked the question that he had most wanted to ask. Fairhart was just draining the last few drops of his drink when he did so.

" Is this normal?" he asked. " Drinking...drinking butterbeer with a teacher?"

Fairhart shrugged. " I'm sure it's been done." He glanced at his watch. " Time for you to go. Detention served" he added with a smile.

" Yeah I guess" Albus asked. He rose from his seat and made to leave. " Thanks again...for

listening.

" Not a problem. I'll see you in class. Oh, and Albus, one more thing, before you go?"

Albus turned just as he was opening the door. " Yeah?"

" Could you throw this out?" Fairhart said, tossing the empty bottle to him. He caught it and tossed it in the trash can in the classroom. " Thank you. Take one hundred points to Slytherin."

Albus grinned and left. No sooner had he closed the door behind him that he realized he wasn't going to go back to the common room. Not just yet. He had to go see Mirra and apologize. He started walking up the stairs. The Gryffindor common was on the seventh floor, and he had the strange feeling that he was going to get caught out of his bed by his brother again. But he didn't care.

He reached the seventh floor and turned a corner, then became amazed at his luck. Mirra was exiting a bathroom, and, as fate would have it, Eckley and Rose were both nowhere to be seen! Surprised at his good fortune, he nearly forgot that he needed to talk to her. He called out to her just as she began to turn the corner that led to the portrait of the fat lady.

" Mirra!"

She turned around and saw him. Cocking her head to the side in curiosity a bit, she started walking towards him. He met her half way.

" Hey" he said.

" Hi?" she said a little uncertainly. " What are you doing up here?"

For the first time in weeks, he looked at her gray eyes. " I just wanted to talk to you real quick. I wanted to...to apologize for earlier. I was kind of short with you."

" Oh!" she said, looking genuinely shocked. " Oh, it's okay. What was that all about though?"

" It had nothing to do with you, I was just having a bad morning. I had a detention coming up...and I just... I didn't feel like talking. Sorry I took it out on you."

" It's okay" she said. " Yeah I heard about the detention. Well it's fine. I'm really sorry about Hogsmeade by the way."

" Not a problem" he said cheerfully. There was an awkward silence while they stared at each other. " But umm...anyway...so you're dating Eck- Charles huh?"

She nodded her head. " Yeah. We went to Hogsmeade together, and then he asked me out. Sorry I didn't tell you...I just thought it would be weird."

" What? Why?" he asked, suddenly frightened. Did she know?

" Because you're one of my best friends" she said. " And I know you guys don't get along.

None of you do really...I kind of wish I hadn't told Morrison and Scorpius actually. Sorry if it's weird."

" Not at all" he said. " That was all...that was all last year. Things are fine now" he lied.

She smiled. " That's great! But anyway, I was thinking, I mean, me and Charlie get to hang out so much, I'd love to just hang with you and Scorpius and Morrison next Hogsmeade trip. I don't want him to come between us-"

" We can all hang out" Albus said, before he even knew what he was saying. " It's not a big deal."

" Are you sure? Really?" she looked ecstatic.

" Yeah I'm sure. Charlie seems like a cool guy" he said through gritted teeth. He hated himself for saying it, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that he had never seen her look happier.

" That's great! And Donny too!"

" Mhm"

She gave him a hug, a great, big, long, hug. He stopped himself from smelling her hair and merely waited for her to let go, though he didn't want her to.

" I have to get back now" he said. " Before James catches me again. Maybe we can all meet up in the library tomorrow?"

" That would be great" she said breathlessly. She gave him another brief hug.

" Bye" he said, and he turned around and began the walk back to his common room, grinning ear to ear as he heard her call goodbye to him as well.

He walked down the several sets of stairs with a strut to his step. He had cleared up so many issues today. He and Mirra were fine - they were friends, nothing more, nothing less. It would take some work, but he wasn't going to complicate things for her. He would deal with James some other time. No, today was a good day.

He entered the common room and saw, among the crowd of people, Scorpius and Morrison sitting on the floor playing chess.

" How'd detention with the ' idiot' go?" Morrison asked.

" Hey, back off" Albus said, smiling. " Fairhart's a pretty cool guy."

And with that, he walked up the stairs to his dormitory to get some well earned rest, amused at the bewildered looks on his friends' faces.

Chapter 10: The Sighting

Albus found himself going through something of an information overload in the weeks following his detention with Fairhart. Not from his classes (though they were becoming increasingly more challenging) but rather from things that he had never bothered to notice before. First and foremost, Fairhart's classes were actually quite interesting. Now that he was bothering to pay attention, he found himself absolutely rapt with attention during each lesson, and he was now even more excited than his friends' by the lessons end.

" Have they all been like that?" Albus asked his friends as they exited Defence Against the Dark Arts, students muttering in excitement.

Both of his friends nodded.

" You missed out on quite a bit mate" Scorpius said with a grin.

The second thing that Albus discovered was that the students of Slytherin house, much like the popularity that he sought from them, was quite fickle. Just as quickly as it had spread that Albus had lost one hundred points, the rumors began circulating that he had won them back during his detention, and indeed he was no longer prone to dirty looks in the hallways.

And finally, the third thing that Albus learned ended up being the one that he had suspected for the longest time. Charles Eckley was the biggest prat in the universe.

Mirra had taken his words to heart it seemed, and now there was scarcely a moment when Albus wasn't in the presence of one of his biggest enemies. Whether it be in classes, in the library, or even during Hogsmeade trips, Albus was forced to sit near him and silently loathe him. Not only was he exceedingly arrogant, but he always seemed to have a nearly impossible tall tale to tell everyday. He was constantly talking of his various humorous, but dangerous misdeeds that he had participated in with his three older brothers (all of whom had graduated years ago) and he wasn't afraid to tell about how much he had explored Hogwarts either.

Furthermore, it seemed as though with Charles Eckley, everything, *everything*, was some sort of an inside joke. On more than one occasion Albus had barely started a sentence when Eckley, Mirra, Rose, and Hornsbrook burst into fits of laughter, all of which Eckley brushed aside with a mere " Oh, you had to be there."

Worst of all however seemed to be his vocabulary. It was bad enough that his voice was unbearable to listen to, but he had the unfortunate habit of referring to something as " stud" when he thought it was cool. Even more aggravating was how he didn't seem to realize just how annoying it was.

And still, Albus preferred this to his other plan. Fairhart had indeed been right. What was most important was that showed how good of a friend he could be. Mirra was nothing short of ecstatic at how all of her friends seemed to be " getting along" and she had even told Albus privately how thankful she was that he had reached out to Eckley and Hornsbrook, let alone that he was getting along with them. And thus, he was forced to sit by them every day, plaster a fake grin on his face once Eckley started an unbelievable story, and silently wonder how on Earth Mirra could like him.

Hanging out with the Gryffindors had its other benefits however. Now that he was in closer proximity to Rose, he was pleased to see that she was actually talking to him again. It appeared as though this affected his cousins as well. They were once more waving to him in the halls, and Fred had even tapped him on the shoulder to tell him that he had dropped his quill. It seemed as though it was now down to just he and his brother to see who could ignore the other one more.

All was not well with the Charles Eckley situation however. As neither Morrison nor Scorpius bore secret crushes on Mirra, both of them didn't try very hard to be polite. Whatever Scorpius may say, he was intimidated by Eckley from the previous year, and thus only muttered under his breath when they would all meet together. Morrison however, who was never one for being quiet, frequently called out Eckley on his ridiculous stories, and on more

than one occasion had 'accidentally' kicked him from underneath the tables at the library. As he had grown even bigger than Hornsbrook over the summer, the Gryffindor boys could do little more than ignore it.

"And that's all that they're going to do, ignore it" Morrison said scathingly when Albus mentioned this. They were sitting in Potions, and as there was no group work today, the Gryffindors were out of earshot in the back of the room.

"Well, regardless, could you tone it down a bit? I don't like him either, but Mirra's really glad that we're all 'getting along'."

Scorpius entered the conversation at this point. "Hey mate, we're not telling you what to do with Mirra are we? Don't tell us what to do with them. Besides, we didn't ask to become best chums with them."

"I know" Albus admitted. "But just..I don't know, play it cool with them."

"At least we'll get away from them this Sunday" Morrison said, prodding the flames under his cauldron.

Albus tensed up. "Yeah about that" he said a little foolishly. "I kind of told Mirra that we'd all hang out again..."

Both of his friends groaned.

The Sunday of their next Hogsmeade trip brought more than just excitement to the grounds. The cold air and freezing rain of November was now accompanied by a thick sheet of snow, and the students had noticed. Many heads were turned towards the enchanted ceiling, where flakes of snow were delicately falling into nothingness while they ate. Albus had no time to pay attention however.

"Blimey I don't fancy walking in this weather" Morrison said through a mouthful of eggs, his eyes up at the ceiling. "You think that they'd let us take the carriages?"

"Can't talk now" both Albus and Scorpius said, hands moving at lightning fast speed as they scratched shoddy answers onto their parchment. They had Muggle Studies homework due the next day, and as they figured they'd be in Hogsmeade all day, they decided to get most of it done at breakfast.

Morrison leaned over the table to read what they were writing. "*The origins and variety of muggle currency*" he read off blandly. "You're struggling with this?" he asked Scorpius, who rarely struggled with any amount of work it seemed.

"It's harder than it looks" Scorpius said through gritted teeth. "They've exchanged just about everything. Chocolate, spices, even people! At least now they're using coins again..."

"And bits of paper with numbers on them" Albus added. As his father had grown up with muggles, he knew a tad bit more than Scorpius. Just a tad however.

"So what's so hard if you already know it?"

"Because we have to figure out where it all came from!" Scorpius shot out, flipping through the pages of his Muggle Studies book. "Why don't you just tell us! You grew up with muggles!"

Morrison shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I know how to use money mate, no clue where it came from. I'm sure it must be somewhere in Europe though. My dad used to sign these things called 'Czechs'."

Albus was very close to writing this down when the mail arrived. He looked up expectantly. He had been hoping for the last few weeks that his parents would write to him to talk to him about his feud with James. This would at least show that James had complained about it. He was disappointed once more however. It seemed as though his parents had no idea that their two sons were fighting - meaning that James didn't care enough to tell them.

"Either that or James did tell them, but just asked them not to mention it to you" Scorpius said reassuringly as they lined up in the Great Hall to go to Hogsmeade. Neville was once again standing by the great doors, accepting signed forms.

"Even if he did it wouldn't matter" Albus said, frowning. "They would have mentioned it to me anyway. I'm surprised Rose hasn't said anything though..."

He was forced to stop here, as at that very moment Rose approached them with the three other Gryffindors in their group. Hornsbrook had dressed casually despite the cold. Eckley was a different case however. He was head to toe in scarlet and gold, including a pair of golden earmuffs with lions on them. Morrison laughed loudly as they approached.

"What's funny?" Eckley asked, looking slightly confused.

" Oh nothing" Morrison said, putting one of his hands in his pocket and pointing at him with the other one. " It's just- you look ridiculous that's all" he admitted.

Eckley was about answer back when Mirra spoke up. " You guys ready? I thought that we'd head straight for the Three Broomsticks first, it looks awfully cold out there..."

They approached Neville with their permission forms, and, after receiving the okay to go, began the trek through the snow to the village. Eckley and Hornsbrook immediately struck up a conversation about how they had used a secret passage to sneak into Honeydukes in their second year. Albus stayed silent, not even bothering to pay attention, though Rose seemed to hang on to every word.

" So your sister told me that one of your uncles has a shop in Hogsmeade?" Mirra asked him, snapping him out of his silence.

" Oh...kind of. My Uncle George bought out this place called Zonkos'. It's now owned by Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes..."

They continued talking on their own for most of the walk, both of them barely registering what Eckley and Hornsbrook were bragging about. Morrison and Scorpius had struck up their own conversation, though he knew at once that it was fake. They were merely doing so to give him a chance to talk to Mirra one on one. Everything was going perfectly until they reached the gates to the village.

" Gosh it's freezing" Mirra said, shivering and tucking her arms in. " I wish I'd brought an extra jacket..."

Eckley, who seemed to have heard this alone amongst his girlfriends sentences, stopped talking instantaneously and wrapped his arm around, bringing her closer to him. " Warmer?" he asked, a grin on his face.

Albus turned his head away so as to avoid this ' cute' moment. His friends must have noticed how uncomfortable he was though, as Scorpius quickly mentioned something sure to distract Eckley from Mirra.

" So Quidditch season starts in a bit. How's the Gryffindor team holding up this year?"

Hornsbrook grinned. " Well they've got an amazing beater on their team this year don't they?" he said, and he gave Eckley a high five.

" Wait what?" Albus asked. " Who?"

" Yours truly" Eckley said proudly.

Albus' heart sunk. He suddenly felt as cold as the snow he was walking in. He recalled what Atticus had said about Gryffindors beaters. *One of them's in your year*. He was going to be playing against Eckley!

His friends seemed just as astonished, though Morrison managed to recover the quickest.

" They let you try out again?" he asked, dumbfounded. " After you broke your back last year?" Eckley turned the slightest shade of pink- and Albus knew why. Eckley thought (correctly) that Morrison had something to do with this particular incident, though he clearly didn't dare make any accusations with his girlfriend there.

" Yeah they did" he said, a little coldly. " And they called me a natural."

With a small twinge, Albus recalled that his brother was on the team. Had he been one of the players who had praised his biggest enemy?

" Don't worry though Al" Eckley added with a much lighter tone, and he thumped him on the back. Albus felt his lips curl into a look of disgust. " I'll go easy on you. Gotta' warn you not to get to the close to the snitch though - then I'll have to knock you off your broom!"

He laughed heartily and was joined by Hornsbrook and, even more annoyingly so, Rose. He was saved the trouble of answering back though, as a moment later they entered the village. Hogsmeade was always a sight to behold, what with the colorful shops and their customers muttering excitedly on the streets, but today in particular was special. The fresh coating of snow made the village look like what could have been a beautiful painting, and Albus couldn't help but stare at the frosted windows of the shops, trying his best to peer through them and see who was buying what. Still, it was freezing, and within moments the entire group had entered the Three Broomsticks.

They took their seats quickly (Morrison and Scorpius had to pull up extra chairs), and it wasn't long before Eckley started to ramble incoherently about yet another improbable excursion. He was cut off before he could get very far however. And strangely enough, it was his girlfriend who did it.

" Could you get us some butterbeers?" she asked him.

" Sure thing" he said, and he rose from his seat. " You guys want anything?" he added to the Slytherins who shared a table with him.

" Yeah, butterbeers" Morrison said. " Did you not hear her..."

" Gotcha" Eckley said with a fake smile, and he left at once.

" Thanks pal!" Morrison called after him. " That's really stud of you!"

Scorpius shook silently with laughter, though thankfully that seemed to be the only ramification of Morrisons remark. Mirra didn't seem to pay it much mind and Hornsbrook was listening intently to a story that Rose was telling him.

With her friends occupied, Mirra flashed him a smile from across the table, apparently once again thanking him for getting along with her boyfriend. He went a deep shade of red and was quite close to saying something witty when he heard the door to the Three Broomsticks open. He did not know what made him look back - he heard doors open all of the time. But for some reason an odd chill had crept down his spine upon the noise, and the second he looked back he saw why. His brother was standing at the entrance, surrounded by a large group of his friends. He had pinned his perfectly shiny badge to the outside of his jacket.

The rather large group of Gryffindors all immediately began pulling up chairs so that they could sit at a table in the back, but James first looked over at them. He waved.

Albus' heart plummeted. After all these weeks, his brother was finally reaching out to him? His hand raised a fraction of an inch, ready to wave back. Then he saw Rose waving out of the corner of his eye and he understood. His brother had been waving to his cousin, not him. He hastily stuck his hand in his pocket, and turned back to the table, where Rose was still in conversation with Hornsbrook.

" So anyway, I told Flitwick that I knew it was only supposed to be ten inches of parchment, but I really couldn't make it less than twelve without sacrificing things or cutting it short. I'm sure he'll understand, my mother always told me that he has no problem giving extra credit and -"

Feeling as though he'd rather listen to grass grow than hear Rose babble about extra credit, he turned his attention back to Mirra, whose smile had turned into the tiniest hint of a frown.

" I think your brother may have been waving to you" she said quietly, jerking her head in the direction of the table that James was now sitting at.

" He wasn't" Albus answered. " He was waving at Rose..."

" Not that Al cares" Scorpius said, clapping him on the back. " He can hold out as long as it takes for James to apologize."

At this, Rose stopped talking and began listening to the conversation.

" I don't think either one of you needs an apology" Mirra said, still talking to him. " He really doesn't know what he did wrong."

Albus gave a derisive laugh. " He gave me a detention for cursing, and tried giving me a detention before that!" he said, careful not to mention the cloak.

" But he was torn Al" Mirra said pleadingly. " He didn't know what to do."

" He wanted to abuse his power" Albus said through gritted teeth, careful to keep his voice low. He did not want to argue with her, especially not over this...

" No, it's not like that" she said. " Look you weren't there in the common room the first day. People were making fun of him. Not to his face obviously, with his reputation...but he still heard."

Albus stared at her incredulously. " Making fun of him?"

" No one thinks that he deserved the badge. Everyone was joking about how irresponsible he was and how he should just turn it in, how Professor McGonagall was senile for picking him. Some of them even said that he only got it because your dad was famous..."

" And it didn't help" Rose spoke up, " That someone accused him of having stolen it!" she added scathingly to Morrison. Albus watched as his friend gave a shrug.

Mirra continued speaking while Rose merely glared. " So he really wanted to prove that he could be responsible and mature, and make the right decisions. So when you were caught out of bed, he did what prefects were supposed to do. It was either reprimand you or prove to everyone, and himself, that he really wasn't mature enough to be a prefect."

" You didn't hear his tone though" Albus said defensively.

" His tone doesn't matter" Mirra said soothingly. " What matters is that he thought that of all people, his brother would understand. And that you would know that he was only doing his job. Had he given you special treatment, everyone would have been right about how he didn't

deserve prefect."

Albus frowned at the table. He had always thought that it had been out of spite. "What about the detention for cursing though?" he added.

"Retaliation for having disowned him from your family" Rose added. "He was really hurt over that."

Albus sighed and looked at both of his friends, though he wished he hadn't. Scorpius had something of a 'told you so' expression on his face.

"I think you should try and talk to him again" Mirra said.

Albus stared at her for a couple of moments. "Yeah, maybe you're righ-

"Oh, are you guys talking about James?"

Eckley had returned with his arms full of bottles. He passed them around and took his seat. "Yeah we were just talking about this the other day weren't we?" Eckley said to Mirra, wrapping his arm around her. "I reckon you should try and talk to him again Al."

"Blimey that's brilliant mate" Morrison spat sarcastically. "I can't believe no one's suggested that yet. You're dating a ruddy genius Mirra."

She laughed, though Eckley didn't seem to think it was so funny. Hornsbrook even made to speak, possibly to defend his friend, but Eckley quickly shook his head against it, and instead gave a fake hearty laugh as well so as to show Mirra how well he could take criticism.

Perhaps it was the news that Eckley had joined the Gryffindor team (Morrison loved Quidditch) but Morrison seemed even more vicious today. Albus hoped that he slowed things down some. He and Scorpius were only protected so long as Morrison was there to defend them. In the off chance that the Gryffindor boys did decide that enough was enough, and did so when Morrison wasn't there, he and Scorpius would be easily be outmatched by the sheer size of them, and Albus dreaded a repeat of the previous years fight.

Still, this was not as important to him as something that Eckley had said however. Yeah *we were just talking about this the other day weren't we?* So they talked about him when he wasn't there, huh? That was awfully cute. He felt his blood boil, and all thoughts of reaching out to James were soon replaced by anger...

He kept his silence for the next several minutes and merely listened while the conversations around him returned to what they had originally been about. Eckley and Mirra had joined their friends in discussing classwork, while Scorpius and Morrison were still making snide remarks about those across from them, though thankfully it was done more quietly.

He was pleased to see that he actually had to do little talking. The idea of Mirra talking about him when he wasn't there had both enthralled him and scared him slightly. If he could just have a few moments to sit quietly and think to himself. Then he could figure it all out...

The doors of the Three Broomsticks opened once more, only this time Albus was not the only one who looked. They had burst open so loudly that even the bartender was eyeing it. Albus watched as Carter Montgomery, the tall dark skinned Head Boy from Ravenclaw entered, looking tense.

"Hogwarts students out!" he said loudly.

There were cries of outrage through the pub, so many that Albus was taken aback. He had not realized just how many students were in there.

"We've only been here an hour!" someone shouted.

"It's an emergency!" Carter shouted. "I need all students to line up and follow me! We have carriages waiting just outside of the village! If there's any prefects in here I need your assistance!"

James rose from his seat at once and walked over to Carter at lightning fast speed.

"I need you to go gather all of the students from Zonko's" Carter said.

"I'm on it" James replied, and he left at once.

"My friend is at Honeydukes!" someone shouted from the back.

"The other prefects and the Head Girl are clearing out the shops now!" Carter said. "Now everyone line up and follow me, there's no time to explain!"

The students did as they were told. Albus and his party all approached the door at the same time as everyone else, causing a major jam. People were pushing him left and right in an attempt to leave or at least get ahead of the line. He would have been crushed by a burly fifth year had Morrison not squeezed himself in between them and moved people around with his considerable size.

The crowd muttered the entire time.

" What's going on?"

" Are we going to be okay?"

" Let me through, let me through!"

Albus heard Rose's panic stricken voice clearly despite the noise. " Do you think we're in danger?"

" Don't worry I've got my wand on me!" Eckley answered her pretentiously.

Though Albus was leading their small group and was unable to turn around, he heard Scorpius give a bitter laugh from behind him. Finally, he was through the door, and his friends soon followed. The snowy streets were even more crowded as students exited from all shops, though thankfully Albus had more room than he had inside the pub.

The prefects and Head Boy and Girl were trying to shout directions over the students, though things were so loud and chaotic they could barely be heard. Finally, after several minutes, someone was clever enough to magically magnify their voice.

" Please remain calm!" the magnified voice said, and Albus realized that it was his brothers. " Try and sort yourself into lines and follow the sparks!"

No sooner had he said it did James shoot red sparks up into the air. The crowd of bustling students all walked in the direction of the sparks, though they did not seem any calmer.

" What do you think's going on?" he heard Morrison ask him. He looked back and saw that their entire group was now close by.

" Couldn't tell you" Albus answered truthfully.

" I heard someone say 'Ares' " Scorpius spoke up.

" Ares?" Eckley asked inquisitively. " Like our old Headmaster?"

" How many other Ares' do you know?" Morrison asked him disdainfully.

" Someone saw him" Hornsbrook spoke up. " I just asked a prefect."

Albus turned to him, his curiosity getting the better of his dislike. " Here in Hogsmeade? How long ago?"

" I don't know but the prefect said that the aurors were contacted. I guess he hasn't been found yet if they're moving us back to the castle though..."

Albus continued to march with the rest of the group, finally arriving just outside of the village, where sure enough several carriages were waiting. Neville was standing by them holding a roll of parchment and a quill in his hand. " Check with me before you enter a carriage!" he called out. " I need to make sure everyone is out of the village!"

" Professor Longbottom, what's going on!" a girl shouted from the crowd.

" Is it true that someone saw Ares?" someone else asked, this one a voice that Albus recognized. It was Cooper Lanely from Gryffindor.

" The Headmistress will explain when we get back to the castle" Neville said impatiently. " Come check off your names!"

They all did as they were told and finally settled themselves in carriages. As it was only four to a carriage, they were separated from the Gryffindors. Albus didn't even get the chance to say goodbye to Mirra or Rose as he, Scorpius, and Morrison were all pushed in to a carriage and quickly joined by a Slytherin sixth year.

" Blimey, Ares picked a bad day to come out of hiding eh?" Morrison said once the carriage started moving.

" Yeah I guess" Albus said, deep in thought.

Secretly though, he disagreed. Was Ares not a former Headmaster of Hogwarts? Surely he knew the dates of all of the Hogsmeade trips? No, he had not picked a bad day at all. He knew that the castle would be nearly empty today. He couldn't apparate in however...the closest place was Hogsmeade. But this begged a different question. Why come back? What was so important that he should risk being captured and carted off to Azkaban?

He was cut off from his thoughts by Scorpius, who had leaned over and said something to Morrison.

" Guess you were right about the carriages" he smirked.

The remainder of the journey back to Hogwarts was silent, and the carriages didn't stop moving until they were literally just outside of the castle grounds. The students shuffled out, still muttering, some excited, others fearful. They followed Neville and the prefects up to the castle doors, and only when Albus took a good look around did he realize something. Neville was not the only professor who had went to Hogsmeade - almost all of the teachers had joined him, no doubt to protect their students. He peered through the crowds to see if he could find

Fairhart, but he was nowhere to be seen.

They entered the castle and maneuvered their way through the halls, still following the prefects and professors. Albus expected them to be sent to their common rooms, but they weren't. Instead, they were led into the Great Hall.

The students took their seats at their usual tables, all of them looking up at the high table expectantly. Professor McGonagall was indeed sitting there, eyeing the students and waiting for them to settle down. Albus stared at her and noted how withered she looked. He had barely spared her a glance this year- assuming her to simply be a capable Headmistress, though now things were different. She had a look of exhaustion to her not unlike his fathers the previous year, and he found it unnerving. Finally, after several moments (in which the other professors took their seats as well) she called for silence.

" May I have your attention please!" she called loudly and clearly, and the entire student body stopped to pay attention.

" You may be wondering why your trip to Hogsmeade was made short. I apologize for the inconvenience, but it was a necessity. We had reason to believe that you were all in danger. Reginald Ares was spotted in Hogsmeade by several civilians."

The muttering broke out. Those that had not heard this rumor were repeating it anxiously, though a handful from each table were bragging excitedly about how they had been the " first to hear".

" Did they catch him!" someone from Ravenclaw shouted.

Professor McGonagall gave them all a steely gaze before answering.

" No they did not. Aurors arrived seconds too late, and he managed to avoid capture."

Several students groaned. Professor McGonagall made to speak but was cut off by another students, this time a girl from Hufflepuff.

" Do they know why he was there?"

Albus watched as the headmistress cleared her throat. " No, we do not."

" Are we in danger?" a boy sitting near the girl asked.

" No, This school is well protected I assure you-"

" Are Hogsmeade trips going to be canceled!" someone a few seats down from Albus yelled.

" Now really!" Professor McGonagall barked. " I am trying to speak, and give you answers. No, Hogsmeade trips are, as of now, not canceled The Ministry does not know what Ares was doing in Hogsmeade, nor do they know of the whereabouts of his many accomplices, including one who used to work here! They are do everything in their power however, and we at Hogwarts are doing everything in ours to insure that this remains a safe learning environment!"

This seemed to silence everyone. Professor McGonagall's cheeks were now flushing, her nostrils flaring. She did not seem angry however, though there was a tone of finality in her voice that meant that question time was over. When no one spoke she continued.

" Once more I apologize for the trip being shortened. As it would normally be lunch time at this point -" food magically appeared on the tables, as did full goblets-" please enjoy."

The students immediately dug into their food, and all questions of Ares and the safety of the school was lost in the appreciation for the magnificent feast that the house elves had provided. Albus barely ate however. He was still thinking about Ares. And a small part of him was still focused on Eckley and Mirra talking about him...

" You okay mate?" Morrison said a few minutes later, his mouth full of steak and kidney pie.

" Huh?"

" You haven't touched your food" Scorpius added from next to him.

Albus stared down at his plate. " Just thinking" he said. " About...James and stuff. And the whole reaching out to him thing."

Morrison swallowed and cleared his throat loudly before speaking. " Well yeah reaching out's a good idea" he said. " But you've got to beat him in Quidditch first."

The idea that something as simple as a Quidditch match could be possible baffled Albus - he had been far too preoccupied recently. Mirra dating Eckley, coupled with the with his fear that his relationship with his brother was truly over and the idea that his father had done something wrong, had turned Albus' numerous practices into nothing more than parts of his schedule. Though his training was both challenging and rewarding, the morning of the match had him feeling more nervous than usual.

" I'm not ready for this" he admitted to his friends at breakfast. His teammates were all sitting at the other end of the table chatting and eating merrily, unaware that their seeker was

incapable of touching his own food.

" You'll be fine" Scorpius told him, his eyes scanning the paper. " It's just nerves. Once the match starts you'll be okay."

" No, I really won't" Albus said truthfully. " I've been practicing but...my head just hasn't been in it."

" Well forget about your head!" Morrison said loudly, his deep voice frightening a few first years that were next to him. " Your entire body is going to be a thousand feet in the air, so you better get your mind set now. This game's important, especially if your really going to try and settle things with James afterwards."

Albus frowned at him, confused. " What are you on about?"

" Well, if you win the match, that gives you a one up on your brother. So it won't be like you miss him, it'll be like ' I kind of feel bad that I wiped the floor with you, so let's try and be nice okay?'"

Scorpius folded up the paper and rolled it, then leaned across the table and smacked Morrison over the head with it.

" That's ridiculous" he said. " If anything, Al should lose on purpose, so that his brother won't be angry."

" I'm not losing on purpose" Albus said through gritted teeth. " And I'm not going to act like I pity my brother either" he added to Morrison.

" Your loss" Morrison said with a shrug.

" Well you have to either win or lose Al..." Scorpius added.

Albus rolled his eyes. " You know you guys aren't helping right? Like, at all-"

" Game time Potter!" Atticus hollered from down the table.

" It doesn't start for an hour!" he called back.

" We have to check conditions!"

Albus looked down at his plate of eggs, suddenly wishing he had eaten, then found himself in the Slytherin locker room twenty minutes later. As was typical, Atticus was giving his pre-match talk, though Albus didn't tune it out as he usually did. This was Atticus' last year, and Albus felt as though he should pay attention.

" Seven years" Atticus said, walking past them, his brown eyes examining them all. " I've been at this school seven years. Been on the team for more than half of those. And we've never looked stronger."

Albus tried not to let his mind wander, tried not to think about his situation with James, but it was difficult. He eventually ended up giving half of his attention to the team captain, the other half to his own personal problems.

" Now Gryffindor thinks that they can intimidate us!" he said fiercely. " They think that beating us last year taught us a lesson. They think that we've got no chance."

The rest of the team all gave angry inarticulate shouts. Atticus silenced them by holding up his hand.

" There's no point in pretending otherwise, we're not just the underdog, we're the bad guys. Gryffindor is the ' protagonist' of this story, they're the good ones, the ones who are supposed to overcome us. But I don't see that. We're not just opposition for the heroes. We're people who have worked hard to get here. We're students just the same as them, and we're determined! This is only the first game of the season, but it's the last of the underdogs! The last of the villains! After today, Hogwarts will know that Slytherin means business!"

The team pumped their fists into the air and gave howls of approval. Albus had to admit that he felt inspired. Atticus had not given up on his team...and neither had he.

" Now get dressed!" Atticus barked, his wavy hair stuck to the sides of his face from his vigorous movements as he cheered with his team. " We've got to check the conditions on the pitch."

As it turned out, conditions were less than ideal. Snow was not falling, though like in Hogsmeade, there was a fresh coat of it on the ground. The cold air was even more painful against him as he was not bundled up, and with a sick feeling in his stomach, he realized that this would only intensify once he started flying and the wind attacked him. Still, this did not deter him. Atticus' speech had fired him up, and the prospect of battling his brother had only added to it.

Twenty minutes later they walked down to the pitch once more, this time to the sound of tumultuous boo's, with the cheers of their house barely audible. As the previous commentator had graduated the previous year (which Albus was thankful for) it was the Head Boy, Carter

whose voice echoed throughout the stadium.

" We're looking for a solid rematch here today folks! Though of course, things may be spiced up a bit from last years Quidditch Final! Both Potter's who were absent are ready to play, and looking to start this season off with a bang!"

At this moment the Gryffindors walked out onto the pitch, and Albus could hear Carter no longer. The applause that went with the " protagonists" as Atticus had called them was nearly too much for his eardrums.

The two teams took all of their positions while Mr. Wood walked into the center, ready to release the snitch and blow his whistle. Though Albus was near the back, he could see Eckley clearly. He was not smiling at him, and Albus knew why. Eckley only acted nice to him because of Mirra, the same reason that Albus returned his pleasance. With her in the crowd, they were back to being enemies. Unfortunately for him however, only one of them had a bat. Albus watched as Atticus briefly gripped hands with the captain of the Quidditch team, and with a sound of the whistle, they were off. He saw James rise into the air faster than anyone else on the field and immediately felt more focused than he had all morning.

As he had predicted, the weather affected him tremendously. He felt as though the wind were cutting his face with vicious intent, and his fingers were so cold it was hard to keep them curled around the broom. The other players seemed to be feeling the same effects. Ten minutes in and there was no score.

" We're seeing a Keepers duel here today!" Carter announced. " That's the twelfth stopped shot by Lanely, Sanders just can't get it into that middle hoop! And a nice beater there from Rawn to regain possession of the quaffle for Slytherin!"

Albus noticed that the new commentator was much more fair than the previous one. Rather than accusing one team of cheating, he was calling it right down the middle, arguing with a call only once (in favor of Slytherin) and praising both teams superb keeping. This was good for Albus, as it meant that he was not distracted by any insults. Twenty minutes into the game however, he had still not seen the snitch.

He circled the hoops near his side, breathing heavily and trying to keep warm while keeping an eye out all the same. He saw his brother hovering low at the opposite end of the field, behind the hops on his side. Albus realized the brilliance of this strategy at once. No chaser was ever going to go behind the hoops, meaning that he beaters wouldn't be as likely to knock bludgers back there. He would be able to search for the snitch with little interference.

Albus frowned at his brothers immaculate strategy and decided to do something about it. He recalled last year, when his brother had pretended to see the snitch to trick him. Perhaps it was time to give him a taste of his own medicine.

He flew to the center of the pitch, smiling slightly as Atticus broke through Gryffindors defenses and scored the first points of the game. Once he was dead center, he accelerated downward.

" The Slytherin seeker has gone into a dive!" Carter announced. " He's going awfully fast!" He was indeed going very fast. He glanced at his side to see if his brother had fallen for it, but he had not. He was still hovering close to his own hoops, peering up at the sky for the glimmer of gold.

Albus frowned and went to turn out of his dive, then heard a great whooshing noise and saw a bludger come from right ahead of him. With half of a second to react, he managed to roll sideways off of his broom, his frozen fingers barely clasping to it as the bludger soared right where his head had been a moment earlier. With a fancy swing, he mounted it again and continued flying.

" Nice move from Potter! A dead on shot from newcomer Charles Eckley is evaded by some truly spectacular flying!"

Albus turned his head at this and saw Eckley hovering in the air a few feet behind him. Judging by how he was comfortably leaning back on his broom and twirling the bat with his hands aimlessly, he was a skilled flyer. Albus still felt that he was better however, and dodging the bludger had been his proof.

" Told you not to go for the snitch" Eckley sneered.

Albus hovered casually before retorting with a supercilious smile of his own. " I was faking you idiot. Or did your superstar brothers not teach you how to use your eyes?"

Eckley made to answer back but they were both interrupted by a loud cheer. A Gryffindor chaser had scored on Nott. They both seemed to realize that they had nearly forgotten about the game and sped away from each other

The separation didn't last long however, as Albus was quick to learn. Twenty minutes later and the keepers were starting to feel the effects of the cold as well, as the game was tied sixty to sixty. Keen on making sure that Albus didn't end the game, Eckley was hovering primarily around him, waiting for stray bludgers to come away so as to knock them towards him.

" Another thundering shot from the Gryffindor beater!" Carter called out. " I don't know how Potter keeps dodging these."

It was true that Albus was making some truly spectacular moves, but he realized that none of it mattered if they lost. Knowing that he would need a clearer view of the pitch if he hoped to find the snitch, he shot upwards into the air much faster than Eckley could possibly hope to comprehend, let alone match.

Only when the game was practically playing below him did he hear Carter say something that diverted his attention.

" And the Gryffindor beaters are receiving a fantastic applause here today, and a well earned one as well. Look at Charles Eckley take a bow! He's already got fans who want him to knock Potter off of that broom!"

Albus froze and pondered this. Fans? Like who? Who wanted him off of his broom? Not...not Mirra?

He nonchalantly floated through the air, deep in thought, oblivious to the crowd and the players. Who was Mirra cheering for? Gryffindor, obviously, but which particular players? She wanted her boyfriend to do well, certainly, but at what cost? Did she want Eckley to succeed in injuring him? One of her best friends?

He thought back to the first bludger that he had dodged. What had she done when Albus had avoided injury? Cheered? Groaned?

" POTTER GET THAT SNITCH!"

Albus looked down several feet below him and saw Atticus speeding past him, looking livid. His eyes automatically searched for James at the other end of the pitch, and he saw that James was rising quickly through the air, a glimmer of gold above him. Thinking of Mirra had distracted him, and his brother's patience was paying off.

He leaned forward and accelerated as fast as he could. As was usual at this speed, he could no longer hear the audience or commentary. The wind smacked against his face. It was colder than ever. But he had to catch up.

His superior broom was going as fast it could go, he was pushing it to it's limits. But James was no slacker on a broom. Exceedingly skilled and having gotten a good jump on it, he grabbed the snitch before Albus was close enough to extend his arm.

Sound returned to his ears, and it was completely unwelcome. Three fourths of the crowd had erupted into cheers, the Slytherins portion of the audience merely staring silently, a few cursing in disapproval.

" And Gryffindor wins the game by the full hundred and fifty points! The Slytherin seekers meandering got the better of him there!"

Albus flew to the ground and dismounted from his broom with the rest of the team. No one was speaking. The Gryffindors in the crowd had joined their team on the field and were celebrating. He saw James in the crowd with two pretty girls, an arm wrapped around each of them as people congratulated him. Albus had never felt more anger towards him. What a cheater. He knew that Albus was not paying attention. And he had capitalized on it. Couldn't even win fairly...

The rest of his team all marched back to the locker rooms, and Albus was right about to join them when he saw something else in the crowd. Mirra was congratulating Eckley on his victory as well, and it was in a very nonverbal way. He turned his head in disgust at the sight of them kissing and began walking to catch up with his team, his broomstick- a birthday gift from his brother- dragging along in the snow behind him.

Chapter 11: Red War

The days following Slytherins' loss were some of the most frustrating that Albus could remember having. When he had lost his house points, he could get them back. But there was no changing history. No going back and winning.

He stayed in a slump for the end of November and most of December, the thought of how he had let his team down creeping into his thoughts every few moments or so. There was simply

no getting around the fact that had he been paying attention, the result of the game could have been radically different. His team tried to feign optimism for him, ensuring him that it was but one game on their record, but they wore the same facade as the rest of his house. Atticus in particular was a heartbreaking case. Albus went through a guilt trip every time that his captain smiled at him. The season may not have been over, but few teams came back to win the cup after losing a season opener by a full one hundred and fifty points.

The guilty looks that he automatically gave his teammates, coupled with the scowls he got from the rest of the house, had taken a toll on him emotionally. Despite the jolliness of the season, he found himself more and more eager to stay inside and do his work, and he had even turned Mirra down when she had asked him to meet her in the library to study with her and her Gryffindor pals. Of all the things that could make him feel worse, being in close proximity to Eckley was probably the most prominent.

All in all, he was more anxious than most for the winter holidays, were he could go home and ignore his housemates, ignore the Quidditch practices, and remember the ephemeral jubilation that had occurred from his detention with Fairhart all the way to the day of the game. Only one thing about going home frightened him.

" So what's going to happen with James?" Morrison asked him in Herbology the week before break. Neville had assigned them a plant to take care of in groups of three

(the *ampliditusnarcissitus*, otherwise known as honking daffodils), and the resulting noise gave them the ability to talk to each other uninterrupted by their teacher.

" What do you mean what's going to happen with him?" Albus asked him dryly, pouring water onto the large daffodil, which gave a loud honk of approval.

" Well aren't your parents going to wonder why you're not talking?"

" Haven't thought about it" he lied. The sad truth was that his anger at having lost to his brother in Quidditch had destroyed any ideas of reaching out to him, and thus Christmas would certainly be awkward. Indeed, this was another reason why he didn't want to hang out with Mirra and Rose. He was afraid that they would continue to pressure him into doing something that he most definitely did not want to do.

" It's important!" Neville called out over all the honking. " To distinguish between the noises that denote both pleasure and aggravation. A more high pitched, shrill sound could mean that the *narcissitus* is in pain from too much."

" I think we're killing it" Morrison said morosely as Scorpius dumped an entire jug of water onto the daffodil, which gave a loud and eerie shriek.

" Who cares, it's a plant" Scorpius shouted over the sound.

" I do! This is one of the few classes I might be passing!"

Albus ignored his friends bickering and continued to think intently about his situation with James. Seconds later Neville came to reprimand them all for nearly drowning their plant however, and the thoughts were pushed from his head.

The last class before break was Defence Against the Dark Arts, which Albus was happy for. Few things cheered him up these days more than a good lesson Fairhart, and their last one was no different. In a rather unorthodox improvisation session, students were to throw a ball around the room, with whoever catching it having to add on to a story that Fairhart had simply started with " The wizard entered the hall and heard someone behind him".

So many people had different things to add on and different ideas to use that Milton Parish ended up concluding it with the two wizards (who were actually revealed to be twin vampires fighting over who got to drink the blood of their veela mother) agreeing to stop drinking blood altogether and opening a barbershop.

Fairhart called for silence after the students had had a hearty laugh and beamed at them. Still sitting on his desk, he addressed his students enthusiastically.

" Well done!" he said. " Your imaginations are flourishing fantastically! Always remember, in any given situation involving combat, preparation is your best defence. But improvisation is your most offensive tool! And as we've made so much progress thus far, I think that it's time that we took your education in to much broader grounds."

The students grinned and exchanged excited looks. Though Albus was now sitting in the front row, he could hear people all the way in the back muttering.

Fairhart continued in his enthusiastic tone." What we now have inside of us is potential-

knowledge that can be turned into power. A sort of uncontrollable fire, that, with practice, can be controlled!

" Following your winter break I think that we're going to begin learning actual defensive magic. You now have a significant understanding of the theory that goes behind defending yourself. Your emotions and your mind are every bit as dangerous the magical abilities that you possess! We will soon learn to use all three together!"

The bell rang just as he wished them all a happy holiday, and the students filed out of the classroom merrily, wishing their professor the same as they went.

The train ride back to Kings Cross station was a silent one. Albus, in an attempt to not have to see Mirra and Eckley enjoy their last few moments before the winter break together, had managed to convince his friends to sit in the very back of the train. He also hoped that this would mean very little conversation with Rose, and thus she would not be able to babble to him about how important reaching out to James was. This proved effective, though he still found himself dreading the car ride back to his home. Uncle Ron was going to be driving he, James, and Lily in addition to his own children.

" Just stay away from him all break" Morrison said about halfway through the trip. Their compartment had been quiet for hours.

" He lives down the hall from me" Albus said with a frown. Feeling as though he could put more effort into the conversation however, he decided to change the topic.

" What are you guys doing for Christmas?"

Morrison made to answer but Scorpius predictably interrupted him. " Pretty much the same as last year, minus you. I think my uncle - the one who works with dragons that is- may be visiting."

" Cool" Albus said, uninterested.

" Yeah, that is pretty stud" Morrison said in an uncanny impression of Eckley's voice. Albus found himself laughing for the first time all trip. It was amazing how easily his friends could cheer him up, even in his darkest of hours. He clung to this thought all throughout the rest of the train ride, and by the time that they got off and began scouring the platform, he found himself wishing that all three of them could simply get back on the train.

" Well I'm out" Morrison said suddenly as they walked past a couple from Gryffindor who acted as though they would never see each other again. He pointed at his mother, who was waving to the three of them kindly. She was much shorter than her son, and when he waved at her she gave him an incredulous look. She then then pointed at her upper lip, tilting her head to the side slightly.

" Why is she doing that?" Albus asked him.

" No reason" Morrison said quickly, his face slightly red. He began pushing his trunk unusually fast to meet up with her. " Have a good holiday!" he called back to his friends.

They both wished him the same before continuing to walk around the station. A few minutes later they saw Scorpius' father waiting for him in the center of a crowd of girls who were chattering loudly. He was looking disgusted at where he was and what he was hearing, but he nevertheless smiled when he saw the two of them. Scorpius slapped his hand and wished him a happy holiday, then went to meet his father. Albus was pleased to see that Mr. Malfoy waved to him before they turned to leave. He returned the wave happily.

No sooner had he dropped his hand then he heard his Uncle Ron bellow his name.

" OY! Al, over here!"

Albus spun around and saw his uncle beckoning for him. James, Lily, Rose, and Hugo were already with him. He joined the group and stayed silent as they walked back to the black ministry car that his uncle was using. Uncle Ron ushered them in and Albus was displeased to see that he had to sit next to James, who didn't even bother to acknowledge him.

His uncle adjusted a mirror and started the car, then finally began speaking. " Your Uncle Bill picked up the other kids" he said. " So It's just going to be us for this little trip!"

No one said anything at first, but Rose (who sitting in the passengers seat) began boasting once they were on the road.

" I got an O on my last arithmancy test daddy" she said. " My professor called it the best in the class."

Her father beamed at her. " Tough subject" he said. " Keep it up Rosie. Hugo, how are you doing? You're not falling behind in any classes are you?"

Hugo and Lily both began telling him about their classes and the things that they were doing, some of which Albus recognized from his own first year. He was shocked to learn that his

sister had been the first in the class to transfigure her match into a needle, and even more stunned when he learned that she had levitated her feather first try. Indeed- he couldn't help but feel slightly left out. He was the only person in the car who was not from Gryffindor, and as such, couldn't commentate on the going on's of the house. Strangely, James seemed just as quiet, something so unusual that Uncle Ron was quick to notice it.

" You okay James?" he asked, looking into the mirror to see him. " You've been quiet. Prefect code of silence?"

" No, just tired" James said.

" How's prefect going? It's great to be feared isn't it?" Uncle Ron said with a cheeky grin.

James was in the middle of replying when his uncle cut him off.

" Hold on a second" he said irritably, and he rolled down the window. " LEARN HOW TO DRIVE PAL!" he bellowed at the person in front of him. " Sometimes I wonder how they let these muggles driv- YEAH I'M TALKIN' TO YOU! IT'S CALLED A TURN SIGNAL BUDDY! Oh now he turns it on..."

They all stared at him, though he didn't seem to notice. He rolled the window back down and resumed speaking in his normal calm voice.

" You were saying, James?"

The rest of the trip continued like this, with Uncle Ron stopping the pleasant conversation every few minutes to shout expletives at other drivers. On one occasion Albus was even forced to cover his little sisters ears so that she wouldn't hear the verbal beating he gave someone who stopped abruptly in front of him. Albus was somewhat glad for this however - it kept him entertained and made the trip go by faster.

They arrived at the Potter Mansion around midday, and Albus was relieved to see his parents smiling at him when he first entered the kitchen. They were sitting next to each other reading the paper, his father looking tired. He stifled a yawn before speaking.

" How's year three going?" he asked.

" Fine" Albus lied. He couldn't say much more before James and Lily entered the kitchen as well, and he soon found himself sitting at the kitchen table with both of his siblings as they were bombarded with questions from their parents. All three of them said nothing regarding the fact that two of them were not speaking to each other- Albus wondered if James had purposefully told their sister not to mention it.

Uncle Ron entered the kitchen just as Lily was telling them about the first time that she was caught in the vanishing step. He tossed the keys to his brother in law, who caught them with excellent reflexes.

" What took you so long?" his father asked, bemused.

" Took forever to park that thing right" Uncle Ron said. " By the way Al, Rose is upstairs, she wants to talk to you about help with some assignment?"

Albus gave his uncle a quizzical look, unsure of if he was joking or not. When his uncle shrugged he left the kitchen and walked upstairs upstairs, where he saw Rose sitting on her bed in the guest room that she stayed in so much it had might as well have been hers.

" You need help with something?" he asked her, closing the door behind him.

" Don't be silly, I only said that to get you on your own" she said snobbishly. He frowned but waited for her to continue. " You still haven't talked to James."

Albus made to speak but she cut him off.

" Don't say anything, I know you haven't. He would have told me if you had even tried. You guys haven't talked in months, and it's going to ruin Christmas!"

" Yeah that's right Rosie!" he spat sarcastically. " Me not talking to my brother is going cancel Christmas for millions of kids all around the world..."

" You know what I mean!"

He stared at her for a few moments. " Look, now that we're both back and everything, I'm sure it'll work itself out. We don't have to have some big discussion okay?"

" So are you going to try and talk to him? At least make an attempt to clear things up?"

Albus gave her a contemptuous glare. As much as he loved his cousin, she was much too bossy, and interfering for that matter. " I'm going to try and clear things up okay? Just stop harping me about it..."

No sooner had he said it than the uncomfortable feeling of having told a lie rose in his chest. And indeed, over the next few days, Albus made no attempt to talk his brother, nor his brother to him. They ate breakfast in silence, did not take part in the same conversations as everyone else, and didn't bother to wish each other goodnight. Strangely, Albus wished that

more people were staying for Christmas. Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur had taken their children to France to see their grandparents, and Grandad and Grandmom Weasley had went with them. The rest of the family seemed to take this as a cue that Christmas was to be celebrated privately this year, and as a result only Rose's family was staying with them. He normally wouldn't have minded the lack of extra people, but having fewer relatives staying meant more opportunities for he and his brother to be alone in their silence.

He had hoped that perhaps things would change on Christmas day, but alas, they did not. Even as they opened their presents, with their parents smiling politely at them, they didn't bother to even so much as wish each other a " Happy Christmas." Thankfully, Hugo received a broomstick as one of his gifts, meaning that not as much focus went into the fact that he and his brother, though in the same house, were celebrating Christmas separately.

The night was helped considerably by his mother and Aunt Hermione creating a fantastic feast that easily compared to those that he would have at Hogwarts. After dinner the adults all went into the kitchen to discuss " adult matters" leaving all but Uncle Ron (who considered said matters as unimportant) in the living room to entertain the children.

Albus sat in the corner mostly, only half listening to his uncles various anecdotes. The other children (all but James, who had joined the adults in the kitchen) sat around him, listening intently as he recounted stories in between sips of firewhiskey.

" So there we were!" Uncle Ron said dramatically, slightly tipsy, but able to articulate fine regardless. " Standing on a giant chess set, with gargantuan marble chess figures blocking our way! I knew at once we'd have to play them to cross. Knew at once that the only way we were going to save the world was if I used my expert strategic abilities to outsmart a chess set that had been put their to stop us from doing exactly what we aimed to do- by your current headmistress no less!"

Albus tuned his uncle out and began to think about his dilemma's, something that he had been doing quite frequently this year. He and his brother's relationship was broken. Not even the holiday spirit could save it. How long would this go on? Until next Christmas? Until James graduated and was forced to give him back the cloak? Forever?

He was just wondering if Eckley had gotten Mirra a Christmas present when his Uncle said something of interest.

" He was a wanted murderer, you see. They had to put the entire school on lockdown to try and find him."

" Someone tried to kill you?" Rose asked her father, horrified. " A murderer broke into Hogwarts to kill you?"

" Well no, not exactly, at the time he was supposed to be trying to kill your Uncle Harry..." Lily gave a shriek next, and Uncle Ron panicked. " But he wasn't! It's hard to explain. He wasn't trying to kill anyone! Well he was, my pet rat- well my pet human- well not really my pet then. Look, long story short, he ended up being a pretty awesome guy..."

" They put the entire school on lockdown to find someone?" Albus asked from his corner. He got up and joined the circle on the ground. " Like they did this year, with Ares?"

Uncle Ron scratched his head. " Not exactly like it. See, we had Azkaban guards looking for this guy, and it was inside the castle, not in Hogsmeade. But it turned out he was innocent anyway. Just a big misunderstanding..."

" So then Ares could be innocent too?" Hugo asked. " It could be another misunderstanding?"

" No!" his father said, perhaps a bit more sharply than he meant to. " I mean- it's different. Ares definitely isn't innocent. I don't want you kids to go off thinking-"

" Why is everyone so scared of him?" Rose asked, and her father turned pink.

" Who? Ares? What are you talking about?"

But it was Albus who answered. " Everyone is terrified of Ares. When people heard that he was in Hogsmeade, everyone panicked. All the students had to stick close and go back to the castle, and they're even talking about canceling the trips..."

"And that's not all" Lily continued. " A lot of people are mad at my dad for not catching him. People with signs and-"

" I see you heard about that" Uncle Ron said, and he now looked truly uncomfortable. He looked to the entrance to the dining room, as if hoping that someone from the kitchen would hear and save him, but no one did. He turned back to the children uneasily.

" What is it you want to know exactly?" he asked.

" Why everyone is so scared of him" Albus said. " Why there's eight hundred galleons on his head. We have a right to know..."

Uncle Ron heaved a sigh. He was looking twice as anxious now.

Rose spoke up. "Daddy *please*."

Albus watched as his uncle sighed once more and took another large sip of his drink. Uncle Ron may cave in to his precious Rosie frequently, but Albus felt that they had some extra assistance. The large glass in his hand was more than half empty. He had had a considerable amount to drink.

"Okay I'll tell you" he said. "Bits of it anyway..."

All four of them moved in closer to him. Of all his stories, this was bound to be the most interesting. Albus in particular needed to have this information. His father had released a potentially dangerous man from Azkaban in the hopes of finding Ares- he needed to know what was so bad that this drastic step needed to be taken.

"I guess it all starts" Uncle Ron began, but then he trailed off. "Well I suppose it *really* all starts with the renegades. You kids don't even know what a renegade is do you?"

All four of them shook their heads, though Albus knew that at least one apart from himself was lying. Lily and Hugo may have been too young to receive the same lesson from Fairhart that he did, but Rose, despite being in a different house, was in the same year and had most definitely heard it. Still, they didn't want to miss anything in the story.

"Well basically, a renegade is someone who fights bad people. Dark wizards. But, they don't really have the authority to do it. They're not aurors like me. And after Voldemort fell, there were a lot of people- renegades- running around fighting. And it caused a big problem for the ministry."

"But why?" Hugo asked. "They were fighting the bad people too..."

"True, they were" Uncle Ron said, nodding his head. "But sometimes there wasn't any proof that these people were bad. It's the Ministry of Magic's job to decide that. So by taking the law into their own hands, they were breaking the law, see? What they were doing was just as illegal as what the bad people were doing."

"Now another thing that you have to know is that all aurors are part of a "task force". A task force is three aurors who are all given the same thing to work on. For instance, your dad and me", he said, nodding his head to Albus, "were in the same task force. Now everyone's job is different. One task force may have to focus on one activity were dark wizards have been meeting. Others may deal with the selling of prohibited products. But at this time, right after the war with Voldemort, nearly every task force was assigned to capturing both dark wizards- and renegades."

"Now the problem is, a lot of people had a problem with that. The "Renegade Movement" got a lot of strong publicity behind it, and the Ministry was taking a lot of heat. Around the same time, the Ministry needed more aurors, because so many had died during the war."

"So desperate for wizards who were willing to put their lives on the line, the Ministry started recruiting people right out of school, sometimes not even. Anyone who was of legal age and wanted to fight could join. You see, with aurors, we're each given a protege. An up and coming rookie who kind of shadows you and sometimes accompanies you on your missions. So essentially, there's six people in a task force. Three fully accomplished aurors, and their three apprentices. Guess who became an apprentice?"

"Ares" all four of them chorused.

"That's right. I got stuck with some idiot named Motley who retired after a year- couldn't hack it. But Ares was fortunate enough to get Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter. And they made a great team too. Ares was just naturally gifted, there's no getting around it. Add in the fact that he was learning from the best, and you could say that he was on the fast track to becoming a fully fledged auror himself."

"But where did Ares come from?" Albus asked. "Where was he during the war?"

"Probably hiding" his uncle answered him with a shrug. "That's what a lot of people did back in those days. Hid. Half the people who joined the Ministry only did it once Voldemort was dead. I guess they felt like they had been cowards, and wanted to give back a bit. Rectify themselves and serve a good cause by rounding up the dark wizards that were on the loose. The ministry didn't care. So what if Ares had never attending school? So what if he had no family to speak of? He wanted to fight dark wizards. They gave him the test, he passed with flying colors, and they assigned him an auror to fight alongside!"

" So he was a good auror?" Rose asked.

" Well...maybe not good" her father admitted. " But effective."

He leaned in closer, and quite suddenly, Albus felt as though he was hearing something that his father did not want him to hear. His uncle continued quietly.

" As powerful as Ares was, people liked him for his methods. He was vicious. He never killed as far I know, but he definitely tortured. In a lot of ways, he was like a renegade. He did what he thought was necessary. Ministry regulations say that you're never supposed to leave the country unless you have the expressed consent of the Minister of Magic from that country, but he didn't care. He'd track a dark wizard half way around the world. Find them. Bring them back and make sure that they were locked up. The public loved him. The media dubbed him ' Red War'. Some pun about Greek Mythology or something. He was getting a lot of attention.

" And you can imagine why, really. Here was a guy- an auror- who fought like a renegade. Someone who did a lot of things that the renegades did, but had the authority to do it. Someone who just toed the line, not enough to be considered a renegade, but enough to be as *efficient* as one. He was probably one of the most successful aurors of all time to be honest. They say that half of the cells in Azkaban were filled up because of old Mad- Eye Moody, a great auror and a good friend of mine. Well the other half probably have Ares to thank. He at least took the one's that had broken out and put them back anyway.

" And he got a lot of attention for his partnership too. You should have seen the headlines. ' Red War and the Boy Who Lived arrest twenty'. ' Ares locks up five, Potter saves ten lives in process.' They were a popular duo, that's for sure."

Albus felt his heart sink. " So...they were friends? My dad was friends with Ares?"

His uncle shifted his weight a bit and tried to word his next words carefully. " Not really, no. I don't think so anyway. I mean, me and your dad are friends. Family now. It's not like your dad and Ares ever went bowling or anything. It was strictly professional. They were around the same age, and they were learning from each other. They made a good team. The way the public saw it- they were the revolution. The " Renegade Movement" didn't really die down until after the two of them had locked up so many people. But still, Ares has a bad reputation now. The people know how dangerous he is. How the tables have turned eh? The same people holding picket signs to have Ares arrested now are the same one's who supported him decades ago. They're scared of him because they know that he's capable of being just as vicious as any renegade was back then. Add in the fact that he's associated with dark wizards now...and it's easy to see why people are so frightened."

But Albus was not done yet. Rose and Lily and Hugo may have gotten their answer, but there was something else that he needed to know.

" Are they also scared of him because he was in Azkaban? I mean, what did he do to get himself locked up anyway?"

His uncle gave him a stoney expression. At this question, he seemed more uneasy than he had at any other point of the night. Once more he turned his tipsy head to the door, though this time it seemed as though he were doing it, not because he sought help, but because he was hoping that he wasn't overheard.

" I'm really not supposed to say Al. Your dad wouldn't want me to."

All four of them groaned. Rose spoke up once more. " Daddy *please*".

" No" he said, and he sounded more strict than Albus had ever heard him. He wasn't going to give up though, not now.

" But if you don't tell us I won't know what to think!" he pleaded. " Ares could have killed someone...my dad could have helped if they were partners!" he added, mortified.

" No, no! Nothing like that..."

" Then what?"

Uncle Ron slouched a bit and stared at the four children. He clearly regretted ever telling them a thing. " I don't- I don't want you to think it's like that. Your dad had nothing to do with. Ares was just caught stealing, that's all."

" Stealing from who?" Lily asked.

" Stealing from the Ministry."

" You can go to Azkaban for stealing?" Hugo asked, the shock in his voice palpable.

" You can for stealing from the Department of Mysteries."

" *The Department of Mysteries*" Albus breathed, and he thought that he had never been more curious in his life. " What was he trying to steal?"

" It's not important" his uncle said firmly. " What's important is that he was caught before he could take it."

" Who caught him?" Lily and Rose asked at the same time.

" I did."

Rose clapped her hands to her mouth, while Albus merely raised his eyebrows in surprise. " You?" he asked.

Uncle Ron nodded, and for the first time during the entire conversation, he looked pleased, even somewhat proud. " I was working late that night when I heard a disturbance. Turns out that Ares and two other aurors tried breaking in to the Department of Mysteries. They got hostile with me, and I managed to hold them off long enough for help to arrive. It took a fair bit of people mind you...Ares is no slacker when it comes to dueling. But by the end of the night he was in Azkaban. Defining moment of my career" he added in something of a slur.

" But how did he get out?" Albus asked. " If stealing from the Department of Mysteries is so bad, why did he get out after only six months?"

His uncle frowned at him while all four of the children waited with bated breath. " I'm really not supposed to say Al."

" Why not?" Albus pouted. " Why can't you-"

" I think you kids have heard enough" came a voice from the other side of the room. His father was leaning against the door frame looking grim. James stood next to him, looking somewhat gloomy as well.

" But dad-" Lily started.

" No" her father said firmly.

Uncle Ron looked away, apparently embarrassed at having been caught divulging secrets. Things only turned worse for him when his wife also appeared in the door frame, looking stern.

" I agree, you kids should go to bed" she said.

It was Rose's turn to complain next. " But we're wide awake!"

" If you stay up late you're going to get on an irregular sleep schedule!" her mother said. "

And that includes you too, Ronald! Bed!"

" Yes dear" Uncle Ron said, defeated.

Albus and the rest of the children, as well as Uncle Ron, filed past the adults and up the stairs.

On his way up he heard his father and aunt talk, though their conversation was hushed.

He crawled into his bed and stared at the ceiling, knowing full well that sleep was not going to come to him anytime soon. He had forgotten all about his brother and Mirra, indeed, all thoughts had been replaced by what he had just heard.

What had Ares been trying to steal all those years ago? Could it have been the Dragonfang Wand? But no, that couldn't be it...the wand had been entrusted to someone at the time.

Whatever Ares was trying to steal, it must have been well protected in the Department of Mysteries...and it must have been dangerous too.

At this another thought simultaneously crossed his mind. Where was this object now? Was it still in the same hiding place? Could Ares still be after it? And if he was...how could he get it this time?

And then there was his release from Azkaban. If what he had done was so bad...if what he had been trying to steal was so dangerous...what possible reason was there for being released from Azkaban? Had he lied his way out? Had he given up names, like Fango Wilde? And who could have been stupid enough to let him out? Whoever he was...he was certainly regretting it now...

Despite believing that sleep was out of his reach, the flood of information that he had received had made him more tired than he had thought. Whether or not he actually ever drifted off he did not know, but he was positive that he had at least had a dream - a dream in which his brother had crept into his room quietly and wished him a "Merry Christmas."

Chapter 12: The Family Pensieve

The rest of the winter holidays dragged on like no other week in his life. Albus had been

pleased to leave Hogwarts for Christmas - pleased to leave the scowling Slytherins and mounds of homework behind- but he now found himself in two minds. Returning to Hogwarts would at least separate him from James once more, and their unbearable silences would cease. At the same time, so long as he was at home he no longer had to worry about hanging out with Eckley and Hornsbrook for the sake of his friendship with Mirra. Needless to say, he spent a lot of time wondering what on Earth it was he really wanted.

In his ideal Christmas break he and James would have mended their friendship, his father would have told him that Fango Wilde had been returned to Azkaban, and it would be he, not Eckley, who was waiting for break to end so as to spend time with his girlfriend. None of these things happened of course, and the gloom that he carried through the Potter household had not went unnoticed.

" Al, you look feverish" his mother told him as he was eating breakfast the day before they were return to Hogwarts.

" I'm fine mum" he said, munching on buttered toast.

" Are you sure dear? You've been looking pale. Let me check your temperature-"

" Mum I'm fine!"

" Good morning Aunt Ginny"

Albus turned and saw Rose enter the kitchen. She stifled a yawn and took a seat next to him. " Morning Rosie" she responded merrily. " Toast and scrambled eggs?" she added, indicating the pan that was on the stove.

" Yes please, it looks delicious" Rose responded sycophantically.

Albus rolled his eyes and continued eating his breakfast in silence. He would have given anything in the world to have Rose be as silent around him as his brother was. She had done nothing but whine about how he was no longer talking to his brother for the entirety of their vacation. He had wondered vaguely why she found it so important at first, but her persistent nagging made him realize something. It wasn't important to her at all- she simply enjoyed antagonizing him.

" Have you seen my dad?" Rose asked both of them as a plate of scrambled eggs was placed down in front of her.

" He went to Diagon Alley with your Uncle Harry" Albus' mother told her pleasantly. " They had a few errands to run. We're low on floo powder and I believe they also want to get Hugo some Quidditch gloves so he can start practicing right away."

Albus finished his breakfast and went to put his plate in the sink when his mother addressed him.

" That reminds me Al, when your father gets back he needs to talk to you."

" Why?" he asked, a little more abrasive than usual. " Am I in trouble?"

His mother batted his questions away with a flick of her hand. " Don't be ridiculous" she said. " Why would you be in trouble?"

Albus looked at his cousin, who shrugged at him. Had she told his father?

" Then what does he want to see me for?" he asked his mother hesitantly.

" He didn't say" she answered him. " He just told me to tell you not to go back to bed."

Albus was about to say something else when his brother entered the kitchen quietly. He sat down and waited for his breakfast, though Albus didn't stay long enough to find out if he ever got any. He hurried up to his room the next moment.

Albus waited in his room for the remainder of the day, hoping that whatever his father did want to see him for, it had nothing to do with James. He did not know why he was so frightened- he did not expect his father to take sides. He thought that it may have been the mere principal of it however. He was afraid that he would be forced to apologize first, something that he flat out refused to do.

He heard a knock on his door right around the time that they normally had dinner.

" Who is it?" he asked.

" It's me" he heard his father answer. " Can I come in?"

Albus frowned. He couldn't stand it when his parents asked him that question. What was he supposed to do, say no?

" Yeah."

His father entered, giving him a small smile as he did so. " Your mother is making dinner now. Should be ready in a couple of minutes" he said. " I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment?" he asked.

" Erm..yeah? Sure."

His father opened his mouth to speak then closed it. " You know what" he said. " I'd actually rather show you something. Come into my room with me."

Albus raised his eyebrows inquisitively. His room? Albus rarely entered the master bedroom. He recalled jumping on his fathers bed to wake him for Christmas when he had been younger, but he hadn't been in his parents room for years. The mystique of it had decreased as he had gotten older.

He followed his father through the hallway and into the biggest room in the house. It was, in all actuality, a pretty boring looking room. Apart from a dresser and the tables with pictures on them, there really wasn't much to look at. He sat down on the king sized bed as soon as they entered.

" Just sit tight" his father said.

Albus watched as he bent down low to a cabinet and opened it. It was easy to see that the cabinet had been magically expanded, for his father soon began rifling through a large assortment of objects that Albus didn't recognize. Eventually, his father started literally taking things out of it, including a large sneakoscope and a few dozen books.

" Aha!" he said, and Albus jumped. It had been strangely quiet in the moments that his father had been searching.

He watched as his father pulled out a large tray with dozens of small glass vials on it. Albus leaned forward curiously to see what was in the vials, but even on closer inspection he couldn't tell. It didn't appear to be solid or liquid.

He continued to examine them for another moment before his father pulled something else out of the magically expanded cabinet- a round, stone basin with a large " P" carved into it. A pensieve.

" Do you know what this is, Albus?" his father asked him, setting the pensieve on the bed next to him.

Albus nodded. " A pensieve."

His father looked astounded. " How do you know that?"

" There's one in Professor Fairharts office" he said, seeing no reason to lie.

" Is there really?" his father said, giving a wide grin. " Well yes, it's a pensieve. Do you know what they do?"

Albus nodded.

" Good" his father said. " That saves time. This is not a regular pensieve however, this pensieve had actually been in our family for several years." He blew dust off it to make his point.

" Where did you get it?" Albus asked. He knew that his father had grown up with muggles.

" My Gringotts vault" his father said. " Shortly after the second war ended, I went in to my vault to retrieve a large sum of gold. I was buying a house, you see. In the very back of the vault there was more than just gold however. I found a few of my fathers possessions. This pensieve was among them. He had also left several memories behind as well."

He waved his hand over the tray of glass vials.

" Those are memories?" Albus asked. " Your dad's memories?"

" Some" his father said. " The one's with the black corks anyway. The one's with the white corks are mine."

Albus peered at the tray. About half of them had white corks, and they were all labeled as well. The one closest to him read *Ron & Hermione- Wedding*. The one next to it repulsed him. *James' birth*. The next few on the tray were turned away from him, though he did see a label that looked like it said *Cedric- Graveyard*.

He was just wondering who Cedric was when another memory caught his eye. This one was the very last in the row of white corked vials, and Albus could just make out what it said. *Ares- Azkaban*.

His heart skipped a beat. Was this what his father wanted him to see? A memory involving Ares, perhaps explaining what he had been trying to steal? Or how he had gotten out?

His excitement turned to disappointment quickly however. His father had removed a black corked vial and was prying it open.

" I very rarely do this" he said. " I haven't looked at any of these in years. And it'll probably be

a couple more before I do again."

Albus looked up from the tray, feeling it best to ask something, or at least speak. He didn't want his father to know that he had been reading the labels.

"Have you seen all of your dad's memories?"

"Not all of them, no" his father answered. "Some of them- more than half of them- were intimate moments with my mother that I'd rather not see. But some of them I've watched. The one I'm going to show you, for instance."

"What's it about?" he asked.

"You'll see" his father said. "But first I wanted to talk to you about something. I hear that you and James haven't spoken in months?"

Albus felt his heart plummet. "Who said that?" he asked, anger cropping up inside of him. *Stupid Rose and her big mouth.*

"Your brother."

Albus' jaw dropped. "James told you that?"

"Indeed he did. I'm going to skip around the details, but apparently, he has your cloak, you served a detention, and he's no longer your brother?"

Albus opened his mouth to argue. "He started-"

His father raised his hand to silence him. "That's unimportant now. We will discuss this later. First, I want you to view this memory with me."

Albus watched as his father spilled the silvery contents into the pensieve. It was like nothing that he had ever seen before. It seemed to float throughout the stone basin, and a moment later his father was swirling it around with his wand.

"You first, Albus."

Albus stared at him. "What- what do I do? Just put my face in it?"

His father nodded. "It doesn't hurt" he said. "It's a rather unique experience, actually. You get used to it after a while."

Albus swallowed hard and prepared to dunk his head in it. His first thought was that he would end up drowning, certainly there would be no air in there? And yet at the same time, he reminded himself that it was not actually a liquid...

He inched his face closer to the pensieve and peered into it. All that he could see was darkness. He inched his face closer and closer...

The next moment he felt as though he were traveling through some sort of whirlpool. His face was now entirely submerged, and yet there were brief moments where he could still feel the rest of his body, sitting on his father's bed. At the same time, his feet hit solid ground.

The feeling of travel ended quickly, and when Albus next looked around, he was in a very dark hallway. He immediately looked up at the ceiling, expecting to see a silvery exit, but saw nothing but concrete. He looked around a bit. He had expected to have to ask his father where they were, and yet this place looked very familiar. He was at Hogwarts. In fact, unless he was very much mistaken, he was on the fifth floor.

He looked behind him and saw that his father had appeared at his shoulder.

"We're at Hogwarts!" he exclaimed, forgetting entirely that his father no doubt already knew this.

His father nodded his head. "Indeed we are. And what we're doing here will become apparent pretty soon."

Albus did not wait for "pretty soon" to occur. He walked up and down the corridor, amazed at some of the small differences. Some of the portraits were much different than the ones in his time. There was also a suit of armor in the corner that definitely did not look familiar, and he could have sworn that there was an extra classroom. Still, the corridor was just as narrow, and even the same color.

He walked back to his father, who was still waiting patiently for something to happen. He made to ask him what it was they were waiting for when he heard a voice. Someone had turned the corner of the hall, and Albus did a double take in examining him.

It was like looking at himself in five years. James Potter had the same thin mouth, the same untidy black hair, and even carried himself with the same posture- he was used to riding a broomstick. He wore glasses however, and his eyes were a brilliant hazel rather than the green that Albus shared with his father. Still, the resemblance between the three of them was

uncanny. It felt very weird to be in the same hallway as two people who looked like older versions of himself.

" Meet my father, Al. James Potter the first."

Albus stared at him, hoping that he would hold still as he rushed down the hallway. He appeared to be in a hurry however. Indeed, he seemed irate as well. His cloak was billowing behind him and his footsteps were very noisy. Albus could just barely make out the Head Boy badge on his shirt. He was in his final year of Hogwarts.

" Stupid Snivellus" James muttered to himself, completely unaware that his son and grandson were standing mere feet away from him.

" So he can't see us or hear us?" Albus asked his father.

" Or feel us. We are not actually hear Albus. We're still in my bedroom. We are surveying, not taking a part in. Quiet now, I want you to pay attention."

James turned the corner however, and Albus and his father were forced to hurry after him, still listening to his disgruntled muttering.

" And she believed him. As if I would *ever* say that. Snivelly's going to pay..."

Albus and his father were walking a few feet behind him when suddenly, out of seemingly thin air, another man appeared, right in front of them and behind James. Apart from them both being tall, this man couldn't have looked any more different from the student he was following. He was old and wrinkly, with a sweeping silver beard as long as his silver hair, which fell all the way down his shoulders and onto this lower back. He had a very polite smile on his face, the mystique of which was only accentuated by his half moon spectacles, which were precariously placed on his long crooked nose, dangerously close to falling off but somehow staying on. He was wearing robes of the deepest blue as well, and they, like James', swept on the floor behind him from the speed at which he was walking.

Albus thought that he looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't quite pinpoint from where. Still, his presence gave Albus the chills. Despite the fact that it was only a memory, it was as though the tall old man radiated power and brilliance. Though Albus had never met him before, he knew, somehow, that this man was a big deal. A *very* big deal.

" Who is that?" he asked his father.

" That, my son, is Professor Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and also your namesake."

" You named me after *him*?" Albus asked. He suddenly felt much cooler than he really was.

" Yes I did. Watch now, this is important."

" But where did he come from?" Albus asked, astounded. Dumbledore had appeared from thin air!

" He doesn't need a cloak to become invisible" his father said with a wide smile. "He was in front of us the entire time. You just couldn't see him. Nor could I or my father, who still hasn't seen him actually."

This was quite true. Dumbledore was still walking behind James, but was making so little noise that James appeared to not have noticed. He was still muttering anyway, and still about the same thing. Someone named ' Snivelly'.

Dumbledore was now so close to James that if he took an additional step forward he would bump into him. He appeared to have realized this, as he finally decided to reveal himself. He held his fist up to his mouth and gave a loud cough.

James spun around on the spot and, with remarkable reflexes, withdrew his wand from his robes. There was a loud cracking noise, and then a puff of smoke engulfed the both of them.

" What happened!" Albus asked his father, though he was answered the next second. The smoke cleared, revealing that Dumbledore was holding both his own wand and James' in his hands. James, who was still coughing from the smoke, was now holding...a rubber duck.

James squeezed it once, heard it squeak, then looked up. " Professor Dumbledore!"

" Good evening James" Dumbledore said kindly. His voice was strangely soothing, and very wise as well. " Forgive me for disarming you, I daresay I panicked. Your reputation as an accomplished duelist left me no choice but to act quickly."

" It's fine" James said, taking his wand back from Dumbledore. He gave it a wave and the

duck vanished. " Did you really have to give me the duck though..."

Dumbledore chuckled merrily. " Probably not, no. But your reputation as a practical joker precedes you as well. All in good fun, James."

James smiled. They stared at each other, young adult and old man, then began walking down the corridor together as though they had not just drawn their wands at each other. They were both walking at a much slower pace now, which Albus was thankful for. It was much easier to keep up and hear what they were saying.

" May I inquire as to why you're still up James?" Dumbledore asked kindly, his arms behind his back as they walked.

" Just doing rounds" James said, staring at the ground. " Making sure no one's out of bed."

" At three in the morning? Very determined aren't you? Though I certainly applaud your enthusiasm at keeping order."

James frowned and shrugged. " Just doing my job" he said, and Albus was immediately reminded of what Mirra had said to him about his brother. *He was just doing his job.*

" Hmm, I see" Dumbledore said. " But where is Miss Evans? Do you frequently split up to do rounds?"

James turned red. " No...not frequently."

They continued walking in silence for a few moments, though their pace was now even slower. Albus was afraid that he would bump into them for a second, and had to remind himself that he would probably just pass through them. He looked up at his father to say this, but decided against it. He was staring at Dumbledore and James intently.

" Is something troubling you James?" Dumbledore asked, breaking the silence.

" Just thinking" James said.

" A sickle for your thoughts?"

James opened his mouth to speak, then closed it once more. He seemed to contemplate what he was going to say. " Just stuff" he settled on. " What's going on...out there."

He did not appear to be lying, though Albus had the strange suspicion that there was much more on his mind. Still, Dumbledore did not press him for his honesty, but merely nodded his head.

" I can certainly see why your mind would be so full of those thoughts. Is there anything in particular that's troubling you about ' out there?'"

" My dad told me that Hogwarts is the only safe place left" James said sulkily. " It just made me realize...things are going to be so different once we leave here."

" Yes indeed. Times are hard James. For one of your friends in particular."

James gave the headmaster a quizzical look. " Who? Sirius? He's smarter than he acts..."

Dumbledore gave a small chuckle, but his face became stony the next moment. " I am not referring to Mr. Black, but rather Mr. Lupin. His condition is more against him than ever once he leaves Hogwarts."

" I know" James said, still frowning. " I heard that it's getting harder and harder for half breeds to find work. Now that most of them are allied with Vol- sorry, *You Know Who.*"

" Call him Voldemort, James. There is no reason to call him anything else."

" That's what my dad told me" James said. " He said that the more frightened we are of his name, the more scared we'll be of him."

Dumbledore smiled. " Wise man, your father. I'll have to remember to mention that when persuading others to use his name. But yes, finding work will be hard for Mr. Lupin. I can only hope that he is valued more for his fantastic personality and intelligence than he is degraded due to his condition. Werewolves are among the worst treated of half breeds."

" It's not just work" James said. " I told Remus that he can live with me. I've got enough money for both of us. It's just the dirty looks that he'll get if people find out..."

" Very admirable of you James, to let your friend live off of your considerable wealth. But I would not worry what dirty looks he may receive. You still have a year left here. Enjoy your time while you can."

James nodded his head as they turned the next corner. Albus doubted very much that either of them knew where they were going, as they passed the staircase and continued walking at their slow pace. Neither one of them spoke, but Albus didn't think that there was anything wrong with the silence. It appeared as though their relationship as a student and professor

had nothing to do with the lack of speaking ; they were both merely thinking. Finally, James spoke.

" What are *YOU* doing up sir?"

" A very good question James. I have lived at this castle for many years now, and still I find myself wandering in vain for a lavatory nearly every night. For a castle so big, there are so few places to go to the bathroom."

James stopped walking abruptly, and Albus did indeed pass through him. He held out his arm to stop Dumbledore, then glared around the hallway. Finally, he pointed at a portrait on the wall at the far end of the hall.

" Tap that with your wand three times. Maybe four. Should open and reveal a bathroom." Dumbledore merely stared at, then looked back at James. " Your knowledge of this castle never ceases to amaze me James. I'll have to remember that."

James shrugged as they resumed walking. It became apparent however that Professor Dumbledore had more on his mind than just the bathroom.

" I get the feeling that something else is troubling you James. Forgive me if I'm incorrect. Are you sure that there's nothing else on your mind?"

James hesitated. Dumbledore resumed speaking when he did. " Unless you'd rather keep it private" he said. " In which case I implore you not to feel obligated to tell me anything."

" I'm having girl trouble at the moment" James said, and Albus smiled to himself. Had he not said the exact same thing to Fairhart?

Dumbledore smiled at him. They stopped walking once they had reached the top of the staircase that they had just passed- they had been moving in a circle, with no real destination. They both took a seat on the first step. When Dumbledore said nothing, James spoke once more.

" It's Lily" he said. " We finally just became friends and everything blew up in my face."

" Well I must admit James, I'm proud of you all the same. We- and by ' we' I mean the entire staff as well as myself- had some doubts about making you and Miss Evans Head Boy and Girl. The fact that you've worked alongside her thus far this year without any real trouble is nothing short of astounding. You were friends, you say?"

" Well it was shaky" James said. " But yeah, we were calling each other by our first names at least. But tonight everything got ruined."

" How so?" Dumbledore asked, intrigued.

" We were doing our rounds about an hour ago and we ran into Snape-

" *Severus* Snape, James. He is a fellow student at this school, there is no reason to address him by his surname."

" Right, Severus" James said, though Albus knew from his tone that he loathed saying it. It was the same tone that Albus used when he had to say " Charlie".

" Anyway" James continued, " We started exchanging some words...Severus accused me of having said some things...I pulled my wand on him. Nothing happened!" he added quickly at the stern look on Dumbledore's face. " But Lily just ended up getting mad at me. I don't really want to go much farther than that."

Dumbledore nodded, than placed the tips of his fingers together deep in thought. " What a very unfortunate position to be in James. Have you attempted to speak to Miss Evans since?" James shook his head. The silence that followed was the first uncomfortable one of the entire memory. When James finally did speak, he spoke as though even he himself couldn't believe that he was saying it. It was a defeated, depressed tone.

" Sometimes I just feel like giving up" he said. " I feel like I've wasted six years at Hogwarts, and my seventh is going to go the same way."

" Seven years, you say?" Dumbledore said. " Dear me, that is a very long time to be wasted on something."

James frowned, and Albus knew why. He had not been expecting Dumbledore to agree with him, but rather to change his mind. Hearing that the old headmaster also thought it a waste of time had made him realize more than ever that he should give up.

But Dumbledore did not stop speaking. He exhaled deeply, then resumed talking over the tips of his unnaturally long fingers.

" I am not allowed to have favorites, James. As a professor it is both highly not recommended

and greatly unethical. I can, however, offer you advice. If I had spent seven years wanting something, than I do not think that I would let one moment tarnish that search. Not one moment, not one argument."

James looked up at Dumbledore, the defeated look on his face replaced with one of pure uneasiness. " I know what I want" he said. " I just don't know what I'm supposed to do." He said it in such a way that Albus could easily tell how hard it was for him to say it. It was something that had been on his mind for the longest time, yet he could not tell it to any parents, or any friend. It had to be said to someone who could not give him a suggestion, but rather one who could understand the situation.

" I don't know what you're supposed to do either James. But I can tell you that as unwise as it is to follow your heart sometimes, listening to it can do you no harm."

" My heart?" James asked incredulously.

" Oh, yes, your heart" Dumbledore said, beaming at him through his spectacles. " I find that the heart is easily just as wise as any mind, and much more powerful than any wand. Never underestimate it."

Dumbledore stood up at this, and in this on moment he seemed taller than ever. He straightened his posture and turned to leave. " I'm rooting for you James" he said.

James turned to him, still sitting down on the steps. " I thought you weren't allowed to have favorites?" he asked.

" Oh I'm not" Dumbledore said kindly. " But I'm certainly allowed to have friends. Now if you'll excuse me I have a full bladder to attend to, goodnight James."

Dumbledore began walking back down the hallway, and Albus knew that at the next turn he would be able to access the hidden bathroom that his student had shown him. James merely sat there on the stairs, apparently very deep in thought.

" I think it's time to go, Albus."

He felt his father place his hand on his shoulder, and the next moment he was revolving on the spot. He closed his eyes and when he opened them he was sitting on his fathers bed; the pensieve lay right next to him. He felt his face to see if it was wet. It wasn't.

He waited patiently while his father scooped the memory back into the vial, then recorked it. He watched as the vial was returned to the tray, and then the tray to the cabinet. Finally, he turned to face him.

" Well? What do you think about your grandfather?"

Albus had not been expecting to be asked anything, but rather to merely comment. " He seemed...cool I guess. He didn't seem to get along with Severus Snape though" he added. It did not bother him, but it did intrigue him. Did his middle name belong to his grandfathers enemy? It was one thing for Snape to have been an unpleasant person...but as someone who had been detested?

" No, they didn't get along" his father said. " And I'll leave it at that."

" And they mentioned Teddy's dad too!" Albus said, remembering it suddenly. " They said he was a-

" Werewolf" his father finished for him. " And he was."

" Does Teddy know?" Albus asked.

His father thought about it. " I think so" he said. " I mean, we never really talked about it. It's really not that big of a deal."

Albus opened his mouth to say something, but his father cut him off.

" Do you know why I showed you this memory?"

Albus shook his head. He really didn't know. He supposed that it could have been a way to show him who he had been named after, but that didn't make much sense. Why would his father do that now?

His father folded his hands. " I want you to pay close attention to something in that memory Albus. I want you to focus on the relationship between my father and the professor that kindly extended his advice. Did you notice who reached out to who first?"

" Professor Dumbledore" Albus said.

" That's right. James was unwilling to reveal his true feelings. Unwilling to admit that he needed help. But his professor- Albus- insisted."

Albus looked down. He thought that he knew where this was going now.

" I knew what I wanted to name my children long before they were born" his father said. " I had thought, for some time, that the names ' James' and ' Albus' would be given to any boys, but it wasn't until I saw this memory that I realized how appropriate that was. Your brother is

very much like your father. For all the good qualities that they possess, sometimes they find themselves a little lost on the way. And the pride that they carry- the pride that can only be attributed to being at the height of their popularity- would prevent them from ever asking for help or revealing their troubles. But I knew that I could always count on Albus, whether it be the kindly old headmaster or the younger brother, to be a guide.

" I do not know how your feud with your brother has escalated to where it is, Albus. But I want you to know that whatever you are feeling, your brother is feeling it just as bad. James is destined to be stubborn, Albus. How could he not be? But at the same time...he is destined to be helped. James may never be able to make the first move, to admit his troubles, to confess when he is in the wrong. But I know that *YOU* can."

Albus nodded his head. He understood. He had been waiting for nothing this whole time. James could not reach out and apologize to him because James did not understand how. If anyone was going to initiate a truce, it would have to be him.

" Also, Albus" his father continued. " Did you notice something else about their relationship? About what occurred when they met late at night?"

Albus' first idea of a response was that his grandfather James had not attempted to give Albus a detention, though somehow he knew that that wasn't the answer. " They helped each other" Albus settled on.

His father nodded, smiling. " Whether it be telling one to listen to their heart, or directing one to the bathroom, they saw past their labels. That they were student or professor didn't matter, nor would it have mattered had they been brothers. They were friends. And friends help each other get through things."

Albus nodded. " I think I'll talk to James" he said. " Or at least...try to."

" I can ask for no more than that" his father said, beaming at him proudly.

" Not now though!" Albus added hurriedly. " After...after break."

He did not want to have to talk to his brother until he was ready to.

" Whenever you feel is best" his father said to him.

They stared at each other for a moment, and Albus did his best not to let his eyes wander to the cabinet. There was still something on mind however. The memory of Ares. Before he could speak however, his father had risen from the bed and went to the door.

"I think we're done here" he said. " Let's go eat our cold dinner."

Chapter 13: Uncontrollable Fire

The next morning dawned much quicker than Albus had hoped for- he was not anxious to return to Hogwarts. Perhaps it was because he now had a an obligation, something to commit to while there, but he wished nothing more than to stay in bed as his mother shook him awake at seven in the morning.

" Time to get up sleepy head" she said softly, gently nudging him.

He didn't need the nudge, though he appreciated it all the same. It got his body moving anyway. He rolled out of bed just as his mother was leaving to make breakfast.

The morning moved by much easier than it normally did. James had remembered to pack all of his things this time, which resulted in a much quieter breakfast. Add in the fact that Uncle Ron's family was the only one staying with them, and Albus found the morning quite peaceful. The only problem seemed to be Rose, who was complaining politely- if not quietly.

" I just don't understand why we can't use portkeys" she said, cutting her toast in half with her knife and casting a sideways glance at her younger brother, who was sloppily eating his own. " It would get us there much quicker. I really want to talk to my friends about something important."

Albus' mother gave her niece a dotting look before smiling. " You'll have plenty of time on the train Rosie. And we'll make good time anyway. We don't need to use portkeys."

" What's a portkey?" Albus asked sleepily. He had heard the term several times before, but upon racking his brain, couldn't quite remember what it was.

He ignored Rose, who had rolled her eyes at his stupidity, and listened to his mother.

" A portkey is a device that teleports you somewhere. It's too much hassle to use these days tough, what with Ministry authorization being necessary. We'll take the Ministry cars and be

fine. Are all of your things packed?"

Albus nodded his head, though this was not entirely true. He still had socks folded up next to his bed.

"What about your socks Al?" Rose asked.

His mother gave him a stern look. He groaned, shot Rose a contemptuous glare, then went to finish packing.

Rose had become increasingly bad since the start of winter vacation. He supposed that his empty promise on talking to James may have played some part in this, but he was at least taking steps to rectifying this. The memory that his father had shown him had convinced him that he needed to take the first step in patching his relationship with his brother, anyway. No sooner had he thought this than he glanced sideways and down the hall, at his parents bedroom. The memory of his grandfather was not the only one that he had thought of overnight. No, there was still a memory involving Ares...and Azkaban.

A feeling of daring and risk entered him like nothing before it. His father was gone, at work. His mother was downstairs feeding Rose and Hugo, and soon, Lily and James as well. Would his father notice that a memory was missing from the tray?

Albus entered the kitchen a few minutes later, hoping that his mother didn't notice that his right pocket was bulging slightly.

"Got your socks all packed?" she asked him.

He nodded his head and proceeded to eat the remainder of his breakfast in silence.

The car ride to the Kings Cross station was easily one of the most unusual of his life. The Ministry drivers, always pleasant, had opted not to "speed things up" as they were in no such hurry, meaning that the trip went slower than usual. His mother was sitting in the passengers seat writing furiously; her article on the Wimbourne Wasps' losing streak had a deadline of just a few hours. Still, she kept looking in the mirror to see if her children were talking, and seemed rather disappointed when she realized that they weren't.

It took this car ride for Albus to realize just how many people now knew about his argument with James. If his brother had indeed told their father, it was only natural that their mother now knew too. Rose, Hugo, and Lily obviously knew as well. It seemed that the only person oblivious to the awkward silences in the car was the Ministry driver, who was smiling politely despite his intimidating black sunglasses.

James seemed to be more polite than usual however, though Albus wasn't even sure how he knew this, as they were still both silent towards one another. Still, the minute details of their trip did show that James had received a similar talk from their father. He scooted over to give Albus more room without being told to anyway.

All in all, Albus was pleased quite pleased when the awkward trip ended. He would make amends with James on his own time, not because he was in a car full of people who wanted him to. He watched the Ministry driver remove their trunks from the back of the car, then carefully slid through the barrier in between Platforms nine and ten, revealing a brilliant scarlet train ready to depart. He was just thinking of how he might be able to ambush James and talk to him on the train when Rose pulled him roughly aside.

He gave her something of a nasty stare then glanced at his mother, who had also crossed through the barrier and was kissing Lily goodbye. Thinking that Rose was about to harp on him about reaching out to James again, he immediately directed his attention back to his cousin.

"Look I'm going to talk to him-"

"This isn't about that" she said calmly.

"You kids okay over there?" Albus heard his mother call over to them.

"We're fine Aunt Ginny!" Rose called back in a sing song voice, not even giving Albus the chance to answer his mother. She turned back to Albus, her face becoming serious once more.

"Listen, me and Mirra might join you guys on the train okay?"

"Why?" he asked her, barely paying attention.

"Because it may be a little awkward if we sit with Charlie and Donny. Now that Mirra and Charlie aren't together any more it might be a little weird for a bit, so we may need to sit with you guys-"

"Wait what?" Albus said, his heart beating ridiculously fast. Had he heard correctly?

Rose blew her hair out of her face angrily. "We may have to sit with you-"

"No not that!" Albus spat. "The other thing. Mirra and Eck- and Charlie broke up?"

"Yes" Rose said in a dismissive tone. They began walking towards the train, though it took

Albus a few moments to realize that his feet were moving.

" Why? What happened?"

She gave him a patronizing stare. " Why do you care so much?" she asked him.

He felt his cheeks burn red. " Because...well...I really don't" he quickly lied. " I'm just trying to make conversation. We never get to talk any more Rosie..." he said, hoping that his voice sounded sad, or at least concerned. " I just miss talking to you, that's all. Thought we could talk about something..."

Her cold stare turned into a look of joy. " Oh Al!" she said, beaming. " Of course we can talk about it!"

He gave a small grin. He knew that it had been a horrible lie to tell, but he'd have the rest of his life to feel guilty, wouldn't he? No, now what he needed was juicy details...

Rose flipped her hair, and they began walking at a slower pace. " Not really much to tell" she said. " Mirra wrote to me over break and told me that Charlie had accidentally made of a fool of himself introducing himself to her grandparents right when they got off of the train. Then apparently there was some confusion over Christmas presents or whatever, a couple of small arguments, and she just called it off. Said she wasn't ready for a relationship."

Albus felt his breathing quicken. He tried telling his cheeks to stop being so red, but it was to no avail. When he finally did speak, he noticed that his voice seemed to squeak.

" Is there- is there any chance that they'll get back together?" he asked in what was the most carefree tone he could muster.

Rose gave him a curious look however, and he immediately realized why. Wanting to know what happened was one thing, but wanting to know what could happen showed that he was interested in more than just " making conversation".

Still, she answered him, even if she did seem a bit intrigued. " Maybe" she said. " I suppose I'll find out during the train ride? I don't think that it was a bad split or anything, they're probably still friends. But still...it must be hard going back to the way things were once you know that your friend likes you."

Albus nodded, his breathing having slowed down a bit now. It didn't matter what Rose said, the most important thing was the cold hard facts. Mirra was, as of this moment, single.

" You kids better get on that train!" he heard his mother call, and Albus quickly realized how far away he had strayed from their group. He wasn't even sure where they were walking to. He hurried back to his mother, who helped him hoist his trunk on to the train and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. " You be good now-"

" I will-"

" Try and look after Lily-"

" I will-"

" And do your homework!"

" I will!"

He moved through the train, walking alongside Rose as he did so. He peered through the compartment windows anxiously, looking for his friends, and found them in a compartment near the middle. Both of them were laughing at something, and they both grinned when he entered.

" Al!" they both exclaimed as he sat down across from them. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Rose had continued down the train, no doubt to find Mirra.

He quickly pushed his trunk aside and slapped both of their hands quickly; he was bursting with things to tell them.

" How was your break?" Scorpius asked him.

" Fine" he said shortly. " I've got a lot to tell you."

" Yeah, mine was good too" Scorpius retorted. " Thanks for asking."

Morrison laughed, but Albus paid it no mind. " Mirra broke up with Eckley!" he said, unable to contain himself.

They both made loud whooping noises and high fived each other.

" No more 'stud' stories!" Morrison shouted in pure jubilation, and now Scorpius was laughing.

" What happened?" Scorpius asked.

Albus shrugged. " Apparently they just fell apart" he grinned.

" So what are you going to do?" Morrison said. " You going to go for it?" he added with a wink.

Albus opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. He had had five, maybe ten minutes since learning about the break up to decide what his next move was. He supposed that the first thought that had jumped into his head was telling Mirra how he felt, but Rose's voice cropped

up inside his head.

But still...it must be hard going back to the way things were once you know that your friend likes you.

" I reckon I'll just wait a bit" he said finally. " Just play it cool, that's all. But I've got something else to tell you!" he added quickly.

He jumped up from his seat and opened the compartment door, then slid it closed again. He did not want Mirra or Rose to walk in when he was talking to his friends. He knew that Rose would not approve.

" So I talked to my Uncle Ron over Christmas break..."

He explained, in roughly fifteen minutes, everything that his inebriated uncle had divulged on Christmas day. He spared no details, and, wanting to make sure that his friends did not receive a butchered version, did his best to use the exact words that his uncle had used. He was particularly vehement about the parts that his uncle had wanted to talk about the least, especially Ares breaking into the Ministry.

His friends made for a very good audience, listening with rapt attention the entire way through. He was forced to silence them with his hand more than once however, as they were quite keen on asking him questions. He was happy to note however that their interest was not feigned. Both of them seemed authentically curious as to why Ares was so feared amongst the wizarding community.

Albus finished his story, then took a deep breath. His mouth was parched from having spoken so much.

" Well that explains a lot" Scorpius said. " About why everyone is so scared anyway. If this guy was known for being vicious when he was an auror, can you imagine him as a dark wizard?"

" I wish that you're uncle would have said what he was trying to steal though" Morrison said, a small frown on his face. " Then we'd know what he was really capable of."

Albus smiled slightly, then looked out the compartment window once more. He plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small glass vial. " We can" he said, holding the vial up so that his friends could get a good look.

Morrison looked at it curiously. " Is that spit?" he said, glaring at the silvery substance that filled the vial to the brim.

" No it's not spit!" Albus said indignantly. " It's-"

" A memory" Scorpius finished for him, though he was looking at it quite curiously as well. " But who's?"

" My dads" Albus said sheepishly.

Both of his friends gave him an alarmed look, but Scorpius was the only who actually said anything.

" You stole one of your dads memories!" he said loudly, and Albus glanced through the compartment window once more to make sure that no one had heard him.

" Will you keep it down!" he spat. " And I didn't steal anything!" he added. He tried to think of a different word he could use, but found that there was none. " Okay, I stole it" he admitted. Scorpius slapped his hands to his forehead while Morrison merely gazed at him.

" I can't believe you stole a memory..." Morrison eventually said, apparently in awe at his nerve.

" Look it's fine" Albus said. " He still has the memory. It's in his head somewhere. This is just the record of it. But look at the label!" he added, and he gave it to Scorpius, who read it quickly.

" Ares Azkaban, huh? Has a nice ring to it..."

" This memory must show why he was in Azkaban!" Albus said. " And my dad told me himself that it'll be a few years before he even goes near the tray with all the memories, so after I look at it, I can just put it right back this summer! He won't notice a thing!"

" But how are you going to see it?" Scorpius asked him. " You need a pensieve."

Morrison looked between the both of them; he had clearly never heard of a pensieve before. Before he could ask anything however, Albus gave an answer to his friend.

" I have one. Well not me. There's one in Fairhart's office."

" You think he'll just let you use it?" Scorpius asked him incredulously.

" Well I was thinking that he wouldn't know actually. Maybe I'll skip dinner one night..."

Scorpius shook his head. " Let me get this straight" he said. " You want to break into a

teachers office to view a memory that you stole? Are you serious?"

" Very" Albus answered him truthfully. This memory was the key, after all. If he knew why Ares had been put in Azkaban, then he would also know why it was so imperative that he be caught. And he would know that his father was justified in releasing Fango Wilde...

He heard the compartment door slide open and hastily stuffed the glass vial back into his pocket. Rose stuck her head through the door and eyed him curiously.

" Why are you looking guilty?" she said.

" I always look like this..." he responded stupidly. He glanced around her and saw that she was by herself. He felt slightly let down. Wasn't Mirra supposed to be joining them? Before he could speak however, Rose had continued.

" We won't be joining you guys by the way, everything's fine. But Mirra did say she wanted us to all hang out in the library this week."

" Okay" Albus said, and he looked at both of his friends, knowing that they were both thinking the same thing. She hadn't barged in on them just to tell them that, had she?

" And" Rose added, a bit more forcefully. " Your brother is patrolling the train now. So if anyone here wants to talk to him," she looked around at the three of them, then settled her eyes back on Albus," now would be a good time to do it."

He nodded his head as she closed the compartment door.

" So you didn't make up with James, huh?" Morrison asked him.

He shook his head and gave a frown. " I'm actually going to go and talk to him right now" he said.

Morrison gave him a bemused look. " What inspired you to do that?" he asked.

Albus shrugged. " Nothing really, I just feel like I've got to do it."

The truth was that he did not want his friends to know about the memory that he had viewed. For some reason, it seemed more personal than anything that his uncle had told him about Ares. His friends wished him good luck, and he exited the compartment.

The second that he began moving through the now mobile train he felt an ominous foreboding that he couldn't quite explain. This was his first real attempt to try and talk to his brother. He couldn't help but feel as though things were going to go horribly wrong.

He checked inside a few compartments and saw many people that he recognized, but his brother was not among them. He must have been patrolling near the very front, where the prefects were given their directions. He finally saw him, his head poking into a compartment full of pretty Ravenclaw girls, his back to him.

Albus approached him and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

James turned to him, his shifty flirtatious grin changing to one of surprise. They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment, and Albus realized that he had not yet actually spoken.

" Hey" Albus said.

" Hey" James answered back.

Another awkward moment followed. His brothers face was unreadable, Albus could no more guess what he was thinking than he could think of what to say himself. He suddenly wished that he knew legilimancy.

" So...erm..." Albus started, merely biding his time until a sentence entered his head. He wished that he had thought this out more thoroughly. " I'm sorry" he finally settled on. " For acting like a prat. When you caught me out of bed."

James' face recoiled slightly, he had clearly not been expecting this. " Oh yeah" he said in an obviously fake casual voice. " Don't worry about it. Sorry about the whole...detention thing too. I was just...I was just venting."

Albus nodded. He knew that there was much more that he needed to say, knew that there was much more that both of them needed to say, but it all seemed like a lost cause. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought that his brother was perfectly content with merely being spoken to, let alone apologized to.

Before Albus could say anything else his brother spoke.

" Here, come with me real quick".

James closed the compartment door full of pretty girls without so much as a thought, then began walking back towards the other end of the train. Albus followed right behind him. They even passed the compartment with Morrison and Scorpius in it, and Albus saw them both pressing their faces up against the glass as they passed.

Finally, James stopped at a compartment and opened it. Albus saw a group of popular Gryffindor boys, who all welcomed him. Albus noticed that they were the same boys who

normally hissed at him when he would approach the Gryffindor table. Indeed, some of them did start to jeer at him once they looked past James and saw him, but James silenced them all with a look. He then pulled his school bag out from under a seat and closed the compartment door so that he and his brother were standing quite alone in the corridor.

James opened the bag and pulled from it a a bundle of silvery robes, which Albus recognized immediately.

" I think that you can have this back" James said, pushing the Invisibility Cloak into his hands.

" You've went a long enough time without using it."

" Thanks" Albus said, stunned. His brother moved forward, and for a single moment, Albus was sure that he was reaching for a hug. He wasn't however. Instead, he had extended his hand.

Albus took it and shook it.

James gave him a familiar grin. " I need to get back to patrolling now" he said. " See you later."

" Yeah" Albus said, grinning himself, though he tried to contain it. " See you later."

James clapped him on the back before turning to leave, then marched down the train poking his head into compartments.

Life after his reconciliation with James was a stark improvement for Albus. Indeed, it seemed to make his return to Hogwarts much more bearable all by itself. For one thing, it took something off of his mind - an unprecedented gift in a time when he was losing sleep over so many different things. For another, James was officially a friendly face again, and with a common room full of Slytherins upset with his lackluster Quidditch performance, he couldn't have asked for more.

In addition to having James back in his life, the first few days of Albus' return were accompanied by some other returns. It appeared as though his cousins no longer felt guilty when waving to him in the halls, and his sister especially no longer seemed to be torn between them. Rose was also a welcome improvement. She flat out told him that she was " proud of him" (something that he scoffed at, though appreciated all the same) and Mirra had also said that she was glad that he had sorted all of his problems out.

Little did Mirra know however, that she herself was a problem. The thought of Mirra being available seemed to invoke a battle in his head, a battle far worse than any battle of silence that he had had with James.

Should I go for it?

Though no one had actually said them to him, these words haunted him for his first week back. Mirra did not seem to be bothered in the slightest by her breakup with Eckley, and her merry attitude caused something of a problem for he had no way of knowing if she liked him back or not, he now knew one thing for sure - Mirra was perfectly fine with not being with anyone.

" I reckon you should give it a shot" Morrison had said to him in one Transfiguration class.

They were told to transfigure their tables into chairs and their chairs into tables, with the intent being that by the end of the lesson, they would be just as comfortable as when they started.

" I don't know..." Albus said, concentrating hard on his table and giving his wand a flick.

" Well I mean, what do you have to lose?"

" He has a lot to lose" Scorpius quipped up from beside them. " If she doesn't like him back, it could get real messy. And you don't want to end up like Eckley mate" he added to Albus.

It was certainly true that Charles Eckley appeared to be taking the break up much worse than Mirra was. The first two Care For Magical Creatures lessons back from their holiday Mirra had grouped up with Albus and his friends, chatting happily about her break and not mentioning Eckley at all. Eckley had instead stayed in the corner, muttering under his breath mutinously and talking to Hornsbrook, trying not to let the sad expression on his face show. Albus had even come close to feeling sorry for him - before remembering how many times he had had a bludger knocked towards him.

With Morrison pressuring him to reveal his feelings and Scorpius pressuring him to keep them to himself, a third party became more of a necessity than ever. It was in this way that having James back became the most handy.

The first Friday back from vacation Albus had managed to approach his brother just after

lunch time. After first giving his brother a gentle nudge, Albus led him away to the boys bathroom on the first floor to talk to him outside of eavesdroppers.

"What's up?" James said once they had entered the bathroom.

"I kind of need your advice" Albus said, not even realizing that he was playing with his hands.

James was very good with girls (his father had even once called him *unusually* good) and it would be his words that decided what Albus was going to do.

"About what?" James asked casually.

"I'm kind of...kind of having girl trouble" he said.

"Don't go for it" James said, without a single seconds hesitation.

"What?"

"Don't go for it. She just got out of a relationship. Get closer if you want, but don't actually try anything."

Albus stared at his brother, mouth wide open. "How...how did you know I was talking about Mi-"

James laughed. "Al, please. Are you kidding?"

He suddenly remembered what Scorpius had said, about how everyone knew. "So don't go for it then?" Albus asked, both relieved and disappointed, if that was even possible.

"Nope" James replied, and he headed for the bathroom door. "I don't know if she likes you back, but if she does, you'd just be a rebound at this point. Just be a close friend. Trust me on this one."

Albus nodded as James left. Moments later he found himself in the front row of Defence Against the Dark Arts, in between Morrison and Scorpius.

"So what did James say?" they both asked him.

"I'll tell you later" Albus said as Professor Fairhart entered, and he immediately smiled in excitement.

This was their second class since returning, but as their first was only forty five minutes, Fairhart could do little more than explain theory. Now however, they were going to learn actual magic.

"Good afternoon class" Professor Fairhart said, taking his usual seat atop his desk.

"Good afternoon" they chorused back, and Albus noticed that many voices sounded excited.

"I was thinking that they would have a good long talk today..."

The class groaned, and Fairhart gave a loud laugh. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding" he said. "I know I promised you real magic. Everyone stand up."

The class did as they were told, all of them rising and standing next to their desks. Albus exchanged a grin with his two friends.

Fairhart stood up now and removed his wand from his robes. With a casual flick, all of their desks were turned into large purple cushions.

"Stunning" he started, "is one of the more useful defensive techniques you can use. The killing curse is commonly associated with dark wizards, but you'd be surprised at how few are actually powerful enough to successfully use it. Likewise, many aurors who were given the option to kill during the first wizarding war also were unable to do so, whether due to their own morals or lack of power. For many wizards, stunning is an ideal spell for a confrontation.

"You will find that like the disarming spell, stunning is actually a pure blast of concentrated magical energy, and as such, can cause damage with enough power behind it. Unlike the disarming spell however, stunning primarily is used to incapacitate. A properly executed stunner should knock someone unconscious.

"Today we will be sorted into groups of three. One will be stunning, one will be stunned, and one will attempt to revive the stunned. You should then rotate accordingly. If you are unable to revive someone after several attempts, come to me for assistance.

"I should also warn all those being stunned that it is extremely hard to aim when unconscious. I thus recommend lining yourself up with the cushions accordingly and not moving. I doubt that anyone here is practiced enough to cause damage with their attempts, but landing on something other than the cushion can be very bad. Sort yourselves up now!"

They did as they were told, Albus of course sorting himself with his two friends. He had to admit, he was eager to learn to stun. They listened to Fairhart explain the incantations needed for both stunning and reviving, then began to practice.

Albus stood next to their cushion while Scorpius stood in front of it. Morrison pulled out his

wand and aimed it at Scorpius. " Sorry mate" he said. " *Stupefy!*"

Nothing happened. Scorpius merely stared at him for a moment, then laughed. " Sorry for what? That I won't get a turn?"

Morrison narrowed his eyes. " *Stupefy!*"

Once more, nothing happened. Albus noticed that Morrison was not the only one having trouble. No one had managed to so much as make sparks, let alone stun. Morrison continued to cry the incantation however, and an hour into it, he was getting visibly frustrated.

" Do not be deterred!" Fairhart said aloud, realizing how little progress was being made. " Practice is essential in any branch of magic, but with combative spells especially! Remember that your magic walks hand in hand with your emotions! If you grow frustrated, you may be making it harder!"

These words did nothing to help however, and many pairs had now started to rotate despite no stunning having actually occurred. Eventually, Morrison joined in on the trend.

" I'm just not really feeling it right now" he said dismissively. " Switch."

And so they did. Albus took Morrisons place, while Scorpius now waited next to Morrison, who was standing in front of the cushion.

" Good luck" Scorpius said, looking at Albus.

Morrison gave him a dirty glare before looking back at Albus. " Not the face mate..."

Albus, who had spent the last hour thinking of his situation with Mirra, had not been paying attention. He took a few steps back so that he was as many feet away as Morrison had been, then lazily aimed his wand at him. " *Stupefy!*"

A jet of brilliant orange flames issued from the tip of his wand, the heat of which was so powerful that it literally took his breath away. There were screams of terror all throughout the classroom. Morrison gave a yell and put his hands up, not even realizing that his skin would do little to protect himself from the flames.

" No!" Albus cried.

From out of seemingly nowhere Fairhart appeared, directly in front of Morrison and now in the way of the flames. He raised his wand, his face full of concentration, and the stream of flames stopped. Albus backed away, eyeing his own smoking wand in horror.

The flames did not subside however, and a stream of fire now lay hovering in the air, somehow stopped and supported by Fairhart.

" Stand back!" he barked at the students, not that it mattered of course. All of them had already ran to the corners of the classroom. Fairhart made a complicated movement with his wand and the stream of fire curled itself up into a ball of flames. With another complicated flick what looked like ice poured from his wand. It surrounded the ball of flames and encased it, and soon enough they were looking at frozen fire.

Fairhart gave another wave and the ball of fire- turned- ice melted in mid-air, eventually forming a puddle on the ground. With yet another flick, the water evaporated.

" Is everyone okay!" he yelled.

There were murmurs all throughout the crowd, though everyone seemed to be okay. Albus was still eyeing his wand in confusion. He glanced across the room and saw Morrison, visibly shaken up but unharmed. Fairhart was giving him a most unusual look.

" I think that's all for today's lesson" he said, and no one disagreed. They all began gathering their things to leave, Fairhart still standing in the middle of the classroom. He waved his wand once more and the cushions were changed back to desks. " Albus, I was wondering If I could have a word?"

Morrison and Scorpius both looked at him, lost for words themselves. Morrison did not look angry, merely shocked. Albus nodded at both of them, and they joined the rest of the class in leaving.

The second that the door closed, Albus launched into an explanation.

" Professor Fairhart I'm so sorry! I swear I don't know how that happened! I-"

Fairhart raised his hand to silence him, though Albus continued.

" I wasn't trying to do that, I don't even know how to do that! And I would never try to hurt Morrison, he's one my best friends! I don't-"

" Albus, stop" Fairhart said calmly, his hand still raised to silence him. Albus did as he was told, still breathing heavily. He stuffed his wand back into his robes, hoping that it didn't set them on fire. Fairhart pocketed his wand as well. " I am not angry, and I know that you would never try and hurt one of your friends. I just want to ask you a few questions."

Albus continued to breath heavily, though he nodded his head.

" What incantation did you use?" Fairhart asked him.

" Stupefy" Albus said quickly.

" Were you thinking of, for any reason, the incendio spell?"

" No! I don't even no how-"

Fairhart raised his hand once more. He then took a seat on top of his desk. " Interesting. You are unable to, or have not even attempted to, create fire before?"

Albus nodded.

Fairhart scratched at his chin, his already thin and mangled mouth turning thinner. " Very interesting. Do you own any other wands?"

Albus opened his mouth to answer no, but then remembered something. Rookwoods wand, the wand that he had found the previous year, was still at the bottom of his trunk, though he supposed that he technically didn't even own it.

" No" he said.

" Have you ever used another wand?"

" No" Albus said, this time sure of his honesty.

" Hmm...strange."

" Why?" Albus asked.

Fairhart raised lifted his hand as though proposing an idea and then launched into an explanation. " Well, it's commonly agreed upon in wandlore that two wands that share an owner can share power between them as well. If one wand is not performing up to scratch, then the other wand may, despite not currently being used, lend it power, assuming of course that the second wand knows the necessary spell. If you did own another wand, and someone else had recently conjured fire with it, I would assume that your wand inadvertently borrowed power from it."

" But why would it borrow power that I didn't want?" Albus asked.

Fairhart shrugged. " Any number of reasons. It is quite possible that whatever emotion you were feeling is connected to the emotion currently triggering the other wand. This is all impossible however, as you have already claimed that you do not own any other wands. Indeed, it's much more probable that you simply subconsciously created flames for the sake of creating flames. Young wizards are known to experiment with magic that they are not used to in the unlikeliest of times."

" So I just shot that fire...because I felt like I had to shoot fire?" Albus asked.

" Possibly" Fairhart said. " Wandlore is very complex and impossible to fully understand. For now, I think it's very easy to classify what just happened."

" So what was it?"

" An anomaly" Fairhart said simply. " Something that we simply cannot explain. There are a billion reasons why what just happened could have happened, but with no concrete evidence supporting any of them, we would do best to simply not worry about it."

" So just...forget it?" Albus asked, feeling relieved.

Fairhart gave another shrug. " Most we can do. I would advise you to explain that to your friend however. I feel that he should know that what happened does not necessarily come from intent to attack."

" I will" Albus said, and he turned to leave.

" Have a good weekend Al" Fairhart said.

" You too" Albus replied before closing the door behind him.

He was unable to find his friends after leaving the classroom, they were not in the common room. Bewildered, he eventually met up with them at dinner, where he immediately began apologizing to his friend.

" - And I don't even know how to do that spell anyway! And Fairhart reckons it was all an anomoree or something like that anyway and -

But Morrison merely batted this away. " Don't worry about it mate" he said through a thick mouthful of mashed potatoes. " I was shaken up, but I know you wouldn't do that on purpose. Besides, you haven't been to my house, my sister does way worse things to me than try and light me on fire."

All three of them laughed, the knot in Albus' chest loosening a bit. He looked up and down the Slytherin table and saw that it was a different picture here however. The few other students who had just left Fairharts class had spread the word about the fire, and now everyone from first to seventh year was staring at Albus with mingled looks of curiosity and fright.

He supposed that nearly killing someone was almost as bad as losing at Quidditch, and he quickly lost his appetite.

" I'm going to head to bed" he said to his friends, and he left for the common room.

Only when he was laying in his comfortable four poster bed did he bother to think more about what had occurred. How had his wand done that? It had not been intentional, had it? He didn't even know that spell...

Despite the earliness of the hour, sleep came to him instantly. Performing magic of that power had drained him somehow, and he was more than happy to let his exhaustion be quenched by the pleasure of closing his eyes. He would worry about the fire some other day...

Little did Albus know however, that hundreds of miles away someone was indeed worrying about fire.

" My family" the man moaned. " My home..."

A large wooden cabin was on fire, in the middle of a heavily wooded and secluded area. It was much darker here, but the radiant flames of the cabin illuminated the man on his knees. He was very old, with very white hair and a thin face. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

" Why...would you do this?" he said in between sobs.

" Me?" came a voice from behind him.

Sebastian Darvy stepped around him and kneeled down so that he was illuminated by the fire as well. His blonde hair seemed to glow, his eerie blue eyes sparkling in the light. He had a look of pure insanity on his face, it was the look of someone who was enjoying the sight of a crying man kneeling at his feet.

" I did nothing" he spat at the man. " *He* set your home on fire."

The man who was sobbing turned and saw another man standing behind him, this one slightly shorter, but equally intimidating.

Reginald Ares looked radically different than he did back when he had been Headmaster of Hogwarts. His short black hair had grown so that it was now neck length, and was now a dull grey. His mustache had also grown itself in a full goatee, equally gray and withered looking. Even his normally cold and piercing eyes looked lifeless, they were practically colorless. Being on the run from the Ministry had not suited him at all. He looked like a man who had aged one hundred years in less than one. Even when he spoke, the change was noticeable. His voice was still deep, but raspier.

" I want information Croaker."

" I have nothing to tell you" Croaker moaned. " Nothing. My family...my family..."

" Your family is not in your burning home" Ares said, and Croaker looked up hopefully.

" We have them" Ares continued, and Croaker gave a wail of despair.

" I have nothing! Nothing that you want!"

" I want answers!" Ares barked, and he stooped down so that he was now face to face with the kneeling Croaker. " You are an unspeakable, correct?"

" I *was*!" Croaker gasped. " I was, but no more! I know nothing!"

" There is a door" Ares barked. " A red door..."

" I know nothing."

Darvy moved forward and struck Croaker across the face; hard.

" Don't lie!" he spat. " Your family is much worse off than your home if you do!"

Croaker gave another wail and began to sob uncontrollably once more.

" They are very close to joining your home" Ares added, and Croaker's cries now echoed throughout the entirety of the wooded area. It mattered not however, no one could hear him.

" Unless you choose to cooperate."

" I am retired!" Croaker wailed. " I have been retired for years! I have lived here with my family, we know nothing, we all know nothing!"

" There is a red door" Ares spoke, somehow even louder than Croaker's wails. " It is in the Department of Mysteries. It had been there for years, you know what is behind it."

" I- yes- I do."

" Then tell me how to get it!" Ares shouted.

" That door is forgotten!" Croaker cried. " Everyone has forgotten about the Foulest Book!"

" I have not forgotten!" Ares spat. " I know what the Foulest Book is, I know what it does, how do I get it?"

" A...a blood offering!" Croaker stammered. " You offer your blood..."

" Lies!" Ares hissed. " I offered my blood! And Sebastian offered his!"

" And don't even say that need an unspeakables blood either!" Darvy added. " Because that fool that I murdered last summer, Hampton or whatever his name was, his blood didn't work either!"

" You need a certain kind of blood!" Croaker gasped.

" Who's!" Ares barked.

" I do not...I do not know!"

" Lies!" Ares repeated.

Darvy stepped in between them at this point. " Can't you just read his mind?" he said to his brother.

Ares sneered at him. " The mind is not a book Sebastian, it cannot be read. The most I could do is extract feelings or thoughts. And you're trained in occlumency, aren't you Croaker?"

Croaker muttered something incoherent.

" Surely not trained enough to defend himself from you?" Darvy asked.

" Perhaps not" Ares said. " But enough to give me false information. And as we have no Veritaserum, we're going to need a little help from Croaker here."

He eyed the man on the ground with malice. " So what will it be Croaker? Who's blood do we need?"

" I do not...I do not know..."

Ares gave a sigh. " Fetch someone from his family Sebastian. Perhaps witnessing murder will loosen his tongue. Which of his family is still alive?"

" No!" Croaker shouted. " No, please, no!"

" His daughter could still be in her teens" Darvy said, and he turned to leave.

" Fetch me her."

" Harry Potter!" Croaker shouted. " Harry Potter! Harry Potter's blood will open the door! Please...please let my family go..."

The light from the fire revealed a flicker of a smile on Darvy's face, though Ares' remained quite expressionless.

" Please let them go..." Croaker continued to moan.

Ares removed a golden wand from his cloak and aimed it at Croakers face. " *Obliviate*".

Croaker fell over, his eyes blank.

" Where is his family?" Ares asked his brother.

" I did as you said" Darvy responded. " They are unharmed. Merely confounded"

Ares eyed him wearily.

" I said that they're unharmed!" Darvy repeated.

" Good. Release them. And put this house out, won't you? And fix it up?"

Darvy gave a look of dislike at being ordered around, but Ares did not seem to notice it. Darvy turned to the flaming house and jets of water issued from his wand. As he doused the flames he turned to his brother.

" Well that was useless" he said. " We figured that we needed Potter's blood."

" We figured" Ares said, stepping over Croakers still dazed body. " But we did not know. Now we can proceed with our plans."

" What will we need?"

" A loyal servant. Someone to take Fango's place."

" Take his place?"

Ares nodded. " And by that, I mean confuse his tail. Let the ministry think that they are following him. We will need Polyjuice Potion. How much do we have?"

" None" Darvy said. " I have not yet finished gathering the ingredients..."

Ares turned to him, a vicious look on his face. " What? What are you talking about, ' gathering ingredients'? I risked being caught for that!"

" Your little diversion in Hogsmeade gave me a half of an hour at the most!" Darvy spat back.

" By the time that I had broken through the castles enchantments they had already sent

carriages to get the children!"

" Regardless, you had a free reign to get what you needed! The castle was empty!"

" Hardly" Darvy said angrily. " The headmistress stayed, as did that scarred auror, no doubt on Potter's orders. I had ten minutes at the most to collect what I needed from the storage cupboards, any more time and I would have been caught! Now I can make the potion with a bit more time, I will simply need to search elsewhere. But if you want me to make it, I suggest using a different tone!"

Ares stared at him, a twisted expression on his exhausted face. It was clear that Darvy had reached a breaking point with being told what to do. When Ares finally did speak, it was in a much politer and softer tone.

" I'm sorry Sebastian. I sometimes forget how much I need you. Have the potion ready when you can."

Darvy nodded, though his face remained angry. He began speaking just as the last flame was being extinguished from the house. " But how do we get Potter's blood? We can not hope to do so, not when he is surrounded by other aurors..."

Ares grinned at him, his first grin of the night. " I have a plan Sebastian. Do not forget, Harry Potter's blood lies in more than his own veins. We have more options than you think..."

The two brothers stared at each other for a moment, then Darvy's face broke into an identical smile. A malicious, insane smile that showed his understanding.

Chapter 14: Second Chances

Life at Hogwarts was good. The weeks following his incident in Defence Against the Dark Arts proved to be something of a reminder to Albus ; a reminder that he could very happy when inside the castle.

The immediate reason for this was obviously James, who since giving advice to him about Mirra had been nothing short of a joy to be around. He frequently visited his younger brother at meal times, helped him with homework assignments in the library (when he was able to) and had went out of his way to make sure that a very bitter Eckley did nothing to annoy him. And on this happy thought, Albus couldn't have been more pleased with how good things were going with Mirra. It was quite strange, when he thought about it. When she had been dating someone, he had felt strangely obligated to make his move on her, though now he felt next to no pressure at all. They laughed together in classes, studied together in the library, and talked about things that he normally confided to just Morrison and Scorpius. Most prominent amongst these things was, of course, his father's memory.

Albus had not forgotten about the small glass vial that was now hidden at the bottom of his trunk. Indeed, whenever he had a spare moment it lingered on his mind like a small lie that he told or a song that he couldn't remove from his head. He had not yet made an attempt to view the memory- Fairhart rarely left his office and during meal times Albus was much too hungry to waste them. Strangely, Mirra saw this differently.

" That's not hunger Al! That's guilt!"

They were sitting alone together in the library, Mirra working furiously on Arithmancy and Albus pretending to work on Muggle Studies so as to have an excuse to still be there after their friends had left.

" Guilt?" he asked.

" Guilt! You know that you shouldn't have stolen that memory, so you're purposefully finding excuses to not view it! "

" But I do want to see it!" he admitted. There was no point in lying to her.

She carefully tucked her hair behind her ear before speaking. Albus needed a moment to comprehend her.

" But you still haven't, and you've had it for a while. You *have* had chances to use Fairhart's memory bowl thing right? So some part of you doesn't want you to view it. Some part of you is guilty."

Albus gave her a weak grin. She was correct is assuming that a small part of him did not want to view the memory, though he suspected that this had little to do with guilt. As curious as he was, he could not shake the feeling that something about the memory of Ares was going to disappoint him.

At the same time, he knew that if he did choose to view it, it would have to be quick. Every morning he dreaded the news from home that his father knew what he had taken, and every night that he fell asleep without viewing it proved to be another wasted day. He knew that this may be his only chance to discover how Ares had gotten out of Azkaban as well. He could not hope for his uncle to become intoxicated and divulge more secrets- there would be no second chance to learn what could be crucial information.

" So there's another Hogsmeade trip coming up" Mirra said suddenly, and Albus was snapped from his thoughts. She seemed to be very tense for some reason, and she was avoiding his eyes. Her eyes stayed glued to her notebook anyway. " Some time in February" she added. Albus picked up his head from his Muggle Studies textbook; he had read the same page five times now. " Any plans?"

She tucked her hair behind her ear again. " None yet" she said. " I'm going to talk to Rose and see if we can kind off just split from Charlie and Donnie. Give it a bit more time."

Albus ran his hands through his hair. " Ahh, well you two deserve a girls day to yourselves" he said. " All this hard work you've been doing."

He picked up her Arithmancy notebook and flipped through it. " Blimey I don't understand any of this. I'd might as well be reading Mermish."

She giggled and took her book back, but she had a small hint of a frown on her face as she did so. " Yeah" she said. " Just a girls day."

In addition to his social life prospering once more, Albus found himself enjoying the challenge of his classwork. Now that Christmas was over the teachers were no longer reviewing and explaining- Albus was actually learning new things. Professor Flitwick had moved them past summoning and was now teaching them things like the shrinking charm and engorgement charm, both of which Albus had something of a good grasp. Professor Bellinger had taken the next step in Transfiguration as well ; they were changing liquids to solids. This too he proved to be surprisingly adept at. Indeed, the only spells he seemed to have difficulty with were the one's that Fairhart was teaching.

They were working on stunning for the third consecutive time now, and Albus simply proved incapable of doing it. A few of the students in the classroom had been a bit weary at the thought of him giving it another try at first, but after the first lesson, the idea of him creating a powerful blast of flames again was laughable. It seemed that no matter how hard he concentrated, he simply couldn't fire a stunning spell.

Even worse was that his friends had gotten rather good at it. Scorpius had ended up being something of a natural- he was nearly as good at it as Albus was disarming. Morrison had struggled a bit more but could now stun nearly every time. Fairhart was allowing one more lesson of stunning to continue so as to give stragglers more of a chance, infuriating Albus as he felt no closer to getting it than he did when he had first started.

" Concentrate!" Fairhart was still announcing one Friday in early February. " Do not be disappointed if you are unable to perform a certain spell- different wizards have different specialities. It is imperative that you not let your confidence drop. Remember, magic works with your emotions and your mind. Let them guide this energy!"

Albus screwed up his face in concentration furiously and aimed his wand at Morrison, who was standing quite still, chewing his finger nails nonchalantly.

" *Stupefy!*" he cried.

Nothing happened. Albus gave a groan and Fairhart continued to walk around the room and give tips. Albus wished that he wouldn't do this ; he was pretty sure that he was the only one struggling.

" Let's take a break" Fairhart said as several students were all revived at once. " We have a good twenty minutes of class left, let's use some time to recuperate."

The students all sat back down in their seats and began talking, all of them in a much better mood than the exhausted Albus. Feeling that he had might as well use this time to jot down the Muggle Studies homework that would be due Monday, he reached into his bag to get his notebook.

" Here let me get that for you" Scorpius said suddenly, plunging his hand into his bag and pulling out a random notebook. " You must be exhausted from all that work" he added cheekily, and Morrison laughed.

Albus gave him a cold stare and snatched his notebook away.

" You'll get it mate" Morrison said reassuringly. " I mean, you have four years left after all..."
" Haha" Albus said dryly. " I just can't concentrate" he said. "I've got other stuff on my mind."
This was quite untrue of course. Apart from the memory of Ares, he had less on his mind than he had in quite some time.

" Why how's operation Mirra going?" Morrison asked him, taking a seat on top of his desk like how Fairhart did. At this Albus glanced at his teacher and saw that he was sitting quietly, reading a paperback book.

" Fine" Albus admitted. " We were just talking a couple days ago."

" About your unrequired love for her?" Morrison asked him with a grin.

" Unrequited" Scorpius corrected him icily, and Morrison shrugged.

Albus frowned. Morrison was clearly pleased that he could do something that he couldn't, and was now trying to make himself feel better by seeing what else Albus was failing at.

" We were just talking about stuff. She mentioned going to Hogsmeade, that's about it."

Scorpius, who had taken out a book of his own, looked up incredulously. " Are you serious?" he asked. " Did you say yes?"

Albus looked at him in confusion. " Huh? Yes to what?"

" Did she ask you to go to Hogsmeade with her?"

" No she just mentioned that she didn't want those two prats to go, that's all..."

Scorpius slapped his head to his forehead. " Next Hogsmeade trip is Valentine's Day you idiot." Albus felt his eyebrows raise in surprise. He had not known this. Had she?

" So what's your point?"

Morrison began talking but Scorpius, as was usual, quickly cut him off.

" So that's a sign you idiot! She was asking you to take her to Hogsmeade on Valentine's Day!"

Albus gave a bitter laugh at the irony in his friend's statement. Scorpius was always telling him to play it cool, not jump to conclusions, and just let things work themselves out. Now he was interpreting for Mirra?

" What are you on about?" Albus asked him.

" Al, that is a sign if I have ever seen one. You- you should go for it."

Albus' jaw dropped, as did Morrison's. " You've been telling me not to do anything though!" he said loudly, and a few people looked over at them. " And so did James!"

" Al, hear me out" Scorpius said, raising his hand up a bit. He leaned forward so that every word could be heard clearly. " You may not get a second chance at this. I mean, how many more times is Mirra going to break up with someone and then inexplicably start talking to you about a Hogsmeade trip precariously planned for Valentine's day?"

Albus blinked. " I don't know? A couple?"

" Never!" Scorpius said, and now he was the loud one. " It's never going to happen again! Ask James if you want, tell him that she mentioned Hogsmeade. See what he says..."

The bell rang after that, and Albus and the rest of the students filed past Fairhart's desk and towards the classroom door. Before Albus could leave however, Fairhart called him. Feeling that this had something to do with his inability to stun, he grumpily mad his way towards his professor.

Fairhart looked up from his paperback book. Albus took the time to register the silver ring that was on his finger, and noticed that it looked unusually tight, as though it belonged to a much smaller finger. Before he could get a closer look Fairhart had spoken however.

" Good luck in the match tomorrow, Al."

The prospect of another Quidditch match was yet another thing that was keeping Albus happy these days. In the first week back Gryffindor had narrowly edged out Hufflepuff to secure a spot in the Quidditch Final. Ravenclaw, who had suffered a thundering loss to Hufflepuff just before break, was now in the running to play Gryffindor for the cup. As that was who Slytherin played next, it would take a fantastic blow out on Slytherin's behalf to steal that opportunity. Albus realized immediately that this next match would make or break him amongst his fellow housemates. Being responsible for losing two matches in a row would turn him into nothing short of a pariah, but if he could somehow redeem himself, somehow get Slytherin to the final, he would prove his spot on the team was no fluke.

The points were against them however. They would need to win by a full one hundred and fifty points to earn their rematch against their Gryffindor rivals. And as Albus sat at breakfast the next morning, hours away from the match, he knew that this meant that his team was counting on him- not the other way around.

" At least you're eating this time" Morrison said as Albus took a few small pieces of bacon and shoved them into his mouth. " Last time you couldn't even say that."

" And I have less on my mind" Albus said, washing it all down with a glass of orange juice. " That should help things a bit."

" So when are you talking to James then?" Scorpius said from across the table.

Albus frowned slightly. " When he's not busy" he said.

Truthfully, Albus was somewhat glad that James had so many prefect duties to keep him occupied. He was afraid that if he did go to James for help with Mirra there would be two people pressuring him to make a move. He had put some thought into it the previous night and deduced that Scorpius was on to something. Mirra bringing up Hogsmeade had been awfully random.

He let his thoughts carry him all throughout breakfast, and only when he was pulling his Quidditch robes over his head did he begin to focus on the task at hand. Thinking of Mirra may have cost him the game last time ; it was time to focus.

His team sat quietly in the locker room, and Albus knew exactly what they were all thinking. If they didn't make it to the final, this would be their last game of the season. And Atticus' last game ever, in a career in which he hadn't even won the cup.

Atticus seemed to be thinking along the same lines, he too was surprisingly quiet, he seemed unable to gather his thoughts. He was still standing however, and when he finally did address his team for the pre-match talk, his voice sounded shaky.

" If this is my last game," he started, " Then I want you all to know that I'm proud of our team. We don't need a cup to know that we're winners. But let's try and get there anyway!"

They all gave yells of approval, and Albus saw that Atticus eyed him as they began the walk to the Quidditch Pitch. Albus nodded his head before Atticus could even speak.

They shuffled out onto the field amidst boo's and cheers, though Albus thought that the boo's had decreased somewhat compared to their previous game. James, it seemed, had had his Gryffindor friends refrain from doing so.

The Ravenclaw team was already stationed in their positions, wearing robes of a brilliant blue with bronze trimmings. Albus noticed that their team captain, a sixth year named Jayden Goldstein, was looking extremely confident as he waited for Atticus to shake his hand. Albus could hardly blame - it would take a spectacular screw up from his team to prevent them from reaching the final.

Albus took his position at the rear of his team and watched as the two captains shook hands. He saw Mister Wood approach the middle, heard the sound of the whistle, and kicked off from the ground as hard as he could.

The weather was perfect for Quidditch. Though early in February, it was cool rather than chilly, and the fresh air did nothing but refresh him as he rose high above everyone else, his eyes peering around the field for any sign of the snitch.

The Ravenclaw seeker proved to be much worse at strategizing than James, he was circling the field aimlessly, occasionally elevating himself for a broader view. He was obviously just as confident as his captain. This thought comforted Albus ; he at least had determination on his side.

The first points were scored by Slytherin five minutes into the match, Atticus had made a truly spectacular shot to draw first blood. At this, Carter Montgomery's voice reverberated clearly through the Pitch.

" Ten to nil, Slytherin" he shouted through the microphone. " And they'll need to keep this shut out going if they want any chance of making it to the final!"

Albus rose higher and higher into the air, narrowly avoiding a bludger as he did so. He was forcibly reminded of Eckley having hit a bludger towards him, but before he could think much more of it he tossed the idea from his head. He'd have all the time in the world after the game to think of how much he hated Eckley. Now, he had to catch the snitch.

Deciding that the snitch wasn't near by, he sped through the sky at top speed, not even bothering to let the game going on below him distract him. He had Carter's voice to guide him however.

" A nice play there by Pollison, and Ravenclaw's tied the game up!"

Albus heard someone groaning and looked down. The Ravenclaw seeker was tailing, but was evidently having a hard time keeping up with his speed. Albus grinned a little, it was time to see if his diversionary trick would work. His brother had not fallen for it...but this seeker didn't look quite as bright.

He pulled into a sudden dive, narrowly missing the seeker tailing him. He shot downwards at an incredible speed, and the sound of the commentary was marred by the wind. He knew, however, that his competition was following him.

He swerved just in time to avoid another player, then swerved again to avoid a carefully aimed bludger. He continued his steep descent until he was quite close to the ground - In a fantastic display of athleticism that astounded even himself, he pulled out of his dive with hardly a moment to spare. He even heard his robes skim against the grass as he twisted himself into a horizontal position. He heard a thundering crash behind him and turned just in time to see a furious Ravenclaw seeker look up at him from the ground, thoroughly disheveled from the crash.

" Fantastic maneuvering by Potter! It's going to take some time for Groman to regain his composure from that!"

Albus sped upwards at these words, fully aware of the position he was now in. The Ravenclaw seeker, who he now knew was named Groman, was far from permanently incapacitated. But he had bought some time. The game was tied at ten each. If he could just find the snitch now...

It was as though fate was rewarding him for his fantastic dive. Just feet above him he saw a glimmer of gold. Groman was still trying to mount his broom without falling off. He sped up and extended his hand-

" POTTER GETS THE SNITCH! SLYTHERIN WINS ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY TO TEN!"

Albus flew to the ground and got off of his broom, barely believing that the scene was real. The tiny snitch remained fluttering in his hand, though his body was soon numb from his team, who had converged on him and was now practically smothering him. They had won by one hundred and fifty points. They were going to the final.

" It's going to be a rematch between Gryffindor and Slytherin for the cup! What a spectacular turn of events!" Carter announced.

Through the gap of bodies now surrounding him Albus could see Jayden Goldstein yelling at his seeker, who looked equally agitated with himself.

Albus smiled as the Slytherins in the stands joined the group and patted him on the back. Someone announced that there was to be a party in the common room, and all other thoughts were lost from his head.

The knowledge that Slytherin still had a shot at the cup kept Albus' spirits high over the stretch of the next few days. He was once more greeted with pats on the back, smiles from his housemates, and the occasional smatter of applause that he had once been accustomed to when he had won games last year. Still, for all the happiness that this brought him, a question still lingered on his head.

Valentine's day was not far off, and he had yet to even approach Mirra, let alone ask her to go to Hogsmeade with him. Scorpius and Morrison had given up on advising him, deciding that he had now gotten far enough to know what he wanted. And thus, seeking James for help become more of a priority than ever.

He managed to corner his brother in the library the week before the Hogsmeade trip. He was, surprisingly, by himself and doing, even more surprisingly so, homework.

" James" he said as he sat down across from him.

His brother looked up for a second before returning to his work. " Can't talk now" he said. "

Charms work. You wouldn't happen to know if *Glacius* is an extension of *Aguamenti* or if they're two separate spells entirely would you?"

Albus stared at him blankly. " No idea" he finally admitted.

James frowned and ran his hands through his hair, then began erasing several paragraphs from his paper entirely.

" I need to talk to you about something" Albus said, ignoring the fact that his brother had already claimed that he couldn't talk." I think that Mirra-

James gave a loud laugh that earned him a reprimand from the librarian. He ran his hands through his hair again and shook his head, smiling.

" What's so funny?" Albus asked.

" It's just that you're completely wrong already" James said in a quiet voice. " Al, you can't think that you know something about girls."

" Why not?"

James shook his head once more. " I'm going to let you in on a little secret pal. A secret that Teddy let me in on before I even came to Hogwarts."

" And what's that?"

" That girls are smarter than us in every conceivable way! We can't possibly know what they're thinking because they're better at it than we are. If they get us to think something, it's only because they want us to think that, and if they want us to think something, it means that they're thinking differently. Got it?"

" There's not a shorter version of that, is there?" Albus asked hopelessly.

" There kind of is" James said reassuringly. " Basically, you're a pawn. In every sense of the word. The quicker you realize this, the bigger strides we can take, understand?"

" Got it" Albus said quickly, eager to explain his situation. " Can I talk now?"

James placed his finger tips together. " Proceed."

Albus explained, briefly and quietly, what had happened in the library. Everything from what she had said to the look on her face as she had said it was told with meticulous detail. He then said everything that Scorpius had said, and finally finished by dramatically asking if Scorpius was correct.

James surveyed him carefully, made to speak, and then stopped. He opened his mouth once more after a bit more thought and finally spoke.

" Scorpius may be on to something" he said, and Albus thought that his heart may have missed several beats. " Or she could have just been trying to make conversation. But bringing up Hogsmeade is very curious indeed...and she may actually like you a bit now that I think about it."

" What?"

It was now Albus' turn to receive a reprimand. He didn't care in the slightest however, he was now trying to make sure that he had heard his brother correctly.

" You serious?" he asked. " How do - who told- why do you think that?"

" Well she broke up with that Charlie bloke because of you" James said casually.

" What?"

" Charles Eckley" James said clearly. " The punk kid that roughed up Scorpius last year. They got into a huge argument because he had been knocking bludgers towards you that entire match, and it finally concluded over Christmas break. Why do you think she dumped him?"

" I don't...Rose told me something different" Albus said, astounded.

James shrugged. " Well she probably covered the basics, but that was the big reason. Of course, you and Mirra are good friends though. She could have just been sticking up for you."

" So what do I do?" he asked. " Do I ask her to go to Hogsmeade with me? Or what?"

James pondered this for a moment, his Charms homework now lay forgotten on his desk. He scratched his chin, then spoke.

" It's a big risk. Things could get really awkward if it turns out she doesn't like you. And like I said, she's still in rebound mode. Maybe you should kind of...I don't know...go half and half?"

" Huh?" Albus replied, bewildered at his brother's choice of vocabulary.

James leaned forward across the table. " Maybe you should like bring it up. But don't be so forward about it. If she seems into it, then ask her out. If not, back away before it gets awkward. Just prod a little bit."

" You really think that I should try that?" Albus asked hesitantly.

James nodded. They sat in silence for a couple of moments before James flapped his hands. " So get on it!"

" What now?" Albus asked, surprised.

" You waiting for next Christmas or something? You can still catch her on the way to dinner!"

Albus jumped up from his seat without so much as a second thought. The second that his brother had said these words he felt adrenaline rush through him. He strode out of the library at an extremely brisk pace, bumping into students as he did so. James had been quite correct - it was nearing dinner time.

His eyes peered through group after group of students, though he couldn't find Mirra anywhere. Using his advanced knowledge of the castle's many secrets, he took a concealed passageway down to the fourth floor right near the stairs. If anyone was walking down to dinner, he would be able to meet them.

He saw Mirra after a couple of moments ; she was chatting merrily with Rose and a pretty blonde girl from Gryffindor who's name Albus' didn't know or even care about. All three of them eyed him curiously, and he knew why at once. He must look very peculiar standing by

the stairs, chewing on his fingernails nervously and moving his feet in a kind of quick step that he couldn't control. He supposed that he may have looked like he had to use the bathroom. " Al?" Mirra said when they approached him, and they waited on the stairs while hungry students passed them.

" Hey" he said quickly. " Do you think I could talk to you? For a second?"

She gave him a bewildered look. " Erm...sure?"

She stepped off of the stairs and Rose followed.

" Privately" he said, and he realized at once the mistake he was making. If his nervous tone and body language didn't do it, then certainly his choice of words would let her instantly know what he was going for.

Rose looked at Mirra for a second before following her blonde friend down the stairs. Albus led Mirra down a narrow corridor, where she followed him wordlessly. He finally stopped in the center of the corridor.

He tried thinking about what he was supposed to say, but now that he thought about it, realized that he had nothing.

" So erm...remember what we were talking about a few days ago?" he asked uncertainly.

She gave him yet another curious look. " You mean about the memory?" she said quietly. " You watched it didn't you?"

" No" he said quickly, and indeed, this was the first day in a while that he had not even thought about the tiny glass vial. " I mean about...erm."

He didn't know what to say next, so he ended it there. He ran his hands through his hair much like his brother had, and now saw that it was probably untidier than ever. Forgetting everything that James had told him, he just decided to take his chances. Kind of.

" Wannagotohogsmidwimme?"

He wished that they were closer to the stairs, he very much wanted to throw himself down them. He had to be the only person on the planet stupid enough to screw something like that up.

" I'm sorry?" she said, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't heard him.

" I- I wanted to know if-"

" Al!"

" What!" he barked, spinning around angrily. It was Scorpius who had called his name, and he was running towards them from the other end of the corridor very fast ; what looked like *the Prophet* was in his hand.

" Hey Mirra" Scorpius said in between breaths when he had finally reached them. " What's up?"

" Nothing" Mirra said. " I was just going to dinner. What were you saying Al?"

He glanced at her, his heart beating fast. But he couldn't say anything with Scorpius standing right there.

" Oh. Yeah...I forget" he lied to her.

Did she look disappointed? A strange look had flashed across her face for a moment, but it went away as quickly as it came.

" Okay then" she said. " Well I'm off to dinner...if you remember then tell me."

Albus nodded as she walked towards the steps and vanished. He turned to Scorpius, his face livid.

" What is so damn important!"

But Scorpius didn't say anything. He merely held up the newspaper, a stony expression on his face, and let Albus read the bold headline for himself.

POTTER TO BE REMOVED FROM POST?

"What?" Albus gasped, taking the paper from his friend's hands. " Why?"

" They found some guy with a memory charm on him" Scorpius said. " They cracked it a bit. He couldn't say much, but he claims that Ares is responsible for a few Ministry workers deaths. He's taking a lot of heat for still not having caught him."

Albus crumbled up the paper in his hands, furious. He stared down at the wrinkly headline, ignoring Scorpius' reprimand for having wrecked his paper. It was time to view that memory.

Chapter 15: The Deal

The news of his father's near removal from Head Auror may have inspired Albus to view the memory stowed away in his trunk, but he found that finding a way to do it was as hard as ever. He had the strange feeling that the only pensieve in the castle was in Fairhart's office, and as such the problem was finding a time to use it unoccupied.

" Or you could just...not do it all?" Scorpius suggested when Albus told his friends of his dilemma.

They were sitting in the Slytherin common room, and it was well past midnight. Morrison had finally managed to finish his Divination homework, and was just now getting started on copying Scorpius' Transfiguration work. Albus and Scorpius, meanwhile, were focusing on an aggravating Muggle Studies essay.

" What do you mean ' not do it'?" Albus asked him from across the stone cut table that they were occupying. He noticed that his tone was much more annoyed than usual, possibly because Scorpius had about two more pages done than he did.

Scorpius gave a shrug. " I thought I was pretty clear" he said. " You could just not do it. Not risk it."

" Then what was the point of taking the memory!" Albus shot at him.

Scorpius ignored him for a moment before speaking. " To keep your mind occupied?" he said sarcastically.

Albus made to retort but was cut off by Morrison.

" Can you guys argue about this later?" he said angrily. " I'm trying to copy!"

Albus kept his mouth shut, but still cast a contemptuous glare at Scorpius. He was glad that it didn't escalate however. Scorpius was just as vehement about not viewing the memory as Mirra was, and he didn't feel like defending himself. He merely returned to his hopeless essay in silence.

Though it did not occur to him when he had taken the memory, the secrecy surrounding it proved to be much more than he could handle. He had counted on at least Morrison's support in taking the memory, but he had ended up thinking little of it. Mirra had already told him that she did not think that he should watch it, and her opinion meant a much bigger deal to him than he wanted to admit. As he could hardly tell James or Rose about it, or anyone in his family for that matter, he found himself with few options when it came to getting advice.

The trouble was, as he realized over the next few days, there was little to no time outside of meals when he could break into Fairhart's office- and even then, there was nothing stopping Fairhart from returning to his office early. What's more, he had the strange feeling that that his Defence Against the Dark Arts professor was suspicious of him. Though he had done nothing to warrant such behavior, Albus found that his professor's scarred face showed up in random hallway encounters more than anyone's should, and on more than occasion he could have sworn that he was being watched at breakfast time.

Even with his mind on his father's memory, Albus still occasionally thought about his situation with Mirra as well. There was no mention of the Hogsmeade trip between the two of them, and Albus continued to insist that he had forgotten what he wanted to ask her. It wasn't until a grueling Quidditch practice two days before the trip that Albus realized that Mirra and the memory were connected.

" Potter!" Atticus' voice echoed through the sky as Albus fumbled an easy catch of the snitch. " Come down here!"

Albus floated cautiously down to where his team was gathered, all of them panting in exhaustion from the practice session.

" What are you doing out there Potter?" Atticus said in between breaths. " That's twice now you've missed an easy catch! No slacking just because we're already set for the final!"

" I'm not slacking" Albus said shortly. " I've just got something on my mind, that's all."

" Well spit it out, then!" Atticus retorted, and the rest of the team nodded in agreement.

Albus frowned. " Any of you guys know when the best time to break into a teacher's office is?" he asked shortly.

They all stared at him for a moment.

" What are you on about?" Patrick Parcher asked.

" Don't worry about it" Albus said hotly, momentarily forgetting that Parcher was four years his senior.

Atticus scratched at his chin. "Hogsmeade trip" he said after a moment.

"Huh?" Albus said, shocked. "Why?"

"Teacher's have to patrol Hogsmeade now during trips" Atticus said, and the team nodded in corroboration. "Just in case Ares shows up. You want a teacher's classroom all to yourself, that's when you do it."

Albus blinked. This had not even occurred to him. This entire time Hogsmeade had just been a potential day to spend with Mirra. He had not even realized that it could also be the ideal moment to use Fairhart's office...

"I don't care what you do on your own time" Atticus said loudly, snapping him away from his thoughts. "But on my time, you catch that snitch! So go catch it!"

And without further ado, Albus sped off into the sky.

It took little more than a few hours after this for Albus to get his plan set, and by the morning of the Hogsmeade trip, he felt more ready than ever. He sat at the breakfast table, nibbling on toast quietly as Scorpius muttered into his ear repeatedly.

"You're going to get caught" he kept saying. "*You're going to get caught.*"

"No I'm not!" he hissed back, still nibbling on his toast. "I'll have my Invisibility Cloak just in case I hear someone coming anyway."

"There are ways to tell if someone invisible is there!" Scorpius said quickly. "All kinds of spells-"

"You're starting to sound like Rose mate" Morrison said from next to him.

"I am not! Take that back!"

Albus barely listened as his friend's bickered back and forth. He glanced up at the table and saw Fairhart laughing merrily alongside Professor Bellinger. A feeling of uneasiness rushed through him. Fairhart had helped him through a hard time, and here he was about to break into his office.

Somehow, thinking of Fairhart made him think of Mirra to. Perhaps it was fate that today was the best day to view the memory. It may be fate's way of telling him that he was right in not asking her to go with him...

The bell rang, signaling not the start of classes, but the end of breakfast. Chattering students all excitedly left to their common rooms to get their permission forms, Albus following his friends back as well.

"You want us to get you anything?" Morrison asked once they reached their dormitory. "Anything from Honeyduke's? Or maybe a butterbeer?"

"No, I'm alright" he said, digging through his trunk. His hand grazed Rookwood's wand as he pulled out the tiny glass vial. With another heave, he pulled out his Invisibility Cloak as well. He stood up and looked at both of his friends. They both stared back in silence, Scorpius obviously bursting to tell him not to risk getting caught, but saying nothing. They finally both said goodbye, leaving him alone in the dormitory, staring at the tiny glass vial that held so much information...

Ten minutes later he was speeding down the first floor corridor, completely concealed by his Cloak. He knew that there was nothing suspicious about being on the first floor, but he wanted to be extra cautious. He did not want anyone to see him leave or enter the classroom.

Thankfully, the hallways seemed completely clear. Everyone had went to Hogsmeade to celebrate the most romantic day of the year. With a small pang in his gut that could have been regret, he wondered if perhaps he had been wrong. Maybe fate wanted him to ask Mirra so that he couldn't see the memory that was now stuffed in his robes...

He reached the door to Defence Against the Dark Arts and tried to turn the doorknob. It was locked. What were the odds that Fairhart had put extra protection around it?

He reached into his pocket and removed his wand. Hoping that he didn't accidentally set fire to the door, he removed his arm from underneath the Cloak and tapped the doorknob sharply with it.

"*Alohamora!*"

The lock clicked and Albus felt a sense of accomplishment that he rarely felt outside of classwork. He pushed the door open and entered the classroom, then closed the door behind him.

It was dark, though Albus could still make out the door that led to Fairhart's actual office. This

door was unlocked, and Albus passed through it into the small room that he knew made up his professor's livelihood. It was dark in here too.

" *Lumos!*"

A beam of light issued from his wand, and he whirled it around so as to get a better look at the shelf in the corner of the room. He saw the pensieve at once. Placing his wand in between his teeth to hold it steady, he stood on his toes to grab the stone basin and pull it down. After subconsciously glancing at the door to check that he was in the clear, he placed the pensieve on the round table where he had experienced his first butterbeer.

He examined the pensieve for a moment. It was nearly the exact same as the one that his father owned, except of course there was no " P" engraved in it. It also looked noticeably cleaner, or at least more used. He had the feeling that Fairhart used this pensieve much more than his father used his.

Without procrastinating any further, he removed the glass vial from his robes and uncorked it. He spilled the silvery contents into the pensieve and stared into it. There was what looked like a giant white room shimmering within the basin. This was it - he was about to discover the circumstances of Ares' release. He may even find out what it was he was trying to steal.

He removed his head from underneath the Cloak and, forgetting that it wasn't liquid he was staring at, took a deep breath and plunged his head into the pensieve. He once more felt as though he was traveling through a whirlpool, and kept his eyes shut the whole way down. He didn't open them until his feet hit solid ground.

He was standing in what looked like a massive cafeteria. The entire room was white, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, everything. All of it was polished to an unnatural sheen as well. There was what looked like a hundred white round tables within the room, all of them occupied by wizards in white robes talking merrily, trays of food in front of them. He glanced towards the back of the room and saw there was indeed what looked like a buffet, with several wizards in line tossing delicious looking food onto their trays.

He instinctively knew that these men were aurors. It struck him as odd that they were all lining up for food rather than hard at work in their offices or on the streets catching dark wizards, though now that he thought about, he supposed that he had never seen his father pack a lunch. This must be where aurors ate everyday.

Realizing that his father must be near by, he looked around and saw him immediately. He was sitting at one of the white round tables, a plate of delicious food in front of him as he scanned the Daily *Prophet*. He looked about the same as he did now, with a few tweaks. His hair was just as untidy, his glasses the same, his lightning bolt scar still clearly visible beneath his bangs, but he had a look of healthiness to him that Albus did not recognize. In recent years his father had become overworked, and was frequently seen with bags under his eyes and a gray tinge to his skin. Here however, he looked like he had never been more well rested. This memory clearly took place when he was in his prime.

Someone coughed from across the table, and Albus jumped. He looked and saw that it was Ares. He too looked like he was in his prime. He was much healthier looking as well, with his black hair much neater and more well kept than it had been when he was Headmaster. He also had no facial hair, and his gray eyes seemed more piercing, pronounced. They looked as though they were examining everyone in the room.

At the same time, he looked just as bored as he had looked at Hogwarts. Apart from his eyes, his face had a very exasperated look to it, and Albus thought that he saw his feet tapping uncontrollably under the table. He was clearly restless - he did not like sitting down quietly. He noticed that there was no tray of food across from him as well.

There were two other empty chairs at the table, of which Albus could only assume belonged to Uncle Ron and his auror apprentice. He looked around for a sign of familiar red hair, and sure enough saw his uncle in the cafeteria line, arguing with the person in front of him. He was repeatedly saying something along the lines of " No cutsies!"

" Sure you don't want anything to eat Red?"

Albus turned back to his father and saw that he was still flipping through the paper, only now he was eyeing Ares.

" I'm fine" Ares replied curtly.

" You sure? The sirloin steak is delicious."

" I said I'm fine" Ares said, his tone slightly colder.

The silence resumed after this. Albus' father was clearly used to Ares' abrasive attitude however, as he resumed eating in peace. He turned a few pages of the paper, then groaned. Ares snapped out of his bored gaze. " What?"

" WAR" his father said. " Waddlesworth apparently threatened the American Minister of Magic. Said that if he refused to admit that dark wizards were hiding in his country, then he'll get his men to go in there and investigate with or without permission."

Ares snorted. "' Wands and Redemption'" he said, his tone disgusted. " The biggest excuses for Renegades out there. They'd might as well be Death Eaters themselves."

" We call them ' EP's' now, I believe" Albus' father said with a slight frown.

Ares rolled his narrow gray eyes. " Kingsley can call them whatever he wants, they'll always be Death Eaters."

" The world isn't divided into good people and Death Eaters, Red. And maybe you should read the paper a bit more. If anyone is getting as much attention for their methods as WAR is, it's you."

" Don't compare me to them" Ares spat. " I am an efficient wizard, not a dark one."

Once more, silence resumed. Albus had the feeling, as he watched Ares glance around the room at his fellow aurors, that he was not fond of the company. He seemed like he wanted to do nothing more than go outside and catch wizards- whether they be EP's or Renegades.

Judging by the way that he was staring at the tray across from him, it seemed like he didn't think that aurors should be using their time to eat either. Indeed, he even said something along these lines as he broke the silence.

" Are you almost finished?" he said.

" Can't catch dark wizards on an empty stomach Red. And besides, Ron still hasn't gotten his seconds yet."

Ares rolled his eyes once more. " Why does Weasley-"

" *Mr. Weasley*" Albus' father said, taking his eyes off of the paper finally.

" Fine, Mr. Weasley eat so much anyway? You know he'll be having thirds too!"

Albus' father gave a shrug. " Ron likes to eat. You should have seen him at Hogwarts, he would just dive in as soon as the feast started -"

But he broke off at the sour look on Ares' face. His father went back to eating his steak quietly while Ares turned his head away. After a moment, his father spoke again.

" I'm sorry" he said. " I forgot."

" Forgot what?" Ares said indifferently, though his head was still turned away.

" Forgot that you never got to go to school."

Ares sneered. " I assure you I am competent enough. I don't care."

His head remained turned away however, and there was something sad in his deep gruff voice. Whatever he may have said, it appeared as though he cared a great deal that he had never attended Hogwarts. Or any school for that matter.

Albus' father pushed his tray away. " You know Red" he said quietly, " The Ministry sponsors several educational programs for employee's. I wouldn't say no to some adult classes. They wouldn't be at Hogwarts, obviously, but-"

But Ares had sneered once more. " I think I am capable enough as a wizard" he said darkly.

" I know you are. I know how powerful you are, and I know you're a capable wizard. But there's more to magic. Plenty of adults take classes in wandlore, or arithmancy, or wizarding genealogy-"

Ares gave a harsh, derisive laugh. " Don't patronize me" he said. " I am sufficient enough to defeat dark wizards. That's all that I need."

" But an education-"

" I had my education" Ares said, and his voice was slightly darker. " My school was the streets."

" But you didn't have a proper education!" Albus' father said, and his voice was raised at this point. He clearly did not like the idea that his protege was arguing, or at least disagreeing with him. " You'd be surprised how much your abilities would grow in a social setting! In a classroom! An educated person will always be better off than someone who learned from ' the streets!'"

Ares sneered once more. " Don't feed me that babble" he said. " A fantastic education given to

a lackadaisical, unmotivated student would be every bit as beneficial as giving a home to a vagabond. Determination, perseverance - these are the things that allow a mind to flourish!" Albus watched as his father leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. He pulled his tray close to him and resumed eating. " You'd of loved Hogwarts, Red" he said defiantly. " I know you would have..."

Albus watched as his Uncle Ron strode over to the table, his tray packed with so much food that it looked like it would topple over at any moment. He sat down, completely oblivious to the argument that had just occurred, and began eating at once.

The scene began to darken. Suddenly, the white walls and ceiling were gone, as was all the chatter of the aurors enjoying their lunch. Albus stood quite still, confused as to what was going on. That couldn't have been the memory that he needed to see. It had nothing to do with Azkaban at all...

But then he realized that there was more. The darkness that had engulfed him began shifting, and suddenly, different shapes were being formed. A new scene was materializing around him, a new memory.

When the darkness cleared Albus saw that he was in a much smaller room. It was all entirely stone, and the walls were dirty and uncared for. It looked like a waiting room of some sort. On a single metal chair sat his father, and he looked furious.

He looked a bit older now, and his hair was the messiest it had ever looked. It appeared as though he had dug his hands through it in agitation several times. He was holding the *Daily Prophet* once more, only this time it was folded up. A small door opened up and a tall, thin man with short blonde hair and a rather large nose entered.

" You can see him now Mr. Potter. He's in the very back."

" He has a cell all to himself?" Albus' father asked.

The thin blonde man nodded his head.

" Good" his father said. " Where is his wand?"

The thin man removed a long wand from his robes. It was not the Dragonfang wand that Albus knew Ares' now used, but it looked foreboding all the same.

" Scheduled to be snapped at noon" the man said.

" No" his father said. " Give it to me."

Albus watched as his father extended his hand calmly. His other hand remained clasped around the newspaper.

" I'm sorry Mr. Potter" the man said, apparently a little nervous at having to say ' no' to the ' Boy Who Lived'. " But Ministry regulations states that a prisoner cannot, at any time, be in the presence of their wand. And as it's already scheduled to be snapped -"

" Give it to me!" his father barked, hand still outstretched. He looked furious.

The man instantly handed the wand over.

" Thank you" his father said, a little calmer. " You won't get in trouble" he assured the man, and he made to go towards the door.

" Would you like an escort sir? You're not very well liked in there..."

His father turned just as he opened the door. " I wouldn't have it any other way" he said, and he walked through it. Albus followed him.

The second that they had entered the long corridor Albus could have sworn that he was at the Gryffindor table. There were so many cries of outrage and indignation, so many boo's and screams, Albus was sure that the noise must have been palpable. They were standing in an extremely long corridor full of cells, all of them lined up next to each other and looking grimy and filthy. This was Azkaban. And by the disgusting look of the place, this was the floor where the worst prisoners were kept.

Some of them grabbed at the bars and spit at his father as he walked past. Others recoiled back against the filthy corners of their cells and closed their eyes, as though it were all just a bad dream. Albus understood the animosity at once. As Head Auror, his father was probably indirectly responsible for all of their imprisonment.

His father walked by them without so much as glancing in the cells. He was either ignoring them or was simply used to their hateful glares and disparaging comments. Someone, a man with a twisted face and whose prison robes were shabbier than the others, tried grabbing him through the bars. Albus watched as his father nonchalantly removed his wand from his robes and aimed it through the bars without looking. The man was blasted back several feet,

collapsing when he made contact with the filthy wall that his pitiful excuse for a bed was next to.

He continued walking in silence for several minutes; the corridor seemed like it was never going to end. Albus did his best to avoid bumping into the grimy cells, though of course he knew that it didn't matter anyway. He followed his father in silence, realizing that unlike the memory with Dumbledore and his grandfather he would be unable to ask about something that he didn't understand. He would have to learn everything on his own.

They finally reached the end of the corridor, where sure enough, there was another door, this one made of iron. A small metal plaque on it read **High Security**.

Albus looked around, expecting to see some aurors standing guard, but there were none. Instead, his father tapped the door several times with his wand, muttering strange incantations as he did so. Albus understood at once what was happening. There must have been several protective charms and spells around this door.

After what seemed like the hundredth muttered incantation, there was a click not unlike the one that Albus had heard when opening Fairhart's door. The door swung open. Albus followed his father in and the door closed behind them, and suddenly the sounds of weeping and yelling were blocked out.

They were in a room slightly larger than the waiting room, most of it occupied by a large cell, this one filthier and more disgusting than all of the other cells combined. The bed even seemed smaller than the other beds that he had seen. In front of the cell was a small silver chair, no doubt put there in anticipation of his father visiting. Within the cell was Ares. "Harry!" he exclaimed, his voice raspy. He lunged forward and grabbed at the bars. "Harry!" His voice sounded relieved, if not slightly airy. His prison robes were not as shaggy as the one's on some of the other prisoners- he had clearly not been here long. He looked quite dirty however.

His father stepped forward, and in one swift motion, had picked up the small silver chair and tossed it against the wall. It reverberated all throughout the room, and Ares recoiled.

"The Foulest Book? The Foulest Book, Red!" his father yelled, and Albus had never seen him look more angry. He looked like he wanted to do nothing more than reach through bars and strangle Ares without a moment's hesitation.

"Harry, please-"

"What were you thinking! Who could you possibly want to talk to so bad that you had to try and steal the Foulest Book!"

"I was not trying to steal it" Ares whimpered, and he fell to his knees obsequiously. "I was merely- merely trying to examine it. You have to believe me-"

"DON'T LIE TO ME RED!" his father bellowed, and Albus was sure that even the other prisoners could hear him, regardless of the iron door that separated them. He picked up the chair once more and tossed it, this time at the bars. The echo was even louder this time.

"I'm not lying!" Ares wailed, and he sounded very close to tears. There was no bored, agitated look on his face now. "You can ask! They had your top legilimens interrogate me!"

His father hissed. "Me and you both know how good of an occlumens you are! Don't pull your crap! What were you doing going after that book! You know what it is. You know what kind of magic- you know how despised-"

"I'm sorry" he said, his mouth curling into a sad, despicable shape. He looked like a child that had been caught in the act of stealing from the cookie jar. "*I'm sorry*" he repeated.

"Why?" his father asked, his voice still raised. "Why would you try and steal something like that?"

Ares opened his mouth to answer, but was cut off.

"You know what, I don't even want an answer! I don't want to hear whatever story you've cooked up!"

Ares closed his mouth and muttered something that might have been yet another pitiful apology.

Albus watched as his father picked up the silver chair once more. Ares flinched, but nothing was thrown at him. Instead, his father set the chair up across from the bars and sat in it. He then buried his face in his hands.

"Do you have any idea Red?" he said, and his tone was quieter, and one of deepest disbelief.

" Do you have any idea what you've done? Everything that we've worked for...everything that we've done to ensure that these people felt safe. To ensure that the Ministry was trusted..." Ares gripped the bars once more, his face wore a look of complete pity. When he finally spoke, it was in a croak that showed how close he was to tears.

" Did they snap my wand?"

This, it seemed, was the question that he was most eager to ask. Albus could hardly blame him. Wands were like extra arms to wizards- they were both weapons and tools. Few things were worse in the wizarding world than being wandless.

His father did not reply, but merely stuck his hands into his robes and pulled out Ares' wand. Ares' eyes opened at once, and a hungry look appeared on his face. Albus saw him flex his fingers, and for one frightening moment, was sure that Ares was going to dive for it, to reach through the bars in a desperate attempt to reclaim his wand and perhaps fight his way out. He seemed to maintain his composure however, as he merely continued to stare at it.

" You want this back, don't you?" Albus' father asked him.

Ares nodded silently. Albus watched as his father leaned forward and scratched his chin, apparently deep in thought. When he spoke, it was done extremely quietly. It was as though he knew that his son was listening.

" I'm going to make a deal with you Red" he said. " Do you know what happens in six months?"

Ares shook his head.

" In six months" his father started, " Hogwarts opens up for a new term."

Ares continued to stare blankly. After a moment, he made his bewilderment known.

"Your point?"

" I'm getting to it" his father said icily. " The Defence Against the Dark Arts position has been taught by Mrs. Tweedle for quite some time. But she's retiring at the end of this year."

Ares mouth opened up slightly, he appeared to be slightly surprised.

" I have kids Red" his father continued. " And when they go to school I want them to learn from the best. I want them to learn from someone who's been out there. Someone who knows how to fight dark wizards, not just the theory behind it. I want you to work there Red."

Ares looked looking nothing short of astounded, though it was nothing compared to how Albus felt. What was going on? Ares had only started working at Hogwarts...because his father had offered him the job?

" Parents will not want me teaching there" Ares said. " They do not want a criminal teaching their students..."

But Albus' father unrolled the newspaper, and now Albus saw why he had it on him. In big black letters, on the front page, read :

RED WAR RETIRES

Ares stared at it, eyes wide open. " A cover up?" he said, dumbfounded. " A cover up?"

" What was I supposed to tell them Red?" his father said. " What was I supposed to tell these people? That their hero turned his back on them? That the person that they looked up to, the person that showed the public how efficient the Ministry could be, tried stealing? Stealing something," he said and his voice got noticeably louder, " That is so dark that the Department of Mysteries doesn't even study it anymore?"

" I- I-" Ares stammered.

" Do you know what would happen? Anarchy. Chaos. The second that the public knows that one of the best aurors out there turned out to be a criminal, they'll never trust the Ministry again. Is that what you want? You want the Renegades to come out? And start trying to do our jobs again? Start killing innocent people?"

Ares merely continued to stare off into space.

" This was the best way" his father said. " The official word is that you retired, and are currently thinking about taking up a position at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Now not everyone in the Ministry likes it. But Kingsley gave me the final word, and now here's what I'm giving you. A deal. You can either spend the rest of your life in Azkaban, or you can spend the next six months here and start working at Hogwarts."

" I don't know how to teach!" Ares said desperately.

" You don't have to" Albus' father replied simply. " You can spend all of your days in here if you want..."

" No!" Ares shouted quickly. " I- I'll do it!"

Albus' father didn't smile. When he spoke, it was extremely business like.

" Well then let's go over some ground rules. You will be monitored. Constantly. I'm rather close with a few professors there. One toe out of line and you're back in this cell. For good. You will not be allowed to leave the castle of your own accord. Ever. Not even during the summer break. You leave the grounds for anything- bar with my permission and only my permission, you're right back in this cell. For good. Got it?"

Ares nodded his head, though he avoided eye contact. He seemed like he was thinking that he had perhaps agreed too hastily. He raised his head to speak, but by the time he did, his former partner had already stood up and turned to go to the door.

" And Red?" he said as he put his hand on the doorknob.

Ares looked up.

" You owe me a favor."

Ares nodded morosely. " I know" he croaked.

The scene dissolved, and darkness quickly engulfed it. Albus felt his head spin and soon enough he was back in Fairhart's dark office, staring at the pensieve in disbelief.

His mind was now racing at what he had seen. He felt nothing but disappointment, nothing but shame. His heart seemed to be beating abnormally slow. His father had let Ares out of Azkaban. His *own father*.

Chapter 16: The Foulest Book

Was it possible to die from shame? Albus pondered this question for the next several weeks, though at the same time knew that it was not. If it was, he would have stopped breathing the moment that he had left Fairhart's office.

It had been something of a struggle to return the memories to the glass vial in which they belonged, a truly arduous task to leave the classroom looking as though it had never been entered. He had struggled with coherent thought the entire time, and only when he was safely back in his dormitory had he buried his head into his pillow furiously.

His father.

He did not know if he was depressed or apoplectic, if he was more ashamed or more surprised, his mind was at a crossroads of sorts. Every word that his father had said was now officially useless. Every tale of justice and doing the right thing, every moral question that Albus had ever been given an answer for, all of it was nothing to him. His father had allowed a guilty man to go free. And for what? To hide the truth from the public...

Both thoughts stung him, though admittedly he had tried, perhaps more than he should have, to place himself in the time at which the second memory had occurred. It took every ounce of cognitive ability that he possessed to try to see a way in which his father had made the right decision, had done the right thing. He thought once or twice that he had understood the position that his father had been in, and yet flashes of Ares' wanted poster soon overtook these thoughts, reminding him of the lurking danger that his father could take credit for. He remembered holding the Dragonfang Wand in his hand, aiming it at Ares in the middle of the Forbidden Forest. He had not attacked him, not stopped him. Though he hadn't thought about until seeing Ares locked away in a cell, he realized that anything that Ares did- anybody that he hurt- Albus could take the blame for. He had done nothing to help prevent it. But now he was sharing the blame. Sharing it with the one person who he had hoped he would never have to share it with.

The second that Ares committed a murder, his father was just as much a killer. It was he who had arranged it, after all. It was he, who by allowing someone to be released from Azkaban, had given that person the opportunity to do harm. And what if it wasn't just one person? What if Ares was never caught? How many lives will his father indirectly take? Did he belong in a cell himself?

His thoughts did not end here however. As February turned to March and his classes intensified he was prone to long stretches of time by himself, long stretches in which his mind did not wander, but analyzed instead. Both memories had been packed with information,

information which he hungrily accepted and reiterated in his head until the conversations that he had seen were memorized verbatim.

You will be monitored. Constantly. I'm rather close with a few professors there.

That would be Neville, poor Neville who had been forced to watch as his students were watched over by a criminal. Neville, who had interfered and done everything in his power to protect his students.

But really, *Neville*? Albus supposed that Professor McGonagall had been at Hogwarts too, but had his father really expected these two people to "monitor" Ares? A wizard so powerful that he was given a cell all to himself, way in the back of a prison said to be so fortified escape was impossible? Was he really counting on *TWO* wizards to keep track of a wizard who was so cold and calculated that he had nearly gotten away with stealing from the Ministry of Magic?

Of course he hadn't. He had been counting on Ares to look after himself. He had looked passed the truth and attempted to give a second chance to someone who had not deserved it. What a horrible vice. Whatever Uncle Ron may have said, Ares and his father had been friends. And his father had attempted to help his friend.

This thought pierced his mind with staggering force as well, and it was normally this thought that brought about the next valuable piece of information from his excursion into the pensieve. There had been *TWO* memories. Albus had pondered why at first, had wondered why the two memories that he viewed were so closely connected that his father had been incapable of separating them, but had figured it out after a while. It was the subject matter of them. Both memories had included talks of education.

What had Atticus told him on his very first day of school? That Ares had hated being a teacher? How correct he was. Ares had loathed the idea of education, and having never been given one himself, did not fully understand it. He had thought it quite useless it seemed, though Albus had recognized his tone when talking about it. It was the tone that was used when speaking bitterly, when talking of things that you wish you knew more about. Ares had undoubtedly longed to go to school when he had been younger, had yearned to be taught by professors and to learn alongside students just as gifted as he. But he had not. Could Albus really blame him for despising his position at Hogwarts? How could anyone who desired an education enjoy watching children learn? How could anyone like teaching when they did not even understand the benefits of it? His only option had been to live in an environment that he had wanted nothing more than to be in when he had been younger. To see what could have been. To see what it was like to have students help one another and do work together. Learning from books- not streets.

And he had not been allowed to leave. Ever. It was a treacherous punishment, a nightmare that he was forced to live from every morning when taught to every night when he slept. Hogwarts was just as much a prison to Ares as Azkaban had been- there were simply no bars. Indeed, Albus wondered if Ares had regretted his decision to teach. Judging from the way that he had left Hogwarts the previous year without looking back, it appeared as though he was happier hiding in the shadows from the aurors than he was seeing smiling children enter his classroom every day.

And his rise to headmaster troubled Albus nearly as much as everything that he had learned. Though he had no way of knowing for sure, he thought that he could imagine the situation quite accurately. What had happened after Professor McGonagall had retired? Certainly, Ares had been offered the position of Headmaster. How many oblivious parents had written in that they thought that Ares, or "Red War", should be given the job? How easy was it for Ares, who had a good reputation to all but the few who knew of his imprisonment, to get the support of those whose families he had once saved? The support of those who knew him as a hero in an era of dark wizards and renegades? He must have fought hard for it, it would at least mean he didn't have to teach, even if he was still in a schooling atmosphere. And Albus could only imagine the look on his father's face when he learned that Ares had obtained the most powerful position at Hogwarts one could have. The Ministry could not interfere with Hogwarts matters, it was the public who cared who was in charge of the school, the public who decided.

His father had been forced to sit and watch, unable to admit that Ares didn't deserve any amount of authority at all.

These small bursts of realization, these troubling thoughts of the memories that he had seen, they all seemed to connect in his head like pieces to a puzzle. He spent many an hour laying in his bed, allowing things to come together and fuel him with information that, though he wished he did not know, simply could not ignore. But this was not all that his father's memories had done.

For with every puzzle piece he fit, another turned up missing. He had not forgotten the main topic of the second memory- the actual reason for Ares being sent to Azkaban. He had attempted to steal something. Something called the Foulest Book.

This intrigued Albus more than anything else that he now knew, mostly because he could not imagine the dangers of a book. He recalled Grandad Weasley telling him of books that burned the eyes of their readers, or of never ending novels that were impossible to put down, but these things did not seem like they were important enough to be locked away in the most secretive department in all of the Ministry.

And the mere innocuous nature of books in general puzzled Albus greatly. As far as he knew, the most that Ares could do with a book was read it. Why then, had it been so important that he try and steal this one in particular? And more importantly, why had it been so well protected?

For days Albus allowed these questions to plague his mind, stray thoughts of what the Foulest Book could be colliding with the thoughts of his fathers horrible decisions. After a few weeks however, he was forced to submit to the idea that he had probably misheard. The Foulest Book, it seemed, did not exist.

And Albus knew that it did not exist because it was not mentioned in any other book. The Hogwarts library was one of the most expansive in the world, filled with all sorts of information that could only be learned at one of the most prestigious magical schools known to man. With so many books, it was impossible to search them all for an inkling of information, though Albus knew a trick to this. Twice now in his life at Hogwarts he had managed to use the Room of Requirement to find what he had been looking for, but alas, this time it had failed him. Even after concentrating with all of his might on needing to learn more about the Foulest Book, the Room stayed empty. There was no such book at Hogwarts that could give him this information, and thus, there was no such book in the world.

" Maybe Ares took it with him!" Morrison said as they sat in the common room, allowing the fire to warm them as the other students made their way to bed. " Before he left, he took all of the information he could about it away from Hogwarts!"

Albus frowned. " He left in kind of a hurry. And he doesn't need information on it, he clearly already knows what it is, if he was trying to steal it."

He hung his head low after saying this, taking the time to note his grim tone. His voice had been hoarse and raspy from lack of use ever since viewing the memories- he had been much more prone to silence recently.

He turned his head to see what Scorpius had to say on the matter before frowning again. He had forgotten that his other best friend was not there.

Students were allowed to leave Hogwarts for the spring break, though few ever did. The break was much shorter than the winter one, and with exams closing in, most students preferred to be near the library for studying. Scorpius however had left to be with his family for a week, claiming that he missed their company. Albus was not fooled however- he knew very well that he had left so as not to put up with him and his fluctuating mood. He had shifted between sulky and angry every day since viewing the memories, both of which Scorpius was not fond of.

Scorpius had, at least, promised to try and get more information on the Foulest Book while he was away, but Albus knew that he was placating him. If Hogwarts had no information, he doubted very much that Scorpius would.

Albus stared into the light of the fire, not even bothering to acknowledge the awkward silence that was between him and Morrison.

" Maybe we could see Hagrid tomorrow!" Morrison said brightly. " Take your mind off things a bit?"

Albus shook his head no. He didn't feel like seeing or talking to anyone. Indeed, he didn't even want to be around Morrison, though as the common room was far from private, he could hardly ask him to leave.

" Well Mirra mentioned she wanted to hang in the library sometime this week. That'll be nice, eh?"

Albus once again shook his head. He was now close to asking Morrison to leave. He was right about to say something, perhaps slyly hint at wanting to be alone, when Morrison spoke again.

" I'm just going to head to bed. Goodnight."

He stood to leave and began walking up the stairs to their dormitory. Albus mumbled " ' Night", then continued to stare into the fire.

The week of spring vacation passed by slowly, and Albus savored it. As long as he wasn't in class, he didn't have to participate, meaning that he could speak as little as possible, instead choosing to use his time to think about the memories and the Foulest Book.

Still, he managed to see one teacher more than any other. Fairhart, it seemed, was on to him. What was once a suspicion that he was being monitored had turned into a fully fledged fact that his Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was keeping his scarred eye on him. He frequently found that his teacher was walking so close behind him that he could almost feel his breath, and Fairhart had also taken to holding his newspaper up high during breakfast, his eyes skimming over the top to stare at Albus with fierce determination.

Three days before spring vacation was set to end, he was finally spoken to. He was walking down the seventh floor corridor, eager to perhaps try the Room of Requirement one more time, when Fairhart called out to him.

" Albus!"

Albus turned around briskly, his heart dropping. This was it- Fairhart knew that he had broken into his office.

" Albus I wanted to talk to you real quick."

Fairhart was now standing just a mere foot away from him, with an odd expression on the side of his face that could still show emotion. It was a mingled look of both concern and discomfort.

" What's up?" Albus said, his tone flat and defeated.

Fairhart opened his mouth as if to say something then closed it. He seemed to be toying with what it was he wanted to articulate.

" Are you okay Albus?" he finally said. " I know there hasn't been classes for a week, but even when there were you haven't been participating like you used to."

" I'm alright" Albus said quickly; he was slightly taken aback by the sincerity of the question.

" Are you sure?" Fairhart asked, and his tone was much quieter now, despite there being no one else in the hallway. " Are you sure there's nothing that you want to talk about?"

Like...things in the paper?"

Albus gave him an inquisitive look for a second, then realized what he was getting to. He supposed that he should have expected this. The news that his father was very close to being removed from his post had spread through the school like wildfire after all, and he had been forced to listen to it all. Most students, particularly the Gryffindors, seemed outraged by it. He even knew from a quick conversation with Fred that James had given a rallying speech in the common room in support of their father. The Slytherins meanwhile, many whom Albus knew were probably indifferent to the whole thing, seemed to think that the public may be right. Though Albus would have normally fought against this, what he had learned since had him questioning his position. Though he said it to no one, he thought that his father deserved some of the negative attention that he was getting. He felt sickened with himself for it, but he could not fight it.

Fairhart was still waiting for an answer it seemed.

" No, I'm okay" Albus quickly lied.

Fairhart raised his eyebrows slightly, and Albus immediately avoided eye contact. He did not think that Fairhart was reading his mind, but he could never be too sure.

At this point he wondered what would happen if he did tell Fairhart. He imagined that his professor would comfort him, much like he had when Albus had been lost with Mirra. But he then immediately realized that he could say nothing about what was bothering him- doing so would admit that he had broken into his office.

" Are you sure?" Fairhart asked sternly.

" I'm sure" Albus said, but he realized that he needed to add more to make it believable. " I've just got a bunch of small things on my mind" he added.

Fairhart stared at him for another moment. " Okay" he said. " Just checking. You'll figure it out Albus. Just use your head."

Albus nodded. Fairhart turned around and began walking down the other end of the corridor,

leaving Albus alone to his thoughts.

That Saturday, Albus finally met with Mirra in the library. He had thus far put off talking to anyone that could take his lethargy as a personal attack, and he was unwilling to risk this with Mirra especially. Still, she had, through message sent by Lily, asked him to help her with her potions work, and as Albus did not want to be rude, he found himself sitting across from her in silence.

Her head was buried deep in a potions textbook; Albus' remained quite closed. It had reached the point in the year where Professor Handit had finally gotten a grasp of his new subject, and as such, they were finally working on third year work. As Albus was easily the best in their year at Potions (Scorpius coming in at a somewhat distant second), he instead waited for her to ask questions.

" So if ashwinder eggs can't cure poisons at all, why do we use them?" Mirra asked, pointing at it in her book. She slid her textbook over to him, then watched as he scanned it quickly.

" Because it takes the properties of other components" Albus said, in a tone that he did not mean to be patronizing, though it came out as such. " So if you toss a few eggs in, then they work as substitute's for anything missing, so long as there's already parts of it in the potion. They're not very hard to get, so it's easy to have a cauldron full of them, all taking the properties of one key ingredient."

She nodded and pulled the textbook back to her, then began scribbling on her paper quickly. Albus merely sat and watched, unsure as to what she was writing. It had been a long time since he had cared enough to do his own homework, let alone know what his assignments were. Roughly everything he handed in was just a mangled version of Scorpius' immaculate work.

" And another thing" she started, and Albus let out a reluctant sigh that he immediately regretted.

Mirra sat up straight and tossed her hair out from her eyes. Albus would normally feel his heart do a small flip at this, but it didn't. It wasn't because she was any less attractive or because he liked her any less. He knew it had more to do with his inability to focus on anything that didn't involve his father these days.

" Something's wrong with you" she said to him. " You've been really distant."

He stared blankly. " I'm just tired" he said. Why was he incapable of telling the truth?

Mirra leaned forward a little bit. " If you want to talk about something, we can" she said. " Rose has shown me what's in the papers, and my entire house-

" Oh really?" Albus said, his temper rising slightly.

" Yes really" Mirra said, her voice much calmer than his own.

" Well that's not all that's going on with my dad" Albus said grimly.

Mirra gave him something of a quizzical look, then said, " You watched that memory of your dad, didn't you?"

Albus waited a moment before nodding. He then explained, briefly, the second memory that he had viewed.

Mirra sighed before speaking. " Oh Al" she said, and Albus felt his heart lighten at how she had said his name. It grew heavier the next moment however.

" You shouldn't be making such a big deal out of it" she said in what seemed like an attempt at a soothing voice.

" *What?*"

" Your dad just made a mistake, that's all."

" A *mistake?*" he snapped, and he realized that his voice had grown steadily darker, and louder as well.

" A mistake" Mirra repeated. " He had no way of knowing what Ares was going to do! You can't blame someone for not being able to read the future! He thought it was the best decision to make at the time!"

Albus mouthed wordlessly, he had not been expecting this. All that he could tell himself was that he must not lash out...must not show how foolish he thought that her argument was. He could not risk her being angry at him...

" That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" he practically spat.

There goes that plan he thought bitterly. It was quite weird, he knew how deep he was burying himself. He knew how much of a problem he was causing, knew how much he risked his chances with Mirra. But this was all blinded by his anger. It felt good to raise his voice and show contempt towards something, regardless of how much he would pay for it later...

When she did not speak, he continued, his voice more menacing than he had ever heard it before; it was a voice that he had bottled up for weeks.

"Ares is a wanted criminal! He belongs in Azkaban! And my dad knew this and he let him out! Because he didn't want people to know how corrupt the Ministry is! As if that was any better! And they were friends and he was just trying to help his friend out! He deserves to be removed from his post!"

He was breathing heavily now; how the librarian hadn't heard him was somewhat shocking.

"But he didn't know Albus. Maybe he thought that Ares deserved a second chance!"

"He could hurt a lot of people!" Albus said, and there was a faint pleading in his angry voice.

"I could have hurt people too!" Mirra said darkly. "And I got a second chance..."

There was a small stretch of silence after this; Mirra rarely mentioned anything that had occurred during their first year. When Albus didn't speak, she continued.

"Maybe you should talk to someone in your family about this. Like James or Lily, or Rose-"

"No!" Albus spat, and at this his temper hit the boiling point. It was the second time that she had mentioned talking to Rose in their conversation, and that was something that he definitely did not want to do. He didn't need to talk to anyone, there was nothing that could be said.

Why didn't people understand that? His father, his personal hero whom he had idolized, had let him down in every way possible, both with Ares and Fango Wilde. What could anyone possibly say to that?

"I don't want to talk to Rose!" he said bitterly. "Is that what you do? You go and tell Rose everything?"

Mirra narrowed her eyes. "I'm just trying to help" she said coolly.

"Well you're not!" he said fiercely, and he hoped that his anger subsided soon- he feared that if it didn't his next words could be irrevocable. "All you're trying to do is push my problems off on other people! Plan on having a neat little chat with her?"

Mirra flushed a deep scarlet. "For your information," she said, and her voice was quivering, "I don't tell Rose *anything* that we talk about. I don't tell her *anything* about you, because you're just as much my friend as she is, and I respect your privacy just as much! I didn't even tell her that the real reason I broke up with Charlie was because I didn't like how he treated you!"

These words stung like few others that he had heard. There was something about the disappointment in her voice, the way she had said it, that made Albus think that she was now seriously regretting having called things off with Eckley because of him. This thought tortured him. Not knowing what else to say, he remained defensive.

"Well you shouldn't have been dating an idiot like him anyway!"

Mirra glared at him with what looked like the most upset face she could muster. Her lips were now quivering the same as her voice had been. The silence in the library was deafening- Albus wondered why no one had interfered yet. Then, in one sudden movement, she stood up, her eyes shining with what may have been tears, and scooped her things into her bag. Without so much as a word or a glance, she then hurried out of the library, leaving him even more miserable than he had been before they had started talking.

He sat in silence for several minutes, his breathing slowing down as his anger gradually left him. Way too late of course, he realized bitterly, but it had left him. There was so much on his mind- so much to deal with. He was sick of it all. With one more burst of anger, he shouted an expletive that got him kicked from the library.

"Don't worry about it mate, girls cry all the time" Morrison was saying to him the next day as they sat near the fire in the common room. It was midday, and many people were relaxing on their last day before break ended.

Albus shot him a look of annoyance but didn't speak. All that he had thought about the night before, an entirely sleepless night, was how badly he had ruined things with Mirra. He supposed that the only benefit of it was that it had at least taken his mind of how much a fool his father was, or his inability to learn anything about the Foulest Book- like if it even existed

for one thing.

" Cheer up" Morrison continued when Albus didn't speak. " Scorpius'll be back any minute. You know he'll just leave again if he sees that you're still sulky.

Albus glared at him. " Well then he better not unpack his bags" he said sarcastically. "

Because I don't see anything cheering me up anytime soon."

" You're a really negative person, you know that?"

Both Albus and Morrison turned. It was Scorpius. He had evidently just arrived, his bag was still slung over his shoulder anyway. Albus had been too busy gazing into the fire to notice that the Common Room door had opened.

" Scorp!" Morrison said excitedly, and he rose from his feet and widened his rather large arms into a position for a hug.

Scorpius stared at him for a moment with a look of loathing. " Don't ever call that me again" he said seriously.

Morrison laughed then slapped his friend's hand in welcome. Albus attempted to do the same, but was simply too lethargic to do so. He ended up raising his hand in something that resembled a halfhearted wave, then lazily swung his arm so that his fingers barely skimmed Scorpius' outstretched hand.

" Good to see that you're completely over your depression" Scorpius said in a voice of mock approval.

" So how was home?" Morrison asked him.

Scorpius gave a shrug as he sat down on the floor casually, his bag dropping off of his shoulders with a loud thud.

" It was alright" he said as Morrison sat down on the floor as well. " Typical family I guess.

Hassled me about schoolwork. My mom reckons if I keep my grades up throughout this year I might be allowed to try out for Quidditch next year though!" he added excitedly. " What's been up with you guys?"

Albus said nothing, though Morrison jerked his thumb towards him. " Al blew it with Mirra. Made her cry."

Albus threw Morrison a disgruntled look before looking at Scorpius, who frowned.

" Ah" he said. " Then in that case, I'd might as well show you this now."

" Show me what?" Albus asked, feeling pleasantly curious- a form of curiosity he hadn't felt in weeks.

" Just something I picked up" Scorpius said, diving into his bag. " Thought you might like it. I was saving it for when you started bawling your eyes out, but as you've probably done that already, here it is."

Albus ignored this insult and stared at what Scorpius had pulled out of his bag. It appeared to be an enormous slab of black concrete.

" Wow" Albus said dryly. " Thanks mate, I've been wanting one of those for ages now."

" What is it?" Morrison said, peering at it with interest.

" It's a *book* Morrison" Scorpius said. " They're filled with words, see? Only on paper. Then those become sentences, and enough of those make a paragraph. Then a few of those-"

But Albus cut him off. " A book of what?" he said. He didn't want to listen to any more of Scorpius' harsh sarcasm.

" Read for yourself" Scorpius said, and he slid the book across the floor over to him.

Albus picked it up- it was extremely heavy. There was no title to it of any sort, and he could see that the pages were blackened with dirt as well. He finally turned the book to the side and read, in faded gold letters, *Herpo Serpakis*.

" Herpo Serpakis?" he read aloud.

" Also known," Scorpius started slyly, " As Herpo the Foul."

Albus raised his eyes in interest. " Okay?" he said.

" It's not an autobiography, is it?" Morrison asked, and Albus knew that he was thinking of the other autobiography that they had found, the one of Vesnovitch, the person who had created the Dragonfang Wand.

" Not an autobiography, no" Scorpius said. " Just a regular biography. Packed with information. Think now. Herpo the *Foul*?"

Albus' mouth fell open in shock. " What's in here?" he said. " Is this...is this it?"

" No" Scorpius said simply. " This is a biography. But the Foulest Book is mentioned."

" But how?" Albus asked, dumbfounded. " The Room of Requirement-"

" - Only has books in Hogwarts" Scorpius finished for him. " I told you I'd look into it didn't I? You won't find this thing in any school. Only the Malfoy family library would have it."

" The Malfoy family library?" Morrison asked him.

Scorpius nodded. " My family's obsessed with pure blood wizards and things like that. This guy- Herpo the Foul- he was was big on it. He's like a legend to us. But you won't find anything about him at Hogwarts. Not with the stuff he did."

" What made you look for this?" Morrison asked.

" I asked my grandmom if she'd ever heard of the Foulest Book" Scorpius said simply. " She hadn't, but she pointed me in the direction of Herpo the Foul. Sure enough, it was there."

" But what did he do?" Albus asked eagerly, his mouth practically salivating at the prospect of solving this mystery. For the first time in weeks, he was excited.

" Well first off" Scorpius started, " He wasn't just a normal wizard. This guy was a *necromancer*."

He clearly expecting these words to have a significant effect on both of them, though neither registered it. Albus could tell at once that it was negative, but that was as far he got.

" What's a necromancer?" Morrison asked, and Scorpius rolled his eyes.

" It's a wizard who communicates with the dead" he said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. " Back then it was just an obscure branch of magic, but over time, it started to get a really ominous reputation. It eventually became one of the first practices attributed to the ' Dark Arts'."

" But no spell can reawaken the dead" Albus said. " My dad told me that..."

With a small wave of anger flowing over him, he knew that this meant nothing however. His dad had probably lied to him, or been wrong, like he was about everything else...

" Well he's right" Scorpius said. " Necromancy doesn't bring anyone back, it just allows you to contact them. Apparently the ability to do it is innate, and even then, it takes a great deal of practice to be successful. It hasn't been taught for hundreds of years though, there are no more necromancers. I think Durmstrang was the last school to try and teach a class in it, but that was back in the early eighteen hundreds..."

" So what did this bloke do?" Morrison asked. " With his necromancy or whatever?"

" Well it wasn't just that" Scorpius said, and he took the book from Albus and began skimming through the dilapidated pages. " There's way more. Care for story time?"

Albus looked around to make sure that no one was listening. Most of the fifth years were by the stone cut tables studying for their O.W.L's. Bartleby, Dante, and Denise Toils were all playing gobstones in the middle of the room. Everyone else was chatting merrily- they were quite safe from being overheard.

Albus nodded, and Scorpius began trying to find the right page.

" Let's see, let's see" he said, flipping through pages. " *Herpo Serpakis was born in Greece in the early fourteen hundreds...yadda yadda yadda... His parents were slaughtered in his youth for not following the rules of his village...boring boring boring...Aha! In the middle years of his life, he rose to fame for being an accomplished wizard capable of defeating several tyrants of his day. The Dark Wizard Prosadicus for instance, was defeated when attempting to destroy Herpo's village. He was later claimed a hero and named a leader to his people.*

" *Herpo claimed that his abilities were aided by his ability to communicate with the dead, giving him a tactical advantage in battle. After honing his skills in this field, he became one of the earliest known and possibly most accomplished necromancers of all time. His abilities, however, he claimed as a curse, for the dead would*

frequently tell him of the horrible pain that they had experienced in death. It was for this reason that he created the basilisk."

"The basilisk?" Albus asked in surprise. "Those giant snakes? They're really rare...and really dangerous though. He made the first ever one?"

Scorpius nodded and continued reading.

"His intentions in doing so were that those who were terminal or set to be executed could merely stare in the eyes of the basilisk to be given a painless death. This further increased his popularity amongst his village, and soon nearly all of Greece had heard of the man who had succeeded in creating "bearable death."

"So then why is he a dark wizard?" Morrison asked. "I mean, that's pretty noble isn't it? Creating a creature just so that people who wanted or had to die could do it painlessly? Why is he called 'Foul'?"

"I'm not done" Scorpius said.

"This event marked an important period in Herpo's life. As one of the first parselmouths (those who can talk to snakes) known to man, he had an extraordinary amount of control over the beast he had created. As he grew older however, his ability to control it decreased, and eventually, the beast inadvertently killed more than fifty members of his village before fleeing into the wild. Herpo was given the name 'Herpo the Foul' and banished from his village for murder. He would then travel abroad for several years."

Scorpius stopped here. "The next like...five hundred pages are all about his various adventures after being named 'Herpo the Foul'. Apparently he was so bitter he started experimenting with dark magic, and eventually returned to his village and slaughtered them all for wrongfully banishing them. Then he did a bunch of other really bad stuff. Talk about a fall from grace, eh?"

Albus didn't say anything for a couple of moments. He was soaking this information in, but a question still nagged. "What does that have to do with the Foulest Book!" he finally said. "I'll get to it" Scorpius said through gritted teeth. He turned to the back of the book. "Okay, notable achievements and discoveries back here. Ready?"

Both Albus and Morrison nodded.

"In his extremely long lifetime, Herpo had many discoveries and events attributed to him. Though some may be known more as myths (such as the event in which he unleashed an army of ashwinders on a group of wizards who attempted to kill him, for more details, see pages 620-622), several items and events are directly traced to him. In addition to being one of the earliest parselmouths and necromancers, he was said to be one of the first to effectively use Occlumency, and was more than a proficient Legilimens. He is one of the earliest known users of the Cruciatus Curse (some claim he created it, though this is disputed) and was also the first known maker of a Horcrux, that which is so wicked it cannot possibly be described-"

"Wait, what was that last one?" Albus asked. "A Horcrux?" He thought that he had heard the term somewhere before, possibly when he was way younger, but couldn't imagine a situation when it could have been used.

" Yeah" Scorpius said. " And I've got no idea what it is, sorry. I looked all over my library, this was the only mention of it. I think it might be a typo or something."

" I don't think it's a typo" Morrison said. " It sounds...kind of like a type of cat."

Scorpius stared at him for a moment. " Really?" he said sharply. " A type of cat? A cat that is so wicked it cannot possibly be described? Are you serious?"

Morrison scratched his chin. " Yeah" he said after a moment. " Definitely some type of cat."

" Are you insane! What kind of cat-"

" Stop!" Albus said, and they both stopped talking immediately. " Forget it. Just keep going!" He could hear the eagerness in his voice and Scorpius turned his attention back to the book.

" Here it is" he said. " *Herpo also created, near the end of his life, the Foulest Book, a book full of incantations that would, when combined with spirit objects, allow one to communicate with anyone that was dead. Herpo claimed in the last years of his life that this was his most wicked of all creations, claiming that a book that gave one the ability to use anyone as a source of knowledge was far too powerful to exist. He claimed to have attempted to destroy it himself but failed. The Book is still one of the most sought after magical objects to date, with numerous magical historians claiming a variety of places where it could be.*"

Scorpius looked up. " Thought that'd interest you" he said to Albus.

Albus merely stared blankly. " That's it?" he said after a moment. " *That's* what Ares was after? That's what was locked away in the Department of Mysteries? A book that can't even hurt you? It just lets you talk to dead people!"

" You're looking at it the wrong way" Scorpius said. " This book is knowledge. You can contact anyone, so long as you've got a spirit object. True, it's all dark magic, anything associated with necromancy is, but can't you see the appeal?"

" What's a spirit object?" Albus practically shouted.

" It's any magical object that has a spiritual connection to it's owner, one that continued even after one of them is destroyed."

Albus stared at him blankly, as did Morrison. Scorpius gave an annoyed sigh.

" Look" he said, and his tone clearly indicated that he was going to try and elucidate for them.

" Take your Invisibility Cloak. Your grandfather owned that once right? If he used it a lot- had a special connection with it- it would be a spirit object. So if you put that Cloak on the Book and read the right incantation, it would...I don't know...activate it or whatever. You could talk to your grandfather. Or at least, his soul."

Albus shook his head in disbelief. This is what Ares had been after?

" But why?" Albus asked, talking aloud to himself. " Why would Ares want that?"

" To talk to his dad maybe?" Morrison suggested. " He was an orphan, right?"

" Adopted" Albus corrected him. " And even then, how would he do it? He would need a spirit object or whatever...so what does he have?"

They all sat in silence at this, listening to the chattering of their housemates. Then, quite suddenly, it came to him.

" The Wand" Albus muttered.

" Huh?" Scorpius and Morrison both said.

" The Wand!" Albus repeated. " The Dragonfang Wand! Ares doesn't know how to work it! He wanted to talk to Vesnovitch!"

Morrison's eyes widened, as did Scorpius'. But the latter then mentioned something.

" But Al, that doesn't make any sense. He tried stealing the Book years ago, before he even had the Wand..."

Albus was ready for this. Everything was clicking in his brain. Everything was suddenly making sense. " He needs both. Hear me out!" he said, and he flapped his hands around as though they were talking. " Ares doesn't know how to work the Wand. The only way to learn how is to talk to Vesnovitch. The only way to talk to Vesnovitch is with the Foulest Book. And the only

way to activate the book is with the Wand! Vesnovitch created it, of course it's a spirit object for him! The Book and the Wand! He needs them both, they're useless without the other one! And years ago, he tried stealing the Book first and got caught! And now...now he stole the Wand first...and..."

And then it occurred to him. The horrible truth.

" And he's still after the Book" he said. " He just went after them in reverse order this time. He's not hiding, he's waiting. Waiting for the right moment, so that he can steal the Book too. That's why my dad's been so eager to catch him, even letting Fango Wilde out. Because he's already got one and he's after the second."

Both of his friends merely stared at him. It was Morrison who finally spoke.

" But the Wand can't work for him. Isn't that what your dad told you? He's already reached his full potential?"

" But it's more than that" Albus said, and he was surprised at how easily that answer came to him. His father's voice rang in his ears with little effort.

The wand has many, many abilities, some of which we know about, others of which we can't fathom.

" Whatever the Dragonfang Wand can do, Ares knows it. He just doesn't know how to use it...for whatever he wants to use it for. And he's so close..."

They all resumed their silence, until finally, determinedly, Albus spoke once more. " But that's not going to happen" he said. " I know it won't. Because my dad isn't going to let him! He'll get caught red handed again and thrown back in Azkaban before he gets that Book!"

Chapter 17: Battle For The Torch

Hogwarts seemed stuck in March. Spring vacation was over, but both the mentality and weather of the third month seemed to linger. The pounding rain was always the first thing seen and heard when entering the Great Hall, and the muddy and slippery treks down the grassy slopes of the ground were now hated by everyone who took Care For Magical Creatures. Meanwhile, exams drew ever closer.

" Your last break is over" Professor Bellinger said politely but sternly near the end of a gruesome Transfiguration lesson in which Albus had accomplished nothing. " Third year exams are extremely difficult and extremely practical. Only knowing the theory will not be as useful here."

Many of the students gripped their chairs and gave wry smiles. Albus knew that most of them, like him, were still struggling with actually performing Transfiguration.

" Third, fifth, and seventh year exams are always the one's most commonly looked at by the Ministry of Magic" Professor Bellinger said. " Though they are not titled like O.W.L's or N.E.W.T's, they are treated along the same lines. Effort is more important than ever. Tonight's homework assignment, in addition to practicing basic vanishing, will be to write twenty two inches of parchment on why vanishing is considered transfiguration, and not a charm. To be handed in next Wednesday. Dismissed!"

Albus groaned, though it wasn't heard over the others student's or the loud bell. Still, he thought that he had more reason to complain than they did. He had Quidditch practice all week.

He was not at all surprised by how quickly exams were coming. Their work load had increased significantly recently, and though Albus neglected most of it, it was hard not to realize that the end of the year tests were imminent. What did surprise Albus however was how close the final match of the season was. Scheduled for the middle of April, he had less than three weeks to prepare himself.

The school seemed to be just as eager for the match as he was. Neither he nor his brother had participated in last years final, and thus this would be the first time that both teams were playing at full strength in the last match of the season. Albus and James were the main focus of course, as seekers were generally expected to be responsible for a game's result, but Albus was at least pleased that their rivalry was much friendlier this time than it had been during their last game.

And though he heard both of their names a considerable amount in the halls, there was yet

another Potter receiving attention from the students. Every morning came with more news of his father's impending removal from his post of Head Auror. First it was merely the picket signs returning, then days later it was revealed that half of the members of the Wizengamot had decided it would be for the best. Albus knew it was only a matter of time before his father was sacked from his job, and, though part of him did agree with the public, the rest of him was furious.

" I mean really!" he practically shouted. " After everything he's done! Beating Voldemort, ending a war, revolutionizing the Ministry!"

He, Morrison, and Scorpius were sitting in Hagrid's cabin, all of them enjoying a delicious tin of treacle fudge as the gamekeeper made them tea. Albus could not speak to Hagrid about anything involving the memories that he had seen, but it felt good to know that there was someone whom he could vent his frustration to outside of the students.

" That's life Al" Hagrid morosely, putting down three tiny cups that he had managed to balance in his massive hand. " One day yer supported, nex' yer not. The public is fickle, see? They on'y like yeh for what yeh currently are. On'y as good as your las' headline."

Albus took a large gulp of hot tea and immediately regretted it. His throat felt as though it were on fire. Albus knew that Hagrid was correct however ; the Slytherins were very much the same with him. You were only as good as your last Quidditch match.

Incapable of speaking from the tea, it was Scorpius who spoke up.

" Do you think that there's anything that Al's dad can do, Hagrid? Anything to change things around before he gets sacked?"

Hagrid scratched at his bushy beard, then took a seat across from the three of them. " They'll never forget about him, he's too famous, so he'll have plenty of opportunities to get back in their good books. But the on'y thing that'd get him righ' back on track would be catching Ares as soon as possible. No small feat, min' you. Over time, he'll be loved again though. You jus' wait an' see."

Albus waited a few more days, but his father's positive reception and chances of keeping his post continued to decline. But the worst thing was that though he tried ignoring it, he was pulled into it by family obligations.

James, who had recently taken to acting as though he were the patriarch in the Potter family, had called a " family meeting" of all who were related to him to discuss and debunk the circulating rumors, as well as keep the morale of his relatives up. The initial place of this event was the Gryffindor common room, before it was realized that Albus could not join them. He had hoped that this would be his opportunity to skip out, but alas, James had instead requested that they all meet in the library. And so, on a Saturday night where he could be rushing through Charms homework in the warmth of the common room, Albus was forced to sit in the library with his family.

James had pulled up several chairs to a table right in the middle of the large room, with himself sitting at the head of the table, his prefect badge never looking more polished. Lily, Rose, and Hugo all sat on the left side of the table, with the twins Molly and Lucy and Fred all sitting on the right. Albus heaved a sigh and took a seat next to Hugo.

James glanced around them all, smiling widely at the thought of being the leader in the family.

" We never really get to talk as a family any more" he said pompously. " I feel this is my fault" he added egotistically. " I'm always so busy. So what has everyone been up to? Hugo? Enjoying your classes?"

" Chase Denner from Huffelpuff stole my Potions homework and put his name on it last week" Rose's younger, much politer and more timid brother said.

James placed the tips of his fingers together. " I see. He will be punished, and severely" he said nonchalantly. " Molly? Lucy? How's things?"

The twins launched into an argument as to who had done better on their last two tests- one had received an O and an A and the other two E's. As James attempted to sort it out, Rose looked down the table and said, quietly, " Do you know what's wrong with Mirra?"

Albus faked a look of interest. Secretly however, he was surprised that Mirra had not told her best friend about their argument. With a small twinge that may have indicated guilt, he remembered that their argument had escalated by accusing her of just that.

" Nope" he said, trying to muster a bewildered look onto his face.

Rose frowned. " She's barely talked to anyone recently. I hope she's not having home problems again..."

Albus was right about to comment that he doubted this very much, but James addressed Lily,

and Albus thought it prudent to listen.

" How about you, Lils?" he asked. " Got a favorite class yet?"

She nodded her head, smiling. " Defence Against the Dark Arts, definitely. Professor Fairhart is so smart- I learned so much already. I even got the disarming spell right on my first try!"

There was something of a smattering of quiet applause for Lily's achievement. Albus realized that this was the second piece of magic that she had managed on her first try- the first being in Transfiguration, and was quite close to mentioning this when Lily said something else.

" - And I think he's really taken a liking to me too, he's always coming up to me in the halls and chatting with me."

" Wait, what?" Albus asked, his eyebrows raised slightly. " Fairhart follows you around?"

Lily looked almost offended at his verbage. " I wouldn't say he follows me" she said. " He just always happens to be around, and we chat..."

" Fairhart's a nice guy" James said wisely, still looking very fatherly at the head of the table. "

I think him and dad know each other, they're like acquaintance's or something. I reckon he knows that I'm a bit of a trouble maker too though, or used to be. He's always kind of got his eye on me...oh, and speaking of dad! Right! He wrote me..."

James then proceeded to tell the family about what his father had written, everything from how he was sorry if they were getting asked questions about it to not to worry about the state of his position. Albus, though wanting to pay attention badly, found his mind interested with something else...

So he was not the only one whom Fairhart was keeping a close watch on. He had thought that it had something to do with breaking into his office, but now he knew differently. He and his siblings were all being monitored to some degree. But why?

It could not have been because they were merely all Potter's. It could not be because Fairhart was seeing how they were coping with the turmoil of their father either, for only Albus had been approached about this particular event. So why then?

" - And, he also wishes us both luck in the match Al. Not entirely sure how that's possible, but he does."

Albus turned to his brother, his mind still trying to make just one more connection.

" Match?" he said stupidly.

James laughed. " You haven't given up already!"

" Oh right" Albus said, and a smile flickered on his face. They were at least now talking about something that involved him. " No, far from given up. Looking forward to it actually."

James smiled smugly. " I suppose you feel pressured. Not nearly as much as me- I'm the one carrying the torch- but this would be Slytherin's first cup in about a decade."

Albus raised his eyebrows at this. " I'm sorry" he said. " Did you mention a torch? What torch would this be?"

James cracked his knuckles while the rest of their family watched them with interest. " Well, being Quidditch champion and all. The winning seeker."

" You didn't win last year!" Albus said somewhat loudly. " You didn't catch the snitch! Neither of us played!"

" Well, I was on the winning team" James said matter-of-factly. " I mean, my name is engraved on last years cup."

" But you didn't participate!"

" Neither did Neville" James said. " But it still says that he won the cup. I am the most recent Potter to win. Dad won it when he was at Hogwarts. Don't fret- you'll have your shot at the torch after I graduate."

Albus mouthed wordlessly at him, his determination at beating his brother now much more prominent in his mind than the mystery that was Professor Fairhart.

Even with the Quidditch final looming ahead, Albus found that his mind was still occasionally wandering towards other things, none of which his friends were very interested in. Indeed, without Mirra he realized that there was no one to talk to about his issues. Scorpius and Morrison had both claimed that there was nothing that they could do about the Foulest Book- and Albus had agreed with them. It's protection was solely dependent on his father now, and Albus hoped sincerely that he wasn't let down. The thought that it had not be taken yet or Ares been caught brought some comfort to him. Ares had not yet made his move, and it had been nearly a year ago that he had left Hogwarts.

But his intrigue at Fairhart bothered him just as much, and without his friend's to discuss it with him, he felt as though he was no closer to learning what Fairhart was doing following

him. During their most recent Defence Against the Dark Arts class, he had not looked at Albus once.

They had progressed passed stunning (of which Albus was still shoddy at best) and moved their way through other defensive spells as well. *Reducto*, which blasted away solid objects, proved to be a fun little spell to use, and Fairhart's claim that it was effective on humans had brought a grin to Scorpius' face- he had used it the previous year on

Eckley. *Impedimenta* was also useful; capable of slowing people down during movement and even knocking them off of their *feet*. *Crescendium* was yet another useful spell in his arsenal; it was a blast of sound-turned energy that in addition to inflicting minor damage on someone also made them temporarily deaf.

This particular lesson had not focused on learning new spells at all. Fairhart had opted for more of a theoretical approach this time. The vast majority of class was done on paper, with students taking notes on things like particles and energy, all of which Albus had no trouble understanding, but could not quite correlate to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Fairhart removed his wand from his robes and asked for the attention of the class. " I want you all to think about something" he said, twirling his wand in his fingers and staring down at his completely empty desk. " What can I do with this desk? Magically, I mean."

They all exchanged glances. He looked at them for a moment before continuing.

" Can I blow it up?"

They all nodded their heads, though even as they did so he answered his own question. With a casual wave of his wand, his desk exploded. Students held up their hands to protect them from the blast, but their professor had isolated it. The tiny fragments of wood had been magically contained in a small bubble, which then dropped to the floor.

" Of course I can" Fairhart said. " That was called *Expulso*. But now I ask, can I repair it?"

They all nodded their heads once more.

" *Reparo!*" he said, and the fragments- both small and big- reassembled themselves back into his desk, completely as it had been.

" Can I," Fairhart continued, " Make this desk not exist?"

Some of them nodded. Milton Parish then said " You could vanish it".

" Indeed I could. But it would still exist, wouldn't it? *Evanesco!*"

He gave his wand yet another wave and this time his desk vanished completely. " Where is it?" Fairhart asked. " Where did it go?"

No one said or did anything, they all merely grinned, waiting for an answer.

" The answer, students, is that it went everywhere. And nowhere as well..."

The class finally did something other than nod. Many of them had raised their eyebrows and exchanged confused looks with their friends. Morrison scratched at his chin vigorously, trying to understand.

" Most wizards would tell you that vanished objects are gone. How? By magic, of course!" Fairhart said. " And with that lies one of the more problematic things about being a wizard. Magic becomes our explanation, our reason for everything. What few realize or ever bother to care to learn is that magic is energy- raw energy carried in our bodies, capable of doing incredible things. Magic is a science, you see, and science is a branch of magic. Muggles do not understand magic because the things that we can do seem impossible to them- they lack the innate energy. Even wizards fail to see how some things work, primarily citing different wands and such. This is foolish. A wand is but an instrument, a tool. A stick with a magical core within it meant to help us channel and harness our magical energy. Thus, enough practice and skill can result in wands not even being necessary, though they certainly are always beneficial.

" And now allow me to explain vanished objects. The science behind it is that this desk is matter- and made of smaller particles. When I vanish an object, I break it down into small particles called atoms; so miniscule that they cannot be seen. The desk still very much exists, it is just in billions of pieces. When I restore it, the atoms are reassembling themselves.

Apparation works similarly. Many believe that " Magic means you can teleport". This is both not eloquent and extremely unintelligent. When disappearing, we use our magical energy to break ourselves down into these atoms. The mind- that which is so powerful it is always intact- then tells these atoms to regroup themselves, and through pure determination and mind power, we are able to focus on a destination in which to reassemble, thus apparating to that destination."

The class stared blankly; Albus was quite sure that few of them had the slightest idea what he was talking about. A few Ravenclaws had nodded their heads in agreement, as though they had already known this and were further establishing it, though Albus knew that this was done to keep their house known as a dwelling for the intelligent. Oddly, Albus was not lying to himself when he said that he understood all of it. Had he not said months ago that magic was a science?

Fairhart continued after the class had soaked this in. He waved his wand and the desk reappeared.

" Of course, there are more variables to it, such as our ability to control this power, and there is energy- like our emotions- that is relevant. But I teach you this for two reasons. One, it is important to understand that this means that magic leaves traces. Whether it be the ominous trace of a curse or the happy after feeling of a patronus, magic stays behind. Had you waved your hand over where that desk was, eventually you would have begun to realize that something did indeed exist there, even it was scattered. And second, it's fun to learn. I was fortunate enough to briefly live with muggles, and science helped improve my magical knowledge immensely. Few things are more rewarding than learning and understanding something.

" And now, a homework assignment. Twelve inches of parchment on how *YOU* used to interpret magic. Due one week from today. No wrong answers of course, merely a thinking exercise-

The class collectively groaned, despite it being their first homework assignment of the entire year, and despite it coming in Spring. Fairhart chuckled at this.

" Come now students, it's not so bad! The quill is much mightier than the wand, after all! And much more comfortable in your pocket as well..."

The bell rang as he was saying this, and the students all shuffled out of the classroom, muttering as they always did after a Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Scorpius and Morrison immediately struck up a conversation about the lesson, though Albus, who would normally participate, stayed silent. For some reason, he did not want to talk about Fairhart. For some reason he now found him less trustworthy...

And still, however uncomfortable Defence Against The Dark Arts was, it was a far cry better than any class that he shared with Mirra. Her silence towards him was easily the thing that bothered him most now that he had some form of closure with Ares and the Foulest Book. She no longer partnered with him during Potions, which was unfortunate, as he could see her struggling, and she even appeared to talk to Rose and her Gryffindor friends less as well, which made Albus feel as though he was responsible for more than one broken friendship. Perhaps even worse was his confusion over what to do to solve this problem. She did not seem angry with him- rather upset with herself. Curiously, this frustrated him even further. If she was angry towards him and made it know, he could at least apologize. But as she was *upset* and rather distant from everyone, he knew that the situation was far too complicated for a simple " Sorry about our argument" to suffice.

For all of his pondering on what to do however, he now knew that things were in their worst shape in a while when it came to getting her to like him back. If anything, she was more likely to go back to Eckley. Indeed, the unfortunate proof of this unraveled itself right before his eyes during Care For Magical Creatures.

It was the Wednesday before the Quidditch Final, which would take place Saturday. Albus and his friends were walking slowly down the grassy slopes leading to the place where Hagrid normally taught; careful not to slip on the excess amounts of mud that the fierce end-of-March rain had brought them.

Scorpius and Morrison were bickering slightly. During lunch one of the older Slytherin girls had asked him how old he was, not believing him to be thirteen due to his size and facial hair.

Morrison had launched into a fantastic explanation of how it was hereditary, and how constant exercising and dieting had resulted in his relatively muscular physique. The charade had culminated in him rolling up his sleeves and flexing his moderately sized, but still far from impressive muscles.

"You're fat" Scorpius was saying blandly.

"How am I fat?" Morrison asked loudly. "I'm heavy-"

"- Because you're fat."

"- Because I have big bones. And I'm so tall. The rest of it is all muscle."

Scorpius laughed loudly. "Muscles don't hang off of your gut. You're tall because you've had a few early growth spurts. But you are far from muscular."

"I am too! And it has nothing to do with how I've grown, I was exercising all summer! Push up's and sit up's and-"

"Bollocks. You did one push up, gave up, and ate a candy bar. You're fat."

Most of the argument proceeded like this; Albus finally tuned it out when Scorpius accused his mustache of being fake as well- resulting in Morrison criticizing Scorpius for looking like he was nine. Albus' lack of attention was not all dependent on this however. He was eyeing the area near Hagrid's cabin with interest.

They were late to class, and thus everyone else was already there. The Gryffindor's and Slytherin's however, who normally stayed as far away from each other as possible, had formed a great big circle around what Albus could only assume was Hagrid. When they reached the group, he knew why.

Hagrid was not alone in the giant circle- he had brought five creatures with him. Albus should have expected this, as they had just finished studying Grindylows, but he was surprised at the sheer size of the beasts in front of him.

"Hippogriff's!" Hagrid announced happily. "Aren't they beau'ful?"

Beautiful was certainly one word to describe them, even if Albus would have personally called them bizarre. He knew of Hippogriffs from his parents- his father had mentioned them several times before. He had described them then as looking like eagles and horses mixed together, and now that Albus could see them up close in person, he thought that was the most accurate description he'd ever heard. Their torso's and back legs seemed to favor the horse part- but the heads, front legs, and (obviously) wings were uncannily that of an eagles. Their brilliant orange eye's seemed to dazzle in the sunlight, with their sharp steel colored beaks pointed right at the ground as they grazed around Hagrid.

They were all different colors, though four of them were quite small, roughly the size of the students. This included a dark green one, an inky black one, and two chestnut one's that may have been brother's. The fifth and final Hippogriff was much bigger, maybe even twice the size, and was a color in between blue and gray. This one seemed to be much more trained than the smaller one's, for it was standing quite stationary next to Hagrid.

"Now these four here," he said, motioning to the four small Hippogriff's with his massive hand, "Are all new borns. They like stretchin' their legs a bit, seein' as how they can't fly an' all, so I'm lettin' 'em graze around me today. This one here", he said, patting the larger one it's back, "Is one of the oldest in the herd. His name is Buckbeak, or Witherwings, whiche'r one you prefer."

"Why does he have two names?" Donovan Hornsbrook asked.

"Long story" Hagrid said shortly. "Now, the first thin' that you have to know about Hippogriff's is that they're proud. Yeh can't insult them, or do anthin' that could be takin' as an insult. If you do, yer in fer a world of hurt, they're mighty powerful. So when yeh approach them, yeh have to bow yer heads down and do it cautiously. It wants you to be scared, see? But once it trust's you, yer all in the clear. They're fiercely loyal."

The class all looked around at each other. Approach them?

"Come on up in groups of two" Hagrid said, beaming at them. "The smaller one's aren't as dangerous, and Beaky here knows better. Be frightened, but not terrified. Yeh can stay back and just look at them before it's yer turn. Any takers?"

"I'll do it" Morrison said, as though it were the easiest thing in the world. He stepped forward and Hagrid grinned at him.

"Pick yerself someone to join ya" he said.

Morrison turned around and indicated Albus. At first, Albus turned to see why Scorpius hadn't been picked, but then saw that Scorpius had moved himself to the back of the crowd in fear. Albus groaned and joined Morrison in walking forward. The crowd was awfully silent now.

Morrison began to move towards the dark green one, but Hagrid stopped him.

"Olive is a bit timid" he said gruffly. "Why don't you try out Beaky?"

He then led them both towards Buckbeak, who was still standing quite still.

"Bow yer heads now..."

Albus did as he was told instantly, but to his very great surprise, saw that Buckbeak had already bowed down. The class collectively clapped. Morrison then made to pet him, but Buckbeak took a step back and eyed him wearily.

"You have to bow Morrison!" Hagrid said cautiously.

"Al didn't!"

"Well I reckon he likes Al a bit then, don' he? Go on an' give 'em a pet Al!"

Albus swallowed and moved forward another few inches. He reached out his hand and began petting Buckbeak's head. It opened and closed its eyes lazily as though it were relaxing at his mere touch. It then stooped down and allowed him to pet its back.

Hagrid clapped, and the students followed. "Alright" he said. "Sort yourselves into two's, an' I'll call yeh up so you can pet 'em. Remember to bow and not to insult 'em..."

Amidst all the chattering of the students now sorting themselves up, Hagrid bent down close to him and whispered "Figured Beaky'd take a likin' to yeh. He an' your dad go way back."

Albus stared into Buckbeak's orange eyes, somewhat soothed by the way it was allowing him to pet him. He remembered that his father had told him that his wand core came from a Hippogriff. Could this be the same one?

Morrison was still hunched over; he had bowed down the second that Hagrid had told him to.

"Hagrid!" he said in a strained voice. "Can I- can I stand straight-"

But Hagrid was not paying attention, he was busy making sure that his students were safe.

"Rosie, yer takin' Olive?" he asked. "I gotta warn you, he's a bit of a nancy... How about' you Mirra? You and Charlie have Skytrotter? Okay, he's a bit *too* proud though, try an' stay bowed down.."

Albus turned his head in an instant. Mirra and Eckley were bowing down next to the inky black one, which was eyeing them with interest. Albus watched as it eventually bowed down. Both of them began gently petting it, and Eckley began telling a story about how this was not the first time that he had seen a Hippogriff- his older brother Clarence apparently owned three of them and let him ride them.

Albus scoffed at them, though he did little more, as they were awfully close. He was still petting Buckbeak, who was now laying down and enjoying it a great deal. Morrison was also petting him- albeit a bit more scarcely. Scorpius had emerged from the back of the crowd, eager to take part now that he knew that he wasn't in danger, but had stopped almost instantly. For a single second, Buckbeak had given him a very evil look.

Albus heard Mirra giggle and turned back to them. Eckley had apparently said the funniest thing in the world. He realized that this was the first time he'd see her smile in weeks. As they were petting their Hippogriff, Albus saw his hand surreptitiously touch hers just slightly, though not quite enough to be anything more than friendly...

Buckbeak seemed to sense his anger towards him. It looked over at the pair of them, then snapped its beak viciously before turning back and giving him a look that clearly said "Do you want me to take care of him?"

Morrison seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He knelt down and muttered to Albus "

Mate, I know that you're a seeker and all, but you have *got* to knock him off of his broom Saturday!"

Albus awoke the Saturday of the Quidditch Final well rested, confident, and eager to play. Atticus had given them a rousing speech during their last practice and told them that to ensure their health, that would be the last practice before the game. Albus had purposefully skipped over a gargantuan mountain of homework so as to make sure that he got enough sleep, and it had paid off. By breakfast time, he was sharp and strong. And hungry.

"Pass me that toast? Thanks mate. Morrison I need the marmalade when you're done."

He piled his plate high with toast, sausages, and scrambled eggs, ignoring the looks he was getting.

"You okay mate?" Morrison said, handing over the marmalade. "You normally don't eat this much."

"I'm fine" Albus said. "Just hungry. Want to be well fed, that's all." Morrison resumed eating, though Scorpius looked up from The Prophet. "You're not nervous?" he asked. "At all?"

Albus shook his head, pleased to see that the familiar feeling of lying was no where to be found in his gut. Over the past few days he had realized that every problem in his life he could do nothing about. Ares and the Foulest Book, Mirra, all of it. The one thing that he could do, however, was win the Quidditch Final. He could beat James.

Breakfast continued in silence after this, Albus scarping down every last remnant of food on his plate. James' arrogance was still ringing in his ears. *Don't fret- you'll have your shot at the torch after I graduate.*

He grinned to himself. This match may be friendlier than their previous one, but he was still burning to win.

He joined his team in the locker room minutes later, and he was the first one (apart from Atticus) to be dressed. As his team pulled on their Quidditch robes, Atticus paced back and forth in front of them, occasionally making to speak but then stopping and taking a deep breath. Finally, when they were all dressed, he turned to them and stood still.

"My last game" he said. "Win or lose- this is my last game. My last shot at the cup. What happens here- today- in the next hour or so, is what I will remember about being on the Slytherin Quidditch team for the rest of my life. Are we prepared?"

The entire team yelled incoherently. Even Albus, who frequently stayed quiet in his determination, gave something of an inarticulate screech.

"How hard have we worked?" Atticus bellowed next, his voice louder than it had been.

More incomprehensible yells. Albus felt his throat burning, he was suddenly parched.

"Do we bring the cup back to Slytherin?"

Amongst all the cries of 'Yes!' Albus heard his own feeble "Yeah", and at the next moment, they were all stampeding the field, not even bothering to walk in an organized manner.

"And here comes the Slytherin team!" Carter Montgomery's voice rang out. "Sanders, Orik, Peesley, Nott, Parcher, Rawn, annnnnnd Potter!"

Albus could barely contain the excitement in his chest as he took his position on the field. The loud chorus of "boo's" did nothing to deter him. For amidst all of them, he knew that people- however few- were cheering his name.

The Gryffindors emerged from the other side of the field next, and as defending champions, Montgomery announced each of their names much more vehemently than he had any Slytherin's. This didn't bother Albus in the slightest. Ravenclaw had had all the momentum in their last game as well...

The Gryffindors took their position's on the field after a lengthy applause, made only longer by Eckley, who had stopped to bow in all four directions. When he caught sight of Albus, he smiled with malicious intent. Albus smirked back.

He then saw James give him a wink from behind his team, and at the next second, the whistle had blown. The Quidditch Final had begun.

Albus shot upwards through the air, the cold wind smacking against his face and blinding him momentarily. He knew that this was a battle of Seekers. According to the points, all that he had to do was catch the Snitch when Gryffindor wasn't at least eighty points up, and easy feat considering that their offense was far from bad.

As Albus had anticipated, James had returned to the strategy that he had used in the first game of the season- hiding behind the goalposts and keeping an eye out for the Snitch undisturbed. Albus did not let this brilliant strategy bother him however, he simply aimed to counter it. Staying near his own goal posts, he flew down so low that his robes skimmed the grass. As long as his brother was at a distance and looking skyward, Albus would make sure that he could not be seen. This way, if he did get a good jump at the Snitch, his brother would realize it way too late to do anything about it.

Both strategies proved to be futile however; unlike in his previous game, the Snitch was not making itself visible. Most of the action it seemed was going on near the goalposts, and Slytherin was on the worse end of it.

Finnigan, the star chaser on Gryffindor, had scored four consecutive times against Nott.

Meanwhile, Atticus was the only one who had managed to take a shot on Lanely, and it had been knocked aside with relative ease.

" Gryffindor still up forty to nil, Nott has to keep an eye on the left goal post!" Carter announced.

Albus was still floating near the grass, his eyes scanning the pitch without blinking. Twice he saw James make a sudden movement, but both times he was dodging a stray Bludger. And with Bludgers on his mind, one just narrowly missed him. He felt the vibration of the small black ball slam against the grass, and flecks of dirt came up, some of them hitting him square in the face as he steered his broom around. Eckley was hovering above him, his Beater's Bat still in the striking position. Albus wobbled for a moment, and came very close to losing his grip. Eckley saw that he had been momentarily disoriented and smirked at him.

" Steady now. Or are you scared, Potter?"

Albus rose a few inches of the ground, completely unintimidated. " You wis-"

He was cut off by the sound of the whistle however. Mr. Wood had flown to the center of the pitch.

" Penalty on Gryffindor" he said. " Finnigan- Cobbing. Excessive use of elbows."

Albus flew to the side of the pitch to allow Atticus to take his penalty shot. He scored. It was now forty to ten.

The match resumed, as did Eckley's determination to knock him off of his broom.

Unfortunately for Eckley however, Albus had now decided to take the offensive in his quest for the Snitch, and was now circling the pitch at top speed while Bludgers were hopelessly and inaccurately hit towards him.

" And once more, Charles Eckley is eager to do his job! He's knocking bludgers towards Potter left and right!"

Albus barely heard Carter's comment however, the wind was now whistling in his ears as he sped towards James, who had finally gotten a jump on the Snitch. Thankfully, he was considerably far away- Albus could still catch up to him.

He urged his broom to go faster, nearly knocking Connie Orik off of her broom as he shot by her, closing in on James, who was less than twenty feet away from the Snitch.

He managed to make it side by side with his brother, though he was unsure if James even knew this. He had a look of ferocious intensity on his face, and as he inched closer to his prize, his mouth curled itself into a smile...

Albus bumped into him. Nothing illegal, but certainly effective. James slowed down slightly as he tried to regain his composure. Albus heard Carter yell something about "Solid defence", but it was lost in the sickening pain that Albus felt in his shoulder. Bumping into James had certainly worked, but he thought that he may have caught the wrong part of one of his brother's pads. Regardless, the threat was over. The Snitch was nowhere to be seen.

What followed in the twenty minutes after this was one of the most brutal games that Albus had ever seen, let alone participated in. As the Chasers scored more, the Beaters seemed more determined than ever to harm their opponents. Twice Albus saw Patrick Parcher hit a lethal bludger towards a chaser that did not have the Quaffle, odd considering that the person wasn't even technically a threat at the time. Holden Rawn, the other Beater, had even smacked his bat against James' broom, an illegal move that awarded Gryffindor a penalty shot and also created a five minute shouting match in which Albus' brother had looked quite close to jinxing Rawn in mid-air.

Indeed, as Albus scoured the pitch looking for the Snitch, he realized he was one of the few people not breaking the rules, or at least playing dirty. It was as though the longevity of the match, coupled with the desire to win the championship, had made both house teams treat each other with something of a suppressed hatred; a feeling of enmity that had previously been blocked but was now clearly visible. Nott had held the Quaffle for at least two minutes before throwing it back into play, allowing his Chasers to be very close to the Gryffindor goal posts before even having possession - something not quite illegal, but still frowned upon. Hale and Rodners, the other two Gryffindor Chasers, had both elbowed Damian Peesley in the face, creating a " Double Cobbing" violation that allowed Atticus to take two penalty shots, both of which he made.

And yet, thirty minutes into the match, the Snitch continued to elude him. Both times he had seen it hovering closer to James, and Albus knew that if he attempted to chase after it James would notice and get there first. In between glances for the Snitch however, Albus was forced to dodge Bludger after Bludger from an unrelenting Eckley.

Twice now the Bludger had made contact, though thankfully Eckley's aim was so poor and Albus so talented that it had only managed to graze him. Still, Albus noted that it did distract

him, and thus, Eckley was performing his job admirably. While the other Beater was intent on helping his Chasers, Eckley had stayed on him the entire game, and this had predictably earned him thundering applause from his house.

Albus was not stupid, he knew that this had more to do with their personal troubles than it did any game of Quidditch. Eckley was undoubtedly hoping that he could bounce his way back into Mirra's favor by knocking the person whom she had argued with off of his broom. Several times Albus allowed his mind to wander and think about if it would work, but he snapped back into reality soon after. He would not let thinking of Mirra take another game away from him.

" And Potter is after the Snitch!"

Albus was nearly paralyzed by these words. Somehow, out of the corner of his eye, he saw James accelerate. Albus dodged yet another Bludger from Eckley and sped after his brother, the crowd now cheering in anticipation of what could be the final play of the game.

All noise was blocked by the rushing of the wind. Gryffindor was only up one hundred and thirty to one hundred and ten, meaning that Albus could catch the Snitch and win them the game. James was not stupid- he knew this. He must've been quite certain that the Snitch was in his reach if he was blatantly attempting to catch it...

Albus urged his broomstick faster, swerving through players from both teams, ducking yet another bludger hit by Eckley (who was now off in the distance), and steadily rising so as to match his brother. The Snitch continued to hover higher and higher, as though it knew that it's capture was imminent. Soon enough, he was side by side with his brother, both of them bumping into one another as they soared upwards.

" That Snitch is going higher, and those brother's are following it! They'll be past the clouds soon!"

The Snitch then started to drop, and both Albus and his brother were forced to skid to a halt so high up in the sky that they could barely hear the people cheering below. After turning their broomsticks downward, they bolted through the sky in an identical diving motion, once more neck and neck as their shoulders bumped into one another.

James was going to get it. Albus' superior broom was going to work against him. As he steadily overtook his brother in the dive, he realized just how close to the ground the Snitch was. The only way for him to catch it at the speed he was going would be to crash into the ground and hope that it fell into his hands. James, who was now a few feet behind him, was keeping his speed steady, making sure that when he did near the ground, he would be able to steer away at the last second. The only way for Albus to catch the Snitch first was to catch it at a slower speed, and to do that, he needed to make sure that James was out of commission- incapable of getting it regardless of how fast he was going.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Eckley speeding towards them, his bat cocked back and a Bludger seconds from crossing his path. All other players on the field seemed to stop what they were doing, knowing that the game was out of their hands now. Eckley still had his bat cocked back, ready to knock it towards him and clear the patch for James...

And then it came to him. He did not how he knew what to do, he just knew that he had to do it. Eckley was going to hit that Bludger no matter what. It didn't matter who else was there. He just wanted Albus on the ground.

Albus decelerated. What was once a considerable lead over his brother diminished, they were now neck and neck once more. James gave him a sideways glance, confused.

" What are you playing at?" he asked, his voice nearly blocked out by the wind. They were both nearing the ground now, the Snitch was hovering just above the blades of grass...

Eckley saw that Albus had slowed down and knocked a bludger towards him. Albus smirked, he decelerated further, and the bludger whizzed by him, just an inch over his head, knocking into James instead. Albus watched as his brother spiraled out of control.

" And the Gryffindor Beater makes a mistake there! He aimed for one Seeker and accidentally got the other! Potter goaded him into it and he took the bait!"

Eckley was hovering in mid-air now, a look of disbelief of what he had done on his face. Albus was now in the clear, James was still trying to regain control of his broom. He now knew that he could go at any speed he wanted to. He casually floated to the ground and the scooped the Snitch up into his hands; he felt his own lips curl into a smile.

" SLYTHERIN WINS! Albus Potter catches the Snitch after the Gryffindor Beater eliminates his own Seeker! Slytherin wins their first Quidditch Cup in a decade!"

His feet hit solid ground and he threw his broomstick on the floor as his team tackled him. The noise from the crowd was louder than any that he had ever heard. All of the booing, all of the

cheering, it blurred itself together into noise that Albus did not understand or bother to care about. The Snitch was still fluttering in his fingers. Atticus approached him as the Slytherins in the stands joined them in the center of the pitch. For a moment, he looked as though he was going to cry, but he maintained his composure and merely outstretched a hand, which Albus shook vehemently.

Carter Montgomery was still speaking, though Albus wasn't listening. The other three houses had all began to trudge back to the castle, clearly disappointed with the result. And yet, some of the Gryffindors stayed behind. He saw Lily clapping and whistling; clearly not caring which of her brothers won. Molly and Lucy were cheering too, and even the shy Hugo was clapping a bit. Fred, a bit more competitive than his cousins, was merely grinning wryly, but it was a grin nonetheless. Albus waved to them. He did not see Mirra or Rose in the crowd, but he was too elated to pay it much mind. He had won the cup.

The weight of his teammates was nearly crushing him now, and through the gap of peoples arms he could see Professor McGonagall walking out onto the pitch, the gleaming Quidditch Cup held high in her hands. Albus felt his insides burning with euphoria...he would soon be raising that cup above his head as well.

But he wanted to hold something else first. He looked behind him and saw the Gryffindor team marching back to their locker room in silence. A few people were patting James on the back, for he had played a good game, but even James looked crushed. As if he could see his brother looking at him however, he spun around.

Albus smiled at him, and James smiled back. Then, realizing why his brother was staring at him, James held out his hand as though holding something. With an almighty heave, he threw something into the crowd of Slytherins.

Albus held out his hand and caught the invisible torch, grinning at his brother as he did so.

Chapter 18: The Trap

Albus was all smiles for the next few weeks. Even with the pressure of his impending exams, even with still having not talked to Mirra, Albus found it extremely hard to do anything other than grin. A small applause accompanied him every time he entered the common room. Older students, who he had never before talked to, clapped him on the back as he went by. And as an added bonus, most of the Gryffindors that he encountered gave him malicious looks, something that only increased his feeling of belonging in his own house.

All in all, it was a radically similar situation to the one that Albus had been in the previous year, before he had been banned from the last game of the season, that is. At that point he had been something of a celebrity as well, and gladly enjoying the fame. And, like in that situation, Morrison was taking full advantage of the fact that they were friends.

" I won't go as far as to say I taught him *everything* he knows" Morrison said loudly. " I mean, the kid is just naturally gifted. But some of the finer points of his technique- yeah those came from me."

Albus rolled his eyes from across the common room. Morrison had been telling lies for an hour now. He was talking to Melonie Grue, a pretty blonde girl in their year with a pointy nose and a very prominent chin. As far as Albus knew, she had never even spoken to Morrison before.

" So are you going to try out next year?" she asked him breathlessly, her face extremely close to his as he relaxed in the stone cut armchair.

" Probably" Morrison said cockily. " I mean, I'll have to ask Al first" he said, nodding his head in Albus' direction. " I'm a good player, but I'm a modest player. Well, a *great* player, but a modest player. I'd never try and steal his thunder or anything like that..."

Albus rolled his eyes once more and turned back to Scorpius, who had placed his palm to his face in embarrassment over Morrison.

" What were you saying Al?" he asked after another moment.

" I was saying that there's one Hogsmeade trip left" Albus said. " And I was asking you if I should ask Mirra to go with me."

Scorpius rubbed his chin. " That's kind of a big leap, considering you haven't talked to her in forever. If it makes you feel any better, she's not going with Eckley."

" How do you know that?"

" I talked to Rose yesterday. Apparently, they left the game early because she was sick of seeing Eckley knock bludgers towards you. To be honest mate, you probably should have gotten hit by one on purpose..."

Albus frowned and thought deeply about his situation. The last Hogsmeade trip of the year was on the eleventh of May. About a month before term ended. He had to take the risk now. What if they went into the summer not even being friends?

" Wait, when did you talk to Rose?" Albus asked, distracted.

" Bumped into her in the library" Scorpius said, scratching his nose innocuously. " Just happenstance, really."

Albus was distracted from his thoughts once more however. A seventh year boy whom he had never spoken to had given him the thumbs up from across the room.

Albus wished that he was as successful with his classes as he was with his Quidditch endeavors. Exams were no longer looming threats or distant obstacles. The studying had intensified, and the homework had increased tenfold. Apart from Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts, Albus couldn't think of a single class that he was guaranteed to pass. Even Herbology had become a struggle.

" Nice and easy now" Neville was saying as he lowered the a Swedish Snapper seedling into a small brown pot. The tiny plant with a massive mouth and tentacle like vines snapped at Neville once before curling up into the dirt. " And the job is done!" he said. " Now I want all of you to draw a picture of the Swedish Snapper and label it's parts. I'll be returning some papers as you do it..."

Albus reached into his bag and pulled out his notebook. Within seconds he was a drawing a horribly inaccurate picture, though to be fair it wasn't quite as bad as Morrisons.

" Does this look right to you?" Morrison asked him, pushing his notebook over after only a few minutes of drawing.

Albus gave it a quick glance. " That looks like a banana mate."

Morrison frowned while Scorpius leaned over and glanced at it too. " A surfing banana" he added.

Morrison defended himself. " Well the seedling kind of looks like that though-"

He was cut off by Neville however, who was returning their papers on the properties of Aconite. Scorpius hastily stashed his " O" paper into his bag. Morrison grinned and did the same with his " A". When Neville gave Albus' paper back however, he placed it face down. Albus groaned and remembered that he had rushed this particular assignment at breakfast last week, having forgotten to even copy Scorpius'. He slowly glanced at his own garde and saw a bright red " P". He had done worse than Morrison.

After class they trekked back up the grassy slopes of the grounds, Albus bitterly commenting on how stupid Herbology was anyway, both of his friends silently nodding to placate him. He was just touching on the finer points of why he disliked the class, like the fact that they had dirt all over their hands, when he heard someone call them.

" Boys!"

All three of them turned and saw Professor Fairhart jogging towards them. He looked like he was coming back from the greenhouses. Had he been following them?

" Hello there" Fairhart said when he reached them.

" Erm..hi" Albus said, and his friends muttered hello's as well.

" Where are you boys headed now?" he asked them, and he began walking with them back to the castle.

" Lunch" Albus said plainly. " And then Transfiguration."

" Ah, right. With Barbara. Professor Bellinger, that is. Yes, I'm just on my way back to the castle as well, I'm teaching second years..."

They walked in silence, and Albus thought that he had never had a more awkward moment in his life. He and his friends were now walking side by side with their teacher, who had a very peculiar and sheepish grin on his face. He looked as though he was bursting to ask them something.

He finally said it. " So you kids going to the last Hogsmeade trip of the year?" he asked brightly.

Scorpius stared at him. " Yes" he said, answering for all three of them.

" Well the teachers have to monitor" Fairhart said, and there was something of an odd step to his gait now. " Is there going to be anywhere in particular that you're going to be? So that we

can stay out of your way, I mean. I know how much of a hassle it can be for students..." Now it was Morrison's turn to respond.

" We'll...just be around the village" he said, clearly perturbed by Fairhart's bizarre behavior and questions.

" So nowhere in particular then?" Fairhart asked.

" Well not for us, no" Scorpius said. " But a lot of people just hang out at The Three Broomsticks, really."

" The Three Broomsticks" Fairhart said. " Okay. Well- we'll stay away from there then!" he added with something of a reassuring grin. And with that, he hurried off towards the castle at a much faster pace.

" Okay" Morrison said after a few moments of silence. " If no one else will say it, I will. That was one of the weirdest thing to ever happen to me."

Albus explained to his friends all of his uneasy feelings about Fairhart, including how he seemed to be following his siblings as well, though it primarily fell on deaf ears. Scorpius passed it off as their teacher merely trying to make conversation with them, and Morrison agreed.

In the end, Albus was forced to acknowledge that his teachers odd behavior was merely the product of exams coming up, and over the next few days spent his time crammed in the common room, doing more work than he had all year in preparation for his upcoming tests. The idea that he was doing worse than Morrison had troubled him greatly.

" Alright, this doesn't make any sense" Albus said angrily, slamming *The Principles of Transfiguration* shut and sliding it across the floor. Scorpius kept his nose buried into his own book however, and didn't look up until he finished reading whatever chapter he was on at an exceptionally fast pace.

" Don't understand what?" Scorpius said, pulling the book towards him.

" All of it" Albus said darkly. " Gamps law's don't make any sense! How is conjuring food from somewhere any different from conjuring it out of thin air? Isn't this like fifth year work anyway?"

" It's just extra preparation for exams" Scorpius said. " Do you want to focus on something else? We've still got a load of Muggle Studies to do..."

" Fine" Albus sighed, and Scorpius reached towards the mound of books and pulled one out from the bottom.

" Okay" Scorpius said, turning to a random page. " I'll quiz you 'till Morrison gets back from the library. Question one. How do airplanes stay up?"

Albus rolled his eyes. " Who on Earth cares?" he said miserably. " Next question."

" Got it" Scorpius said, and he flipped through more pages. " Let's work on muggle history a bit. Who invented the light bulb?"

" Thomas something" Albus said, after racking his brains for a bit.

Scorpius shrugged. " Half credit" he said. " Who discovered electricity?"

" Leonardo da Vinci."

They both looked; it was Morrison. He was holding a large stack of books and looking exhausted. He dropped them all on the floor of the common room and took a seat down next to them.

" That is absolutely correct" Scorpius said, a look of astonishment on his pale and pointed face.

" Really?" Morrison asked, excited.

" No" Scorpius said dryly, the fake look of surprise on his face replacing itself with a nasty smile.

Morrison frowned and stretched himself out. " Oh man, carrying those things down seven floors was a hassle. But guess who I met at the library?" he added to Albus.

" Fairhart?" Albus asked, a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

" Nope. Mirra. She wants to know if you're still mad at her."

" *What?*"

" Oh you didn't know?" Morrison said. " You're mad at her and haven't been talking to her. She's been bent up over it a bit."

" I'm not mad at her" Albus said, narrowing his eyes and taking a book from the pile on the floor. He read the title. *Advanced Numerology- Magic, Numbers, and Magical Numbers*.

" Did you just pick up random books?" he asked his friend.

Morrison gave a small shrug. " I picked up stuff that looked hard. That's what these exams are supposed to be, right? But anyway, Mirra wanted to know if we'd all be up for hanging out at Hogsmeade."

Scorpius opened his eyes in shock, but it was nothing compared to Albus, who was staring with his mouth wide open, completely dumbfounded.

" Are you serious?" he asked. " She actually said that?"

Morrison nodded his head.

" After we didn't talk? After I lashed out at her like that?"

Once more, Morrison nodded. " Mate, I don't know what you want me to tell you. Girls are crazy."

Albus woke up very early the day of the Hogsmeade trip. Something of a cross between excitement and worry continued to flush through him, and his mouth continued to switch from a grin to a thin frown as he sat alone at the Slytherin table, eating a very lonely breakfast. Quidditch was behind him. He had set out to win the Cup, and he had done it. He and his brother were family once more- their relationship had been mended. Ares was still not caught, and his father was still going through turmoil at the Ministry, but those things were completely out of his hands. The only other thing that he had set out to do this year that he was capable of accomplishing was about to commence. He had to confess his feelings to Mirra, and get her to reciprocate them.

He had went over a game plan with his friends, something that would edge things in his favor during the duration of the trip. Scorpius had suggested that they get rid of Rose, and had thus offered to ask her to accompany him to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop. Meanwhile, Morrison would suddenly remember that he has to get Spellotape and would head to Dervish And Bangs. Then Albus and Mirra would be all alone to go to the Shrieking Shack; not the most romantic of places, but the least likely to be interrupted.

The plan itself was superfluous with meticulous details, and Albus only remembered the main parts of it, but Scorpius had done such a good job at explaining it that he felt confident in it. He nibbled on toast for what seemed like two hours, watching as his fellow housemates joined the table for breakfast, going over the plan silently in his head. For some reason, he knew that today was going to be a very big day.

" Don't eat too much" Morrison said from beside him as he and a yawning Scorpius joined him for breakfast; he was having his third helping of scrambled eggs and kippers. " You don't want to throw up all over her."

Albus ignored him and turned to Scorpius. " What do we do if Rose doesn't want to go with you?" he asked breathlessly. " Or if she invites those two prats?"

Scorpius shook his head and pulled a small plate of sausages towards him. " She won't invite them" he said breathlessly. " Not with things being so awkward between Mirra and Eckley. And if she doesn't want to head to Scrivenshaft's with me, we'll find some other way to ditch her. Don't worry mate, we've got your back on this."

Albus looked at Morrison, who gave a weak smile and nodded his head, his mouth too full of bacon to speak. Albus grinned at the effort that his friends were putting in to ensure that things went fine. He trusted them- he knew that everything was going to be okay.

They continued to eat their breakfast in silence, and then joined the rest of the students third year and above in lining up in the Great Hall. Neville was once more standing by the door, with the prefects organizing the students into lines to make things less of a hassle for their Herbology professor. Two lines away Albus could see Charles Eckley, looking very sulky standing next Donovan Hornsbrook. He knew why. Eckley wasn't nearly as popular with his fellow Gryffindors as Albus was with his housemates. No, all that Eckley was now was the kid who secured the Cup for Slytherin. Albus grinned at this and turned his attention back to Neville.

" Now remember," he was saying. " Anything passed Washburn street- that is to say, two streets down from the Hog's Head- is off limits. Stay in the sight of your professors. I will be monitoring, as will the other heads of houses. And stay in groups- three's and four's."

" What if you're on a date!" And older boy from Gryffindor shouted from the back of his line.
" Then make it a *double* date" Neville said simply. " Come on now, I need to see forms!"

The students all marched forward in an orderly fashion, Neville checking to make sure that their forms were all quite real and signed. Albus noticed his professor acting very strange when it was his turn however. Neville, after scanning his form, had looked for a moment as though he wanted to say something serious, but then apparently decided against it. Albus wasn't bothered however, he was far more focused on something else. Mirra and Rose were walking slightly ahead of him, stopping to look behind them for their company.

When Albus and his friends were all checked, they met with the Gryffindor girls. Unlike the time in which Ares had been sighted, no one was dressed for harsh weather. It was a clear and sunny day; one of the finer one's of the spring. Rose was dressed awfully similar to her Hogwarts clothes, though Mirra was wearing what looked like a very comfortable blouse. Her raven black hair, which normally hung in front of her face, had also been tied back into a neat ponytail. If Albus didn't no any better, he would have thought that she had put a great deal of thought into how she looked on this particular day.

" Hi" she said a bit meekly to him.

" Hi" he said back. They got no further than this however- Morrison had began walking and had called for them to catch up with him.

They exited the castle and made their way to the village with groups of students walking around them. Albus saw James walking with a bunch of friends near the front of the crowd, while Neville and Professor Flitwick were leading the way. The walk wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as Albus thought it would be. Most of it was talk of classes, with Morrison throwing in a joke every couple of minutes to keep things light. Albus barely talked, though when he did, Mirra always entered the conversation.

" I thought we'd head to The Three Broomsticks first" Rose said the second that they had entered the beautiful village.

" Ahh" Scorpius said quickly, and they all stopped and formed something of a semi-circle. " I was actually going to head to Scrivenshaft's first. I need new quills, new ink..."

Rose shrugged. " Okay, we'll catch up with you later."

Albus threw a quick, panicked look at his friend.

" Well...why don't you go with me?" Scorpius said. " I mean, we have to walk in groups, don't we?"

Rose raised her eyebrows at him. " Why me? Why don't you just go with Morrison and Albus? I want to meet James at the Three Broomsticks."

Albus watched as the plan crumbled in front of his eyes. Morrison came to the rescue.

" The Three Broomsticks sucks" he said quickly, and Rose gave him a startled look. Before she could argue however, Morrison had continued. " And Albus already told me he didn't want to go there. Why don't you just go there and meet James, and Scorpius can go on his own to Scrivenshaft's. He's a big boy, he'll be fine. And I'll walk around for a bit with these two" he added, jerking his head towards Mirra and a very tense looking Albus.

Rose mouthed at him wordlessly, apparently still shocked at his criticism of one of the most popular pubs in all of Britain. " I'm not going anywhere alone" she finally said. " So we can drop that idea-"

But to Albus' very great surprise, Mirra cut her off. " Then how about Scorpius walks you to The Three Broomsticks, then goes off to Scrivenshaft's on his own. I want to go to Honeyduke's anyway, and that's the other way."

" I want to go to Honeyduke's too" Albus said quickly, raising his hand up as though his opinion mattered. Morrison nodded in agreement.

Rose looked around at all of them, apparently confused as to why she wasn't in charge.

Eventually, she threw her hands up into the air. " Okay" she said. " Whatever. Scorpius, let's go."

Scorpius gave Albus the slightest of winks before walking off with Rose. They immediately began bickering, but Albus paid it no mind. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned to his two remaining friends. " Shall we go to Honeyduke's then?"

The three of them marched through the streets of Hogsmeade, chatting aimlessly as they watched their fellow students pop in and out of the shops. Albus found that he was extremely comfortable- Mirra didn't mention anything about their argument in the slightest. He supposed

that his friend had been right in declaring girls as crazy.

Morrison was at least tactful enough to stay behind them and mind his own business. He frequently stopped at random shops to "Poke his head in" so as to give Albus a chance to talk to Mirra by himself, and on more than one occasion he purposefully steered the conversation towards something in which he could not possibly participate.

Albus was doing okay as well, however. He had a long conversation with Mirra about the situation that his father was in at the Ministry, and she seemed very interested in Fairhart's apparent obsession with him.

"Well think" Mirra said. "Did you do anything suspicious? Something that he could be curious of?"

"Not really" Albus said truthfully. "I mean, I almost set Morrison on fire, but he already talked to me about that."

"You were almost set on fire?" Mirra said, turning around and looking at Morrison, who had been walking a few paces behind them.

Morrison shrugged. "It's no big deal, I've had worse happen. One time my sister glued thumbtacks to my hand while I was sleeping and tickled my face and I-"

"Wait" Albus said, cutting his friend off in mid sentence. He too had turned around, and he saw, in the distance, Fairhart. He was wearing a very dark cloak, and was apparently trying very hard to blend in with the crowd. He was having a very hard time of it of course, as people were staring at his utterly grotesque face, but he was seemingly oblivious to their stares. He had been watching them very intently. When Albus had made eye contact however, he had quickly turned his head away.

"What's up?" Morrison asked, also peering into the crowd of shoppers behind them.

"It's Fairhart" Albus groaned. "He's following us."

"So? It's their job, isn't it?"

Albus shook his head. "Not to follow just one group. Come on, let's ditch him."

"Ditch him?" Mirra said, and she suddenly looked worried. "Why? Where?"

"Because I don't like that he's following me" Albus said quickly, and he turned around and began walking briskly. "Come on, let's turn up here."

They continued walking, turning randomly every once in a while to throw their tail off. Albus did not like the fact that Fairhart was keeping an eye on him even in Hogsmeade. His old suspicions about his professor had returned. They all walked in silence, Albus having almost completely forgotten about their plan.

They reached the Hog's Head Inn, and Albus noted that they were very close to being out of bounds. They turned one more corner and ended up in a cobbled and dingy street filled with suspicious looking people, including, Albus saw, what looked like a few goblins. The shady characters and grimy environment made Albus strongly think they were in the bad part of Hogsmeade- almost like a Knockturn Alley of sorts.

"Can we stop now?" Morrison asked, panting. They had been walking at an exceptionally fast pace. "We lost him."

"But why did we have to?" Mirra asked. "Professor Fairhart is so nice. And he was an auror too, who's safer to be around than him? So what if he's had his eye on you and your brother and sister?" she added to Albus.

"I don't know" he said through gritted teeth. "I just don't want him following me, that's all." He peered through the crowd of people again. Before he could say anything else however, he saw another familiar face. A face that though not quite as ugly as Fairhart's, was far less welcome. It was a very plain, very bored looking face, one almost completely void of expression. It was Fango Wilde, the leak in the Ministry that his father had released from Azkaban.

"Al, what are you looking at?" Morrison asked, still panting.

Wilde was not looking over at them, he was merely standing still, his completely plain and black robes billowing in the wind. As the shoppers jostled passed him, he ran his hands through his perfectly parted black hair.

"That man" Albus said quietly. "That's Fango Wilde."

"That bloke that your dad let out?" Morrison asked, and Albus nodded.

"Wait, who?" Mirra asked.

Albus turned to her. "That guy over there, the real dull looking one. His name is Fango Wilde. He was in the Forest last year, when I chased after Ares. He got arrested, but my dad let him out for giving up names."

" Wait, isn't someone supposed to be tailing him?" Morrison said. " Isn't that what Scorpius said? That that's why they would let him out? To keep an eye on him."

Albus nodded, then looked around. They were still in a crowd of strange and untrustworthy people. There were certainly no aurors present. Wilde had somehow lost his tail.

As if on cue, Wilde finally turned to them. Though he was several groups of people away, they still managed to stare at each other with no problems. Albus recoiled slightly. Wilde gave a wide, malicious grin.

" Let's get out of here" Mirra said.

" Mate, we've got to go" Morrison added. " That guy's dangerous. Let's go tell someone he's out and about. We're out of bounds anyway..."

" No" Albus said simply. " If we leave now he'll get away."

" *Get away?*" Morrison asked incredulously. " Mate, are you out of your mind? What do you plan on doing?"

But Albus was far from out of his mind. No, he was thinking quite clearly. Wilde had managed to evade his Ministry tail, meaning that he was up to no good. This was Albus' chance. If he could just catch him- get him locked up again, then all the negative attention that his father had received for releasing him would vanish. It would be the first true step in getting his father's popularity back.

And without warning, he gave chase. The crowds of people all yelled as he bolted between them. An old lady dropped a basket of what looked like dragon liver, and several old warlocks yelled curse words at him as he bolted by them. Wilde ran as well, only corroborating the idea that he was up to no good.

" Albus get back here!"

The thundering of footsteps told him that Morrison and Mirra were running after him. Wilde proved to be extremely quick however, he was dodging the shoppers effortlessly, and what's more, he seemed to be following some sort of route. Albus sped passed more people, making several sharp turns down more dingy streets filled with dusty shops. He finally saw Wilde turn at a corner into an alleyway. He followed him.

Albus took a single look into the dark alleyway before turning into it as well. It was a dead end. Trash blew past him on the dirty stone floor, and the shoppers now a few streets away were nearly inaudible. Wilde was backed up against a wall. He took out his wand-

Albus was faster. He pulled his own wand out and cried "*Expelliarmus!*"

Wilde's wand was blasted from out of his hand. It hit the ground just a few feet away from Albus. He heard footsteps and knew that Mirra and Morrison had caught up with him.

" What are you doing?" Morrison said tensely, grabbing him by the robes. Albus shook him off. He still had his wand aimed at Wilde, who was still standing quite motionless against the wall. He had yet to say a word.

" Let's get out of here!" Mirra said. " We're too far from everyone else."

Albus ignored her. Something was very strange about the situation. He had just chased this man- who could very well go back to Azkaban- all throughout the outer rim of Hogsmeade. And after disarming him, he had made no attempt to continue fighting, or even to dive for his wand.

Albus took a few steps closer and bent down to pick up Wilde's wand.

" Albus don't!" both of his friends said, and they both grabbed on to his robes. Albus still managed to pick up the wand from the ground. It was very thin and long, but there was something most peculiar about it. It had even started to glow blue...

He saw Wilde grin at him, and the next moment, he was hurtling through space. All sound was blocked from his ears as his feet left the ground. Something was pulling him by the back of his neck. There was a swirling of strange colors and what felt like a gust of wind was spinning him rapidly. But he was not the only one. Morrison and Mirra were still grabbing on to his robes, holding on for dear life, and he knew that they too were hurtling, that they too had left the ground and were traveling with him, to wherever it was he was going...

He hit solid ground. He heard groans on either side of him and knew that Mirra and Morrison had landed as well. He made to get up, to see where he was, but that moment someone hit him cross the face with such force that he saw stars. He fell to the ground and his head banged against the floor. He heard two more loud thumps, a groan and whimper from his two

friends, and then a loud *crack!*

" Why'd you bring stragglers?" someone said. Albus vaguely recognized the voice, but his head was swimming with so much pain that he couldn't think who it was.

" It wasn't up to me" replied an airy and bored voice that Albus knew belonged to Fango Wilde. He felt Wilde pry his wand back from Albus' clenched fist. " They both latched on to him as he grabbed the portkey. Plan worked like a charm though- he went right after me. But I think that we may have a bit of a problem. It looks like I brought an adult."

" That's not an adult you idiot! It's a kid with a fake mustache!"

Albus was feeling too woozy and was in too much pain to make sense of the situation. He thought that he heard the words " adult" and " idiot", but that was it. He now recognized the menacing, maniacal voice though. It was Darvy.

Albus heard another thud and a loud groan and knew that Morrison had been hit once more.

" And the girl?" Wilde asked Darvy.

Albus felt Darvy bend down low to get a good look at Mirra. " Yeah, I know her too. That's Potter's girlfriend."

Albus felt his face grow red hot; this he managed to understand. Though he was still seeing stars and was still quite dizzy, he made to stand up. This proved to be a big mistake. Darvy kicked him in the stomach, and he fell over once more, now in ever more pain.

" No heroics Potter!" Darvy spat. " I'll deal with you in a bit!"

And with that, he seized Albus' wand. He could do little to defend himself. Though his vision was blurred, he could see that Morrison and Mirra were both laying on the floor as well. Where were they?

" Do you have the other one?" Wilde asked Darvy.

" Yeah. He brought a straggler too."

" Isn't there a third? A little girl?"

" Red said that we may not be able to get her. She's not old enough to go to the village. But two will do. It may even only take one. I handed the other one over to Red already anyway."

" What do I do with the spares?" Wilde asked.

" Put them in a room down the hall. There's one with a redhead girl already in there."

Albus' heart skipped a beat. *Rose.*

Albus heard a great deal of struggling and knew that Fango Wilde was dragging Mirra and Morrison out of the room. Occasionally, he heard another loud thump that told him that they were being hit for putting up a fight. Albus wished that he could do something, but the pain in his head made it hard for him to move. Finally, he felt Darvy pick him up and push him against the wall. Then he got a good look at his face.

Darvy looked horrible. His normally sleek, long blonde hair was more than just frizzy- it was tangled and matted with dirt. His skin was a dark gray color that indicated very little sunlight for the last year, and when he smiled sadistically his teeth were a bright yellow. Only his eyes- his electric blue eyes that seemed to encapsulate his insanity- remained the same.

" Hello Potter" he said icily. And Albus felt Darvy's fist collide with his face. He tasted the salt of his own blood in his mouth. " That's for telling your friend to kick me last year!" Darvy spat out.

He let go of him, and Albus was now slumped against the wall, his head lolling to the side from the pain that he was in. But all the while he was thinking, wondering. Where was he? Where were his friends? What was going to happen to them?

His vision returned to normal after a few moments of silence, and Albus was able to take in his surroundings. Not that there was much to take in. They were in a very small white room, with white tiles and white walls. A white door in the corner with a white doorknob. And that was it. Apart from Darvy ,who was looking at him with a look of utter loathing, there was nothing else in the room.

" Where am I?" Albus managed to moan, and he felt blood trickle from his mouth.

Darvy sneered and licked his lips, as if tasting his triumph. It seemed as though he wanted nothing more than for Albus to initiate conversation with him. With one swift motion, Darvy conjured a small silver chair from mid air. It was not unlike the one that Albus had once seen his father throw at Ares' cell. Darvy set it up across from him and sat down in it.

" You're in the Department of Mysteries Potter. And in case you can't decipher the meaning

behind that, I'll make it clear. You're not getting out of here. And no one is coming in to help you."

"What to do want with me!" he yelled. "What do you want with my friends!"

Darvy looked shocked. "I want nothing from you. No, no, nothing at all. But you see, my brother needs you. Or he might, it really depends on if your brother has enough in him to survive the process..."

"What are you doing to him!" Albus shouted, surprised at how loud his voice could be. He had never been more afraid in his life. Where was James? What process?

"I really wish you'd stop accusing me" Darvy said with a nasty smile. "I'm not doing anything."

Albus raised his hand, unsure of what he planned on doing with it. Perhaps he meant to take a swing. But Darvy was much too quick. He had removed his wand from his robes and given it a slight wave. Albus felt it as large, iron chains burst from the wall behind him and coiled themselves around him, keeping him pressed against the wall. The chains had wrapped him at the shoulders, and now he was incapable of raising his arms. In fact, he was nearly incapable of moving at all.

"I said no heroics!" Darvy said. He scooted a bit closer on the chair. "I have to admit" he continued, "I'm glad I'm seeing you again though. I'm glad that I'm the one who gets to hurt you."

Albus swallowed the blood from his mouth and began shaking uncontrollably. His fear had been replaced by complete and absolute anger. He wished that he could do something other than shake.

"You know, I had heard stories of how meddlesome the Potter's could be" Darvy said. "What with all the tales of the adventures that your father got himself into...but I never thought that anyone could be such a nuisance. Of course, that was before you, wasn't it, you nosy little brat?"

Albus continued to breathe deeply and shake violently. He didn't bother answering the obviously rhetorical question.

"Do you know how it feels, Potter?" Darvy went on. "Do you know how it feels, to eat three square meals a day, and sleep in a *very* comfortable, warm bed? And then to run! To eat once a week? To have not slept in days? To have to break into a muggle house just to use the bathroom? Do you! Do you know what it's like! ANSWER ME!"

Darvy hit him across the face once more, but before Albus' head could even finish turning he had grabbed him by the chin and pulled it back. Then he moved his own face dangerously closer, and Albus noted that his breath was horrid.

"You just had to interfere, didn't you Potter? Play the hero, like your daddy? What made you follow my brother, huh? What business did you have, doing all that research on the Dragonfang Wand, trying to ruin a good thing? No one was getting hurt! No one was getting hurt when we were meeting in the Forest! But *NO*. Precious Potter had to come along, and save the day! And now I'm on the run!"

Albus came very close to spitting the blood from his mouth back in Darvy's face. Instead, he finally spoke.

"What were you doing there anyway?" he asked, his voice shaking. "Why couldn't you have just stayed a teacher? All the students loved you...what are you doing with Ares anyway..." But Darvy gave a malicious laugh. "Me? A teacher? Potter, use your head. I gave you idiots puzzles and told you how to brew potions. Passed it off as life lessons. And you lapped it up. No...no, I'm destined for far greater things than teaching brats how to brew cough medicine. Far greater things..."

Darvy stood up from the chair and turned around. "You don't understand Potter, you don't know. You can't know, you could never know. Or *do* you know?" he said, turning around to face him.

"I know that you're a complete psycho!" Albus blurted out, sounding a lot braver than he felt.

Darvy sneered. "Yes...insane. But only to those who can't understand."

There was another moment of silence. Darvy then resumed speaking. " Why do you think I'm here right now, Potter? Do you think I'm blindly following my brother, like those idiots who think that he supports the dark arts? You think I'm one of his henchmen? One of his little foot soldiers? No, I have a different reason for being here. I'm here because big things are going to happen."

He swooped down upon him, and his face was once more dangerously close. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle psychotically as he blinked furiously.

" You were born into the history books Potter. You don't know what it's like- what it's like to be nothing. To be no one. I wandered for so long. Went nowhere, everyday. And then *he* showed up. Told me he had a plan. Told me that everything was going to change. And I took my chance."

Darvy stood up straight, and there was something dignified about him as he said these next words. " There are sixty seconds to every minute. And sixty minutes to every hour. Twenty four hours to every day, and only so many days in our lives...so many days to make something of yourself. I am not like so many before me, who sought immortality, no, that is a fools dream, I embrace my mortality! I embrace it with the knowledge that there is more than one way to live forever!"

Albus could do nothing but stare at him. This man was nothing short of demented. He supposed that he had always known of course, Darvy was known for being eccentric, but Albus now felt more fooled than ever before. The charade that this man had put up was mind boggling.

Albus stared into the face of his former professor, the hungry and psychotic blue eyes and the crooked smile that Albus had once respected so much. He had admired that grin, had looked forward to seeing it every Friday afternoon. And now he hated it. Loathed it as much as he loathed the man who was standing across from him.

Darvy bent down low once more, and his voice, which had grown dramatically higher, returned to normal. " My brother is going to start a revolution" he said. " And people will finally know my name. They will look at the chaos after I have died, and they will say that they knew that man. That man who only death could stop. That man who did *so much*."

" But why not do good!" Albus shouted, and he did not know why he was arguing, or even trying to reason with someone as mentally unstable as Darvy. Perhaps he was trying to bide his time. " Be known for good things!"

Darvy gave a derisive laugh. " Typical teenage words. You have not yet learned that infamy is far more valuable than fame. And harder to achieve. Grindelwald, Voldemort, who were these people? Their names are only remembered now in conjunction with the people who defeated them! They are nothing without their conquerors! Just stains on history! But that will not be my case. No one is stopping me. I have no conqueror. A war is brewing Albus Potter, and by the wars end, I will still be standing. And then people will know...they will know that the hero doesn't always win. They will know that Sebastian Darvy was a greater man by far than any hero or villain, no, he was in a class all his own.."

" But no one gives a damn about you!" Albus spat. " It's all your brother! Read the papers, you maniac! Ares this, Ares that. You're just the accomplice! Why- you're worth two hundred galleons less!"

Albus did not know what made him say it, did not know what had made him remember the wanted posters that he had seen over the summer. He had not expected these words to have any effect at all on Darvy either. But apparently they had. The grin on his face had slid off at these words. He looked quite close to raising his hand again. But he didn't. When he spoke, it was hardly more than a whisper.

" My brother may be the center of attention for now" he said quietly. " But soon...soon they will step back and see the bigger picture."

And with that, he turned his back and began walking towards the door. He turned his head to speak however.

" Now, my dear brother told me not to hurt you too severely. But he had no idea that you'd be bringing guests. So I guess that their fate is up to me..."

" No-"

" Oh yes" Darvy said, his smile returning. " I suppose I'll have my fun with them until you're

needed. The Cruciatus Curse should do it."

" No!" Albus practically begged. " Please- they didn't do anything."

" I am not unreasonable Potter" Darvy said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. " The last one to scream gets to keep their life."

" No! Please-"

He struggled against the chains. His head no longer hurt from the blows, but this was a small consolation to the pitiful position he was now in. Darvy reached into his pocket and showed him his wand. He then tossed it into the corner of the room, far too out of reach for someone who was chained to a wall.

" There's your wand" he said. " You could save them. If you weren't so weak..."

And with that, he left the room, leaving Albus to struggle against the chains in vain.

Chapter 19: The Awakening

How long did he sit there for? Five minutes? Ten? An hour? A day? Albus didn't have the slightest clue as to how much time had transpired. As he sat there, slumped against a solid wall, bound to it by massive chains and exhausted from struggling against them, the taste of his own blood in his mouth, Albus could think of nothing else. Nothing.

It was all his fault. He had been foolish enough to chase after Fango Wilde, had been foolish to not realize that it was all a trap. But his own life was not the cost. For just a few rooms away, his friends were seconds from being murdered. It had possibly already occurred.

He hated Darvy. He *hated* him, and he didn't care how strong that word was, or what the true meaning was behind it. All he knew was that he despised Darvy with every fiber in his body. And this did nothing to help him. Nothing to stop the inner torment that he felt at being responsible for so much.

Just as it had happened after viewing his fathers memories, thoughts were connecting in his head, providing him with sickening revelations. He had seen Fairhart moments before encountering Fango Wilde. Had the two not been friends? Had Fairhart not specifically asked where Albus was going to be? A plot, a giant scheme orchestrated to get Albus kidnapped. And his friends- due to their courage, due to their will to help him, had been caught in the middle. He thought of Morrison, who had orchestrated a scheme of his own to help his friend. Of Mirra, who had been better off not talking to him again, better off not even being near him on this day. Of Rose, who he had gotten rid of because he wanted time alone with his crush. Rose, who had met up with James and been kidnapped as well.

James. Albus' stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch at the thought. Of everyone that was now in danger, it was James whose death was almost certain. What was Ares doing with him? What process? What was going on?

For it was only when confusion flooded through him that Albus felt the first wave of utter depression. He did not know what was going on, whatever he may have pretended. Were his friends already dead? Had Darvy already killed them? Or was he giving them too a speech? Was the inevitable being prolonged?

Was what Darvy said true? Was no one coming? Albus knew that it was foolish to think of the future, not when it was so unlikely to occur for he or his friends, or his cousin, or his brother, but he could not help but hope. Surely, their disappearance was known? Surely, his father was on his way?

But the thought of his father made his heart burn with hatred just as it had with Darvy. This was his fault as well. Albus recalled wondering how many people would die because his father had let Ares out of Azkaban. It appeared as though he, and those close to him, would be among those people.

And he cried. After everything- after having argued with James and not talked to him for months, after watching Mirra date Eckley, after learning of the horrible mistakes that his father had made, it was this that made him cry. His tears were a sweet relief. He was trapped, bound to a wall, and no one was coming. No one was going to save him or James, or his friends. He was in the Department of Mysteries. How many wizards worked here? Surely, Ares had eliminated them all. No, he was quite alone. His salty tears dripped down to his lips, and

he did not care how loud he was being. He did not care because no one was listening. Because no one was there. No one was going to help him out of this position. He was the architect of his own demise. It was his daring, and his nerve, and his disregard for the safety of himself and others that had landed him in this position. He had dug himself into a hole that he could not possibly get out of.

His tears mixed with his blood, and soon his nose was running, his mucus joining the group of liquids that had formulated on his face. He knew that he looked pathetic. He knew he was pitiful. He was pitiful because his friends were either dead or dying, and all that he could do was cry, cry because Darvy was right, because he was weak...

He saw his wand in the corner of the room. He could not let them die. As quickly as hope had been drained from him, it returned. He was alive. So long as he was alive, he could do something. Is this how his last moments would be spent? Crying in a corner, unable to save the friends that he had sentenced to death?

No, he needed that wand. He recalled what Fairhart had always said. That magic was energy. A wand was not needed to use it. True, Fairhart was a two timing backstabber, but nonetheless, he knew a thing or two about magic. It was time to put his lessons to good use.

"Accio!" he cried. **" Accio wand! Accio! Accio! Accio!"**

Nothing happened. Nothing, nothing and more nothing. His wand did not move, it remained on the floor in the corner. The most that he could do was hope that it rolled his way. He remembered that emotions were necessary when performing magic. He had been pleading with his wand. Should he be angrier?

"Accio! Accio wand! Accio! ACCIO WAND!"

No matter how loud he screamed it however, nothing occurred. Albus hung his head in despair. His attempts were futile. He could not be angry. No, the only the emotion that he could feel now was fear. Fear that his friends were dead. Fear that James was dead. Fear that it was all his fault, and that there was nothing that he could do about it. But he didn't even care about himself anymore. All that mattered to him now was that he saved the one's close to him, and he was no closer to doing that then he was saving himself. He burst into tears again.

And then he heard it. An ear splitting scream that, despite however thick the walls may be, somehow reverberated throughout the room. He understood at once. The torturing had commenced. Judging from the scream, it was either Rose or Mirra. Either his cousin or one of his best friends was suffering because of him-

Something snapped. The scream, for some reason, had done more than frighten him. Pain spread through his veins, a terrible nauseating pain that he felt from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. He felt his body go completely rigid, and the pain only intensified. It was like a thousand flaming knives were piercing his skin, it was like every inch of his body was boiling in scolding hot water, yet he was drowning at the same time. A strange buzzing filled his ears, and his eyes, closed from the intense pain, began to see waves of yellow through his lids. It was like his soul was being destroyed-or growing- or something that he couldn't quite explain- And then it stopped. The pain subsided, the buzzing ceased. All he felt was pleasure. And power. He had never felt more alive. It was as though he had been sleeping, sleeping for thirteen long years, and was just now awakening for the first time.

He opened his eyes. Everything was tinted gold, as if we was looking through yellow sunglasses. The sense of power that he had was unnatural, and so inhuman. **He** was less human. What was going on? He had no time to wonder. He couldn't even wonder, it was as if his mind was not his own.

He did not feel his head move, though it turned in the direction of his wand. Without so much as saying a word, or thinking a thought, his wand flew to him. Though bound by the chains, his fingers still managed to grasp it. The chains around him melted into puddles of metal on the floor at once. He stood up properly, though he did not feel his legs move. He tried thinking, but couldn't. It was like everything was instinct.

Without feeling his arm raise, he saw that he had held his hand up and pointed his wand at the white door. Once more without even so much as thinking of an incantation, a small blast

of gold knocked the door off of it's hinges. He strode towards the exit now- the small silver chair that Darvy had sat in had melted as well, and was now a puddle that he had absentmindedly walked past. Without feeling his legs move, and still seeing in shades of gold, he found himself out of the room and in a corridor. The corridor was also entirely white, on both sides of it there was several doors. Which door concealed his friends? He knew which one. How, he did not know. How anything was, he did not know. He could not think. And yet, by acknowledging that he couldn't think, wasn't he thinking? Everything was so primal...he did not understand it. He walked (once more, without feeling his legs move) towards a door on the other side of the room that he had just exited, only a couple of doors down. He raised his wand, and this door too was blasted off of it's hinges. His guess proved correct. Darvy was standing in the center of a room identical to the one that he had just left. Chained to the wall was Morrison, Mirra, and Rose. Of the three of them, only Rose looked disheveled. She was the one that had been tortured. All three of them, and Darvy, stared at him in awe. Darvy said something, but he was not speaking English. Albus could not understand him anyway. Darvy raised his wand and made a complicated motion with it; a stream of dark purple flames issued from it and flew at him. Albus didn't even raise his wand. Something of a protective golden bubble had formed itself around him without him having willed it. The bubble seemed to absorb the flames and disappear. Once more, he saw that his arm was raised. He muttered something that he did not understand, and a beam of golden light issued from the tip of his wand. Darvy created a shield to stop it, but the shield did absolutely nothing. The beam of golden light broke right through it, hitting Darvy in the chest and blasting him through the wall, and through the wall after that, and after that, and after that. By the time he stopped soaring through the air, no less than five rooms had holes in the wall. More than one hundred feet away Darvy sat, slumped against a cracked wall in yet another identical white room, undoubtedly unconscious. Albus turned to his friends, and saw, through glitters of gold, that their mouths were moving. They too were not speaking English however. He raised his wand once more and the chains that bound them melted just as his had done. And with that act, he collapsed. He felt his body return to normal, it could feel again. He could taste his own blood in his mouth again. He no longer saw things through golden tinted glasses. He felt drained however, far more exhausted than he had ever felt in his life. It was strikingly similar to the feeling that he had after he had fired the flames at Morrison, only it was to a much larger degree. He thought that he might drift off into sleep, but Morrison was shaking him.

" Mate, mate get up! Al!"

Albus sat up straight. Everything was hazy. Whatever had occurred seconds ago, he only had flashes of it.

" How did you do that!" Morrison asked him.

" Huh?"

Mirra and Rose were both looking at him like they had never seen him before. Morrison's mouth was hanging open. Albus tried making sense of the situation, but suddenly, his head hurt.

" Your eyes! They were all...yellow. Or gold or something. And Darvy fired a spell at you and you just- you just-" he turned to the hole in the wall, " - disagreed" he finished somewhat anticlimactically.

Albus jumped up. " Are you all okay?" he said quickly, ignoring what Morrison had said.

" I'm fine" Morrison said, and Mirra nodded. Rose was breathing heavily however. It was evident that the pain had not stopped for her.

" You three stay here" Albus said.

" What?" all three of them gasped.

" Stay here" Albus repeated. " I need to go and find my brother."

Morrison immediately objected. " We're coming with you mate-"

" No!" Albus said angrily. " I'm getting James, and I'm getting us out of here. There's bound to be more of Ares' blokes around here. They all think that Darvy's looking over you lot. Just stay here. I'm going to get James and get help."

Mirra spoke up however " Albus wait-"

But Rose cut her off. " Hurry back!" she shouted. " And don't get yourself killed!"

Albus turned on his heel and exited the room from where he had entered, once more finding himself in a white hallway. Almost the second that he had left he nearly collapsed again from

exhaustion. What had happened to him? Golden eyes, strange power. It was all nothing more than flashes. He staggered, then leaned up against the wall. Cold sweat had joined the blood and tears on his face. He could not relent however. He still had to find James.

He looked to the end of the hallway and saw another door, this one far different than the plain white ones. This one was completely black, and there was no doorknob on it. He slowly made his way towards it and pushed it open, then walked through it.

He was now standing in a large, circular room. Black doors were spread out evenly amongst the circle, all of them unmarked and with no handles. On the walls hung candles with bright blue flames, his only source of light.

Then, without warning, the room began spinning. Albus was forced to watch as the room revolved around him extremely fast. Then it suddenly stopped. Albus knew at once what had happened. The room was fighting him. He now did not know which door he had come from.

But which did he have to go through? There were roughly a dozen doors, maybe a few more, and all of them looked equally foreboding. Through which door was James? Guessing randomly, he slightly pushed one of the doors open and peered inside.

At first sight it was an ordinary looking room, with only a few desks in it. Then he saw the tank full of what look liked brains. He shut the door quickly.

The room began spinning once more, and Albus cursed under his breath. He was back to square one. He pushed another door open. This room was completely empty, though the walls were making odd gurgling noises that terrified him. He shut this door as well.

"Not that one" he said. The room began revolving once more." Dammit!"

Once the room had stopped he pushed yet another door open, and this one was much more welcoming than the first two.

It looked like a giant art gallery. This room was roughly five times the size of the other two rooms, and pictures of various landscapes and important looking people were hanging on the walls. Other canvases were set up, though some of them looked unfinished. Albus entered the room; he knew that what he was looking for wasn't in there, but he felt strangely drawn to it.

He walked through the room, somehow managing to marvel at the beauty that was hanging on the walls. All other thoughts had somehow magically vanished from his mind. All that mattered now was that he appreciated the art that surrounded him.

Then he saw it. In the very center of the room there stood a large, completely untouched canvas. There was no paint on it nor near it. The canvas itself looked oddly welcoming, and had strange markings around the edges of it, as well as stunning jewels embedded in it. Albus walked over to it and read what it said at the top.

The Portrait of Fate and Fortune

Albus stared at it for a moment, than looked down at the bottom of it. There was a small silver plaque there, obviously meant to have a name on it. It was a blank however. Whoever had meant to draw a portrait had never gotten around to it, and thus, the canvas belonged to no one.

No sooner had he thought this then lines appeared on the canvas. With no paint- no brush- no anything, pictures began forming. Albus watched in awe as shapes were drawn. He then realized how truly horrible the artwork was. It was all just basic shapes and stick figures. He watched as a small stick figure collided with another stick figure. The picture than erased itself and began drawing another scene. This time a small stick figure was chasing a larger stick figure through a series of triangles. Eventually, the smaller stick figure held up a stick of it's own and pointed it at the larger one, who recoiled against a triangle.

And then a new scene formed. This time it was two large stick figures, both of them standing across from one another, holding out sticks and aiming them at each other. In the middle was a square, resting on top of a rectangle.

This inexplicably reminded Albus that he needed to find James. Somehow, the room, or perhaps just this canvas, had entranced him. He could make no sense of what he had seen, but as he turned to leave, he caught another glimpse of the silver plaque on the bottom of the canvas. It now had a name.

Albus Severus Potter

And just like that, the name erased itself, as did the canvas. Everything was blank again.

Albus hurried out of the room, annoyed at himself for having gotten sidetracked, and once

more entered the circular room. It began spinning at once. Albus was growing frustrated now. The room stopped spinning and he kicked the next door open.

He was now standing in a long, but narrow hallway. This hallway was white just as the other had been, but somehow, Albus knew that it was a different place completely. He reached the end of the hallway and so that he could either go left or right, both had white doors at the end. He chose right. He had just begun walking in that direction when he remembered how horrible his choices tended to be. He immediately began walking left and approached the white door. He pushed this one open and found himself in yet another corridor. Only this one was different. Though it was all white, there was a large red door at the end of it. And slumped against the door was-

" James!" he shouted. He ran to his brother and slid down next to him.

James looked like a ghost. His skin had turned to the color of snow, though his cheeks were flushed. At first, Albus wondered why he looked sick, but then he got his answer. James was holding his chest. When he removed his hand, it was stained with blood.

" James!" he shouted once more, shaking his brother. " James!"

" I'm alright, I'm alright" James said, though he sounded raspy. " Just a cut"

" A cut?"

Albus looked at his brother's wound. It was nothing short of a deep gash, and a large one at that. The right side of his chest to his shoulder appeared to have been punctured.

" What happened?" Albus asked him, and he was now kneeling down at his side, holding his brother's head up. " Are you okay?"

" Ares" he said, and blood trickled out of his mouth. " It could have been worse. He slashed me with a curse and spread my blood on that door" he said, motioning his head towards the red door. " He said he didn't need me anymore and went in."

" Ares is in there?" Albus said, and his voice quivered slightly. " Okay, I have to get you out of here-"

" Dad!" James managed to gasp, and more blood trickled from his mouth. " Dad's in there."

"What?"

" He showed up seconds later. Told me-" he coughed up more blood-" told me to wait here. Said I was safer. Then he went in there after Ares."

Albus stared at the door. " Wait right here" he said stupidly, forgetting that his brother was in no condition to go anywhere.

" No!" James gasped. " Don't-"

Albus looked down at his brother, his bleeding and dying brother. His shiny prefect badge was splattered with blood, his robes moist and soggy.

" I'm going to get you help" Albus said. " I'm going to go and get dad right now."

James tugged at his robes, but Albus carefully removed his fingers. He pushed his hands against the red door and felt that it was indeed splattered with blood. He entered the room and silently closed the door behind him.

He was now standing in what looked almost like a colosseum. This room was circular too, but very wide, and very high up. He realized that he was standing on the top most row of where a spectator would sit, and indeed, there were benches all throughout the dimly lit room. In the very center of the arena like room was the actual ground, dirty and grimy and circular as well. Here there stood a white pedestal, and on top of that a large black, leather bound book. The Foulest Book. On one side of the book, backed away against the benches, was his father. Directly across from him, with the Book in the middle, was Ares.

Ares looked much older than the last time that Albus had seen him, with his hair now filthy and white, his skin hanging off of his bones and his facial hair grown and untamed. Neither one of them had their wands out, and neither one of them seemed to have noticed Albus' surreptitious arrival.

" My son is dying Red" Albus' father said, in a tone that indicated they had been conversing for some time. " And right now, his safety is most important. I'm not going to waste time lecturing you. Leave now."

" Oh, I will" Ares said confidently. " I will be leaving very soon..."

They began walking in a circular movement, almost as if they were following each other around the Book. They were clearly sizing each other up.

" I can't let you get that book Red" Albus' father said quietly. " The most I can do is let you walk away now..."

" I don't expect you to let me do anything Potter."

" Then leave. Your plan is flawed. How many men do you have on hand? How many do you have guarding this department? Fifteen? I've already sent Ron to get reinforcements. You're outmatched..."

Ares gave a bitter laugh. " You sent *Weasley* to get reinforcements? Then we have plenty of time, surely he'll stop for a snack on the way."

" You underestimate Ron" Albus' father replied. " That cost you last time..."

Ares narrowed his cold gray eyes. He apparently had no rebuttal to this. They were still circling each other, though Albus noticed that both of their hands were inching towards their pockets.

" What do you see Potter?" Ares asked, his face stony, yet curious. " When you look at that book, what do you see? What is so important that I should not obtain it?"

" I see a step Red" his father replied. " The second you get that Book working, you get that Wand working. And then there's no telling what you'll do..."

" You are blinded" Ares said shortly. " You see only the material. I too see a step, but I see a step designed to create, the first step of a revolution! You are not stopping me, Potter. You are stopping change. Change that this world needs..."

" This world is fine without your change" his father replied icily. " I thought you were obsessed with your own power, but there's something more to it. Something that I'm not going to let happen, whatever it may be!"

" It would appear as though neither of us is going to back down" Ares said solemnly. " This is unfortunate. I was prepared to resort to violence, though I did not think I would have to inflict harm against you. I give you one more warning Potter, out of respect and nothing more. Leave now. You can catch me after I take the book."

" Don't play me for a fool Red! You think I don't know that you removed the anti-apparition charms from this room? The second you touch that thing you're out of here! And that's why you're not going to even get close to it."

Albus watched as his father removed his wand from his robes and pointed it at him. Ares removed his own wand- a golden wand with a black handle that Albus knew to be the Dragonfang Wand- and raised it as well.

Then Albus heard his father speak.

"My son is dying, and I don't have time for this! Make your move!"

The duel began. Ares made a complicated wand movement and a blast of blue emerged from his wand, soaring passed the Foulest Book and aimed right at his opponent. Albus watched as his father conjured a small shield, which took most of the blast, though he still staggered backwards. He raised his own wand a red beam of light- a stunning spell roughly three times the size of any stunner that Albus had ever seen- issued from his wand. Ares deflected it with ease and sneered.

But the onslaught was not over. More and more bolts of red were fired, and time and time again Ares was forced to deflect them away. Eventually, he took the offensive. He made a complicated movement with his wand and what looked like a bolt of lightning issued from it. Whatever spell this was, it was far too powerful to be blocked. Albus' father had to duck to avoid it. It narrowly whizzed over his head, making contact with a row of bleachers behind him, all of which exploded with terrific force.

He recovered quickly however. He dodged a silver spell that Ares had fired as a follow up and raised his wand high above his head. He whirled his wand around in circles, and a jet of golden flames burst from the tip. The flames soared through the air, almost snakelike, towards Ares.

It appeared as though his father had won- the flames were much too large to be blocked with a simple spell or even dodged. But Ares stood motionless as the streaks of golden fire made their way towards him. Then he flicked his wand casually. The solid ground in front of him began rumbling as though an earthquake were occurring. Then, at the last second, the ground rose up into a wall of concrete, which blocked the flames entirely. The fire continued to try and break passed it, but could not.

Albus watched as his father flicked his own wand, and the flames vanished. The solid wall of rock that Ares had used to defend himself still stood in front of him as an impenetrable guardian. His father raised his wand.

" *Reducto Ultimataadre!*"

There was a flash of light and a beam of silver had destroyed the wall, leaving dust in the air and debris on the ground. Ares began coughing, his cloak held up to protect himself. He whirled his cloak and flicked his wand; the dust subsided at once. Ares then flicked his wand once more and the debris from the wall, the tiny pieces of rock, rose into the air and flew towards his opponent at lightning fast speed.

His father avoided it at the last second. He blasted some of the bigger, more lethal looking pieces of rock out of the way, and managed to hold his ground against the wave of concrete that accompanied them. When the dust from this had cleared, they both stood motionless.

" Is that all!" Ares shouted, and Albus noticed that he didn't look tired in the slightest. Indeed, his cheeks looked flushed and his bored expression had turned to one of something resembling excitement. Apparently it had been long time since he'd had a challenge. " A couple of sparks and some stunners?"

Albus saw that his father wasn't doing so well. The flames that he had conjured had burned him out slightly, and he was still coughing from the dust of the gravel that had hit him. Ares sneered again. " For all your magnanimity, your proclivities are what remain most notable. Not a single flash of green! Not even the Cruciatu Curse! How many times did we have this discussion Potter? About doing what was necessary? You lack the will- and thus you lack the strength!"

" I'd never kill you Red" Albus heard his father say in a raspy tone. " Just the same as I know you'd never kill me."

Ares stared at him for a moment. There was a great look of dislike on his face, though Albus noticed that it did not appear to be directed towards his father, but rather at the situation as a whole.

" I'm sorry Potter" he said quietly. " But I've changed. *Avada Kedavra!*"

The jet of green light burst from his wand with terrific force, and it soared across the arena in a second.

" NO!" Albus screamed, and his father looked up at him.

For a second, Albus was sure that he had cost his father his life. The killing curse was an instant from hitting him when he vanished on the spot with a loud *crack!*. The curse flew into the stands behind him, and the benches burst into flames from the sheer power behind the spell. There was another cracking noise, and his father was standing right where he had been, only thankfully, with no green spell flying towards him.

" Albus!" he shouted, completely taken aback by his sons appearance. There was another cracking noise and his father was suddenly by his side, several feet up from the arena below.

" Albus get out of here!" he said, grabbing at him and pushing him towards the red door.

" Dad, the Book!"

They both turned and looked down, but it was too late. Ares had seized the Book. He spared them a single glance, and with a whooshing of his cloak, he had vanished.

Chapter 20: The Escape

Albus' father thrust him through the red door. There was a look of exasperation on his face; whether it was from his duel or from Ares getting the book Albus did not know. The red door swung shut behind them, but before Albus could say anything his father had swooped down on his other son.

" James!" he said, shaking him. James was still slumped up against the wall, his hand over his wound. His eyes were blinking themselves closed, and he wasn't speaking.

" Why did you go in there!" Albus asked his father furiously. " Why didn't you just get James help first?"

His father was still crouched down, examining his sons wounds. He did not answer. There was a sour look on his face that indicated that he too had realized his horrible mistake. Albus finally got to see a good look at his fathers face. It was as white as James'; he was spent. The dust and residue of his duel with Ares was still all over his robes and in his hair- he looked

filthy.

And then, at that moment, Albus came very close to hitting his father. After everything that had happened this year, all of the nights that Albus had stayed up, unable to sleep, thinking, wondering what could have possibly been going through his father's mind as he was making certain decisions, his father was being silent. He couldn't even answer a simple question. Albus had never been more angry in his life, never. He was just about to shout, to voice his displeasure, when they saw someone come through the door opposite them. Albus watched as his father stood up quickly, removing his wand from his robes and pointing it in the direction of the intruder-

" Sancticus!"

It was Fairhart. He was running towards them, and he too looked exhausted, though relatively unharmed. He had his wand out however.

" Harry!" he said, and he too swooped down upon James, and began examining the wound. James was still not speaking, only moaning in a low tone.

Albus stood there in silence, watching as the two of them talked quickly. What was going on? What was Fairhart doing here? Did his father not realize that Fairhart was in on the entire trap? Albus wanted to do something, to shout, to attack, but he was mesmerized by the conversation going on in front of him.

" They're all over the Department" Fairhart said, still examining James. " Ares put all of his cards on the table today. All of his men are swarming, causing chaos- he may show up at any moment-"

" He was already here" Albus' father said grimly. " He got the book" he added solemnly. Fairhart cursed under his breath.

" Okay" Albus said, raising his hands up to show that he wanted to be paid attention to. " What's going on here?" he asked them both.

They both ignored him, though his father continued speaking.

" Can you heal him?" he asked Fairhart tensely, staring down at James, who had stopped making moaning noises now.

" I am less than proficient in healing spells" Fairhart said, a frown on his face. " Whatever little I could do, it would just take up valuable time and the results wouldn't be sufficient when compared to actual treatment. These are curse wounds, he needs to go to 's."

" What about Hogwarts?" his father replied.

" Hogwarts would be adequate" Fairhart said.

" Then let's go" his father said, and he hoisted James up and made to carry him, but Fairhart stopped him.

" You need to go after Ares" Fairhart said.

" I need to get my sons out of here-"

" They will both be fine with me" Fairhart said calmly. " There's no point in us both going with them. Ares may still be lingering- all of his men are fighting throughout the Ministry. You can still stop him."

Albus looked at his father and saw that his mouth had grown thin. Albus' head was about to explode. He knew that his father and Fairhart were acquainted with each other, knew that they were certainly on good terms, but they were speaking now as though they knew each other much better than that. And what was Fairhart saying? That his father should abandon his children?

" You go after him" he said after a moment of silence. " I'll stay with my kids and get them out of here-"

" You know that they're safer with me" Fairhart said. " I will lead them to safety, I promise you."

" Sancticus-"

" I promise you!"

His father nodded. James had gone back to groaning. He moved him into Fairhart's arms, then turned to Albus.

" Albus listen to me-"

" Dad-"

" Listen to me!" he said loudly. " I need you to stay with Professor Fairhart. You are very safe with him. I need to go-"

" But dad-"

" Albus!" and he crouched down now, and put his hands on his shoulders. " I will see you

again. Stay with Professor Fairhart. He'll get you out of here."

He stood up, and Albus didn't bother arguing. He watched as his father exchanged a look with Fairhart, then hurried off down the hall, right through a door on the side of the hall that Albus had not even noticed before.

Fairhart hoisted James up and turned to Albus. "Okay" he said. "Follow me."

But Albus remained where he was, and standing quite still at that. Fairhart began walking, dragging James along with him, but when he was a few feet away he noticed that Albus was not following him. He turned to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "I said follow me."

Albus ignored this. "Who are you?" he asked.

Fairhart raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What? What are you talking about? I'm your teacher-"

"No" Albus cut him off. "Who are you? What are you doing here? How did you know where we were?"

Fairhart sighed. He now looked agitated. "I'll explain later. We need to get your brother help! And I know that there are others as well-"

"How?" Albus demanded. "What's going on? Answer me!"

He noticed how forceful his tone was, and realized that he sounded a bit like Darvy. But he didn't care. His burning curiosity had reached its peak. Fairhart had been following him, and moments later Albus had bumped into Fango Wilde- who Fairhart even admitted to having been friends with. He wanted answers.

"I'll explain later!" Fairhart said irritably. "I need you to trust me!"

"Shhh!" Darvy whispered. "I need you to trust me, I have a plan."

Albus stared into his electric blue eyes. Darvy had spent the entire year spying on Ares and preventing him from causing harm. "We trust you" he said, and Scorpius turned to look at him.

"Good, now follow me" Darvy said once more. He stood up, and placed his hands onto their shoulders. He began steering them into the forest.

"I- no!" Albus shouted, the pain of his last major betrayal still quite clear in his head. "I want answers! Now!"

"Fine!" Fairhart said, and his face was now flushed with fury, even the grotesque side. It was the polar opposite of James, who was still the color of snow. "What do you want to know?"

"Why have you been following me?" Albus asked. "For the last few months you've been followi-"

"To protect you!" Fairhart said shortly. "On your father's orders!"

"My father-"

"Before your third year at Hogwarts your father deduced that Ares was after an exceptionally powerful object! Years ago he placed a spell around it- one that would require his own blood to open the door to it, ensuring its safety! Only when Ares began trying to steal it did he realize the danger that his children were in! He got me a job at Hogwarts to watch over all three of you! I'm still an auror, but my mission was protecting you!"

Albus stood there, dumbfounded. Suddenly, he remembered what Fairhart had been saying to someone on the night of his detention with him.

"I'm keeping an eye on them. All three."

"Okay" Albus said, feeling slightly stupid. But he could not help but ask. He was not going to trust his brothers life- or his own life for that matter- into the hands of someone who he did not trust. "Well- how did you get here? How did you know where we were?"

"You vanished in Hogsmeade" Fairhart said plainly. "I sent a message to your father telling him, he checked the Ministry and saw that there had been a break in. He sent a message back and I got here as fast I could."

"What do you mean a message?" Albus asked doubtfully. He had never heard of an owl traveling so fast.

Fairhart sighed. "A handful of your father's closest allies have an extremely reliable way of communicating outside of the normal methods, and I'll leave it at that. Now are you done?"

Albus frowned at him and narrowed his eyes. His answer had been less than satisfactory, but

James had moaned in pain, reminding him of how little time that they may have.

" Yeah" he said. " Now what do we do?"

" First we find your friends" Fairhart said, and he pushed James over slightly, so that he was in Albus' arms.

" What are you doing?" Albus asked, his brother now leaning up against him.

" You need to carry him" Fairhart said. " I need to have my wand out. Ares' men have invaded the Ministry, you're still very much in danger. Follow me."

No sooner had he said these words did they hear noises. Then Albus saw them. Two hooded figures, their faces concealed, had burst through the door on the opposite end of the hall.

" There!" one of them said in a raspy voice, and they both drew their wands.

Albus tried plunging his hand into his robes while also supporting his wounded brother, but found himself incapable. He didn't have to worry for long however. Fairhart whipped his wand out so fast that Albus didn't see his hand move, and with a single slash through the air two beams of red light had hit both of the hooded figures square in the chest. They both toppled over and fell to the floor with a crash, clearly unconscious.

" Stay close" Fairhart told him, and he walked towards the two men, then stepped over them with an unconcerned expression on his face.

Albus followed after him, though it was hard to drag his relatively heavy brother along with him. Still burning with questions, he walked and talked.

" Why did you send my dad off like that?" Albus asked him.

" He was exhausted" Fairhart said shortly. " I knew that he wouldn't last long with so much going on. He's better off going after Ares. Where were your friends last time you saw them?"

" A white room" Albus said. " In a hallway. A bit like this one, really..."

He wished that the rooms had more details. How could Fairhart possibly know where they were with so little information?

" The Observation Chambers" Fairhart said. " Okay, come on."

They made their way to the black, handleless door, Albus still dragging James along as Fairhart led the way. As soon as they entered the room Fairhart spun around and slashed his wand through the air.

Albus flinched and nearly let go of his brother, then realized that the spell had not been aimed at him.

" What the-"

But then he saw what Fairhart had done. A fiery red mark had appeared on the door that they had just left, and the room was now revolving, spinning rapidly though a flash of red now accompanied the blue light from the candles. When the room had stopped revolving, the fiery red mark remained on the door.

Fairhart kicked a door open, and Albus saw a glimpse of a tanks filled with brains before Fairhart closed it shut.

" Thought room" he muttered, and he once more slashed his wand across the door, leaving a fiery red mark before the room began spinning.

Albus was beginning to feel even more panicked now. James' breath was slowing down and had grown faint. How long would it take to find the others? How long would they be stuck in this room for?

Another door was kicked open, and this time Albus saw a room quite like the one that held the Foulest Book. Instead of a book on a raised pedestal however, there was a large stone archway in the center with a tattered black curtain hanging in front of it. The curtain was moving slightly, though apart from this there was nothing peculiar about it. Fairhart, however, seemed to be entranced by it. He was staring at it, his eyes wide open, sweat pouring down his face.

" Professor?" Albus asked. " Professor?"

Fairhart snapped out of his trance and shut the door closed with violent force. " I'm sorry" he said quickly, and he shook his head as though he had just gotten out of a pool. He wiped the sweat from his eyebrows. " I'm sorry I thought- I thought I heard- never mind."

" What was that?" Albus asked.

" The Death Chamber" Fairhart replied, and he once more slashed through the air, leaving a mark on the door. The room began revolving again. " And the Executioner's Veil. Don't worry about it."

Albus was about to ask something else when the room stopped spinning. Fairhart knocked this door open as well and Albus saw, to his immense relief, a long white hallway filled with white

doors.

" This is it!" he exclaimed, though Fairhart held his finger up to his mouth to indicate silence. He jerked his head, motioning for Albus to follow.

Albus crept along behind him, James' feet dragging along the ground as Fairhart slowly opened doors and peaked his head into them, checking for people. They did this for several doors before a door finally burst open, revealing two more hooded figures. These two did not bother yelling that they had found someone, they raised their wands to attack, but like the others, were incapacitated by Fairhart rather quickly. Streaks of red light had flown through the air a second after they had appeared, and they too were now unconscious on the floor.

" Why are they still hanging around?" Albus asked. " If Ares left?"

" They're saving their fellow soldiers. The stragglers, anyone who fell behind. There's a huge battle going on in the atrium as we speak. Was anyone with your friends? Anyone that could have taken them somewhere?"

" They were with Darvy" Albus said, and his heart sunk. What if Darvy had awoken? He had not even planned on that...

" Darvy got away" Fairhart said, still poking his head into rooms. " He was fighting in the atrium when I arrived. He was heavily injured though, and I saw him leave."

They continued walking through the hallway, Albus' heart dropping a little further every time they poked their heads into a room and saw them unoccupied. He didn't recall this many rooms being there an hour ago. Did the Department of Mysteries somehow change itself since he had left?

And then they saw another door burst open, and this time, of the two figures that emerged from it, Albus recognized one of them as friendly. Uncle Ron had been backed through a door. His face was bleeding slightly, the blood was even in his hair, and his robes were ripped. His wand was brandished, and Albus saw that a hooded figure had been the one who had backed him through the door. The hooded enemy made a slashing motion with his wand, though Uncle Ron deflected it. Before he could do much else, Fairhart had already fired a stunner, knocking the man down.

Uncle Ron turned to them, breathing heavily. " Thanks San. Who's that bleed- is that James!" And without missing a beat he ran towards James and removed him from Albus' arms. " Can't you heal him?" he said to Fairhart.

" No, he needs professional medical attention. Did you find your daughter?"

" She's safe" Uncle Ron said, and Albus felt his heart lighten, despite the fact that his brother was still looking very terminal.

" What about-" Albus started

" So are the others" his uncle answered him. " They were wandering around, trying get out. I found them and your Aunt Hermione got them out of here."

Albus couldn't help but be a bit quizzical at this. Wasn't his uncle supposed to have gotten reinforcements? Surely, Aunt Hermione could not be classified as such?

" How is she?" Fairhart asked. " Was she hurt?"

" Not a scratch" Uncle Ron said. " She was phenomenal. Must've taken out fifteen or twenty of them in half of a minute. Oh, Ares really shouldn't have taken Rosie too..."

" Good" Fairhart said. " Now we need to get out of here. We need to get to Hogwarts."

" We can't go through the atrium" Uncle Ron said. " It's too chaotic."

" Well we have to risk it" Fairhart said. " He needs help right away!"

" Can't you just apparate us out?" Albus asked. " Or make a portkey?"

" We're not authorized to make portkeys inside the Department of Mysteries..." Uncle Ron said.

" My brother's dying!" Albus said furiously.

" You don't understand" Fairhart said, shaking his head. " It's binding magic. We're unable to. And we can't disapparate in here either, there's extremely power anti-apparation charms around this entire place."

" But Ares!" Albus said. " Ares broke them in that room!"

" Ares is an exceptionally powerful wizard" Fairhart said, and Albus saw his uncle scowl. " And I don't even know how long it took him to do that."

" No, you don't understand!" Albus exclaimed. " If he broke the charms in the room with the Foulest Book, then the charms are still broken! It's not like he took them off! We can go back there and do it!"

Fairhart and Uncle Ron exchanged a look of both surprise and awe. Then Uncle Ron grinned.

" You're a genius kid" he said, and he picked James up and slung him across his back so that his feet would no longer drag.

" Now that's using your head" Fairhart said, a smile appearing on his own detestable face. And so they turned around, hurrying through the white corridors and making their way back to the black door that Albus knew that they would once again be stuck in. The three of them entered the room and watched as it began spinning at once. Thankfully, the fiery marks that Fairhart had left still remained, and thus their options were much more limited.

Uncle Ron sized all of the doors with the red marks up. " This one!" he said, pointing at one that looked just like others. He opened and Albus saw that they had indeed entered a hall much like the one that they had just left.

" How'd you know?" Albus asked his uncle.

" Lucky guess" he admitted.

Fairhart led them through the hall, with Albus right behind them and Uncle Ron and James at the rear. Albus could think of nothing now other than how close they were. Rose and Mirra and Morrison were all okay, and they would be getting James the help that he needed. His brother was going to be okay...

They ran through the door that led to the hallway with the red door at the end of it. The room where they would be able to escape. They were so close now-

A wall exploded. They were all knocked off of their feet, and Albus saw James hit the ground, his head banging against the floor as he coughed up more blood.

" No-"

He saw his uncle crawl towards his brother, and place his head to his heart. " James" he said, shaking him slightly. " James..."

His brother gave a groan. He was still alive.

" You're a fighter James!" Uncle Ron said to him. " Stay with us..."

But there were now more fighters. The hole in the wall revealed no less than six hooded figures, all of them with their wands brandished. How they had gotten here Albus did not know, nor did he care. There was now no hope left.

But Fairhart apparently disagreed. He had recuperated from the blast. His feet were firm and his wand was drawn. He now stood in front of Albus, his brother, and Uncle Ron. Directly in the way of Ares' minions.

" Go" he said. " I'll take them. Go!"

Uncle Ron's scooped up James with surprising strength, and grabbed Albus as well. He began running with them, though it was against Albus' own will.

" No!" he said. " We can't just leave him! I'll stay!"

" He'll be fine!" his uncle shouted, and he pulled him along.

Out of the corner of his eye Albus saw several of the men fire different colored spells at Fairhart. He conjured a large shield and deflected them all expertly. Then he raised his own wand, and Albus could have sworn that he saw a jet of green light fire from it-

His uncle opened the red door and drug them into the room, then shut the door quickly. Albus caught a glimpse of the dusty colosseum, and a small view of the table where the Foulest Book had been, and the next thing he knew his uncle had grabbed him tightly.

" Don't let go" he said. And the next moment Albus couldn't breathe. Everything turned black, and he was compressed, folding into himself, more uncomfortable than he could bear. And all that he could think about was his brother, if his brother was going to survive the trip-

They landed. The three of them were now all outside of a very familiar place. The gates of Hogwarts were upon them. Uncle Ron was still holding James, who had indeed survived and was still fighting. Somehow, his uncle managed to keep James steady while also brandishing his wand. There was a burst of light a small silver dog emerged. It stood quite still, obediently waiting for something.

" Hagrid!" Uncle Ron said to the silver dog, and at once it flew through the gates, completely intangible and nearly invisible as well. Albus looked at the sky and saw that it was darkening. It was right around dinner time. They had been trapped in that horrible place for hours.

Though James was the focal point of his mind, he could not help but let it wander to other things.

What was happening at the Ministry? Was the battle still going on? Had his father caught Ares? How many lives were lost today? What had happened to Fairhart?

He heard booming footsteps and saw Hagrid running towards them from behind the gate. His face showed complete fear as he fiddled with a heavy set of keys before pulling the gates

open. He took one look at James, then gave a wail and said nothing else. Uncle Ron began to speak but before he could so much as say a word Hagrid had taken James from him and cradled him in his arms. Then, with surprising agility considering his size, he dashed towards the castle, each of his strides massive and twice as powerful as that of a normal man's. Albus and his uncle followed the gamekeeper despite being several paces behind him. By the time that Albus and his uncle had reached the doors leading to the castle they had already been kicked open by Hagrid, who had bolted through the Great Hall, ignoring the people who were just leaving dinner. Albus ran passed them as well, completely oblivious to the muttering and the shouting and the people gasping at the blood on his face, or asking him why James was being carried up the stairs by one of their professors...

Uncle Ron stayed right behind him as they followed Hagrid up several flights of stairs, finally arriving at the Hospital Wing. Madam Clearwater had begun tending to James at once, and Hagrid was left in the waiting area, behind closed doors and sobbing.

"Wha' happened?" he growled when Albus and his uncle caught up with him. "Wha' happened?"

"There was a trap in Hogsmeade" Albus told him. "Me and James got kidnapped."

Hagrid stared at him, his bushy beard doing nothing to hide the look of horror on his face. "By who?" he asked.

"Ares' men" Albus muttered. "They got Morrison and Mirra and Rose too, they should be here though..."

"I let them in not too long ago" Hagrid said. "Couldn't get any info though. Madam Clearwater patched 'em up. No one said anythin' about James though..."

And he burst into tears and gave a roar of rage. "Ares!" he yelled. "I'll kill 'em! I'll kill 'em if he killed James, I'll rip 'em ter shreds, limb from limb I swear it-"

"Hagrid!" Uncle Ron said. "Don't talk like that, about James dying! He's strong, he'll make it through this!"

But Albus heard the tone of uncertainty in his voice. He was right about to say something about it when his uncle turned to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You're bleeding..."

"I'm fine" Albus said. "But I need to go and see him."

Uncle Ron didn't object as he walked to the door separating him from his brother. He entered the actual room in which his brother was being tended to and saw him laying on a bed, a bed that was completely red from the blood that he had shed on it. He was still moaning, and Madam Clearwater was tipping a purple potion into his mouth. She turned when he entered.

"You need to leave" she said. "I need to be alone with him."

"Please, he's my brother! I need to know if he'll be okay!"

She gave him a sad look. "I don't know" she said. "I'll see what I can do but- but I just don't know."

Chapter 21: James The Noble

The casket was beautiful. The Hogwarts grounds had never looked more splendid, the sun shining down upon the chilly lake, the gentle rustling of the wind making the leaves flutter across the grass. The weather was perfect, though Albus could hardly notice it. The muttering of the people sitting around him was nothing more than mangled sentences filled with incoherent, meaningless words. He saw that it was his turn to look inside the silver casket.

He walked towards it slowly, dreading the feeling that he would get when he saw the body of the Potter that lay within it. Why did it have to be an open casket funeral? Was it to torture him?

He approached the beautiful box and peered inside. He gasped at the body that he saw. It was himself. Eyes closed shut, his black and messy hair untidy even in death, he had been buried in his emerald and silver Quidditch robes.

He looked at the lake, which he had not even noticed was right behind the casket. He saw his own reflection in the ripples of the water, though he was not himself. He was grinning maliciously, and his eyes were glowing golden. There were two Albus'. The one in the casket, his former self, and the new and improved Albus. The powerful one, the one who did what was necessary-

"Albus!"

Albus awoke with a start. A blanket had been draped over him in his sleep. How he had drifted off he did not know, he had known for sure when he was awake that sleep would be impossible. His brother had been dying. How long had he been out, his body resting in the chair of the waiting room? What had happened?

He saw that it was his Uncle Ron who had awoken him.

"He's going to be okay" he said, a watery grin on his face. "You can see him now."

Albus practically jumped out of the chair. "How long?"

"You were sleeping for a few hours. It's very early in the morning. You have to be quiet though, there's already a few people in there."

Albus nodded and opened the main door of the hospital wing. He entered and saw that there were indeed a few people in there.

James was laying on a bed in the corner of the room, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully. His face was still unusually white, but Albus could see no signs of blood. There were chairs drawn up surrounding him, the most prominent of which was his father, who looked like he had been crying all night. Hagrid was standing, obviously unable to be supported by a chair, and Lily was sitting down in a chair next to him. She too appeared to have been crying. Madam Clearwater had left them alone, though Albus saw Professor McGonagall sitting down as well, her face looking very relieved. Albus was surprised to see that his mother was not there, though then he realized that his father was probably too afraid to tell her what had happened.

They all turned when he entered, and he heard Uncle Ron enter and close the door behind him. They all opened their mouths to speak, though Albus asked his question first.

"How- how is he?"

"He's going to be all right" his father answered him, his face still screwed up as though he was fighting back tears. "And that's all that's important. He just needs his sleep."

A great deal of the anger that he felt towards his father evaporated. So consumed was he with joy at his brother's survival that he seemed incapable of feeling anything other than pure bliss. At that moment Madam Clearwater entered from the back office.

"Clear away, clear away" she said, her face sweaty from working, her long brown hair tied up in a bun. She was carrying a cup full of the purple potion that Albus had seen a few hours ago.

"He needs his Blood-Replenishing Potion"

"How long until he's perfectly healthy?" Uncle Ron asked her.

"I don't know" she admitted. "He has curse wounds. And he'll have a scar for sure. He's quite lucky really, the damage could have been worse. Whoever did it was either deliberately trying to give him a chance of survival, or was in a very big hurry."

"He was in a hurry" Albus said darkly. He then looked at his father, and without even asking his question, his father knew how to answer.

"He got away" his father said, and he tried hiding his face in his hands as he said it. "He got away..."

"I would imagine that we have bigger problems at the moment!" rang out the strict voice of Professor McGonagall. "Students were kidnapped! And the battle at the Ministry, has there been any word? James narrowly escaped! Were there any casualties?"

"No" came a voice from behind Albus.

He spun around and saw Professor Fairhart leaning in the door frame. Albus had not even heard him enter, and apparently no one else did either, as they all shared his look of bewilderment. He appeared to be relatively unscathed.

Albus was the first to address him. "How did you get out of there?" he asked.

"I should have been clearer" Fairhart said darkly. "There were no casualties on *OUR* side."

A deafening silence seemed to fill the room after this, interrupted by his father.

"What happened?" he asked. "I've had no contact with anyone."

"Ares' minions must've realized that their job was finished. Half of them got out of there as fast they could. The ones who stayed behind are either dead or in Azkaban" Fairhart said.

"How many? How many do we have?"

"I lost count" Fairhart said. "Not that it matters now. Their mission was accomplished. How's James?"

"He'll make it" Albus' father said. "But now we need to discuss something imperative."

Albus felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and the rage that he felt towards his

father returned. What was more imperative than his son? Was anything more important than his own flesh and blood, who, Albus reminded himself, would not have been so close to death if it weren't for his father's idiocy?

" We don't have much time" his father said, snapping him away from his thoughts. " If my assumptions are correct, Ares is currently on the move. We cannot let him leave the country. I will need help."

Everyone in the room stared at him, though it was Professor McGonagall who he turned to first.

" Minerva" he said. " This entire ordeal needs to be kept as secret as possible. Address the students, and do not let them know the full situation-"

Albus' jaw dropped, but it was nothing compared to Professor McGonagall's face. She had turned chalk white and her eyes were bulging.

" I don't think I understand you, Potter. Certainly, the students-and their parents- have a right to know-"

" The break in at the Ministry is already news" he said. " If the words breaks out that students were endangered, there will be a panic of great proportions. Hogwarts may be one of the few safe places left, we cannot let it be jeopardized. Parents cannot know what occurred at Hogsmeade."

Albus felt his fists ball up in fury. So what, James' injury was to be written off? Kept secret? The students were supposed to be lead to believe that his deteriorated health was a product of his own blunder, of an accident? And for what? So that his father wouldn't get in trouble?

" Potter, I don't think I can do that" Professor McGonagall said, clearly uncomfortable.

" Minerva please" he said, and there was a tone of both pleading and urgency in his voice. " The situation is more complex than you know."

Albus noted that he exchanged a quick glance with Fairhart at this, who nodded. His father turned to Hagrid next, who had thus far stayed quiet.

" Hagrid, I will need your assistance. Ares may be trying to flee to a country that isn't as strict with their laws on certain matters. You still have your contacts in France, I believe?"

Hagrid nodded.

" Good, if you could get in touch, that would be excellent. Likewise," and he turned to Uncle Ron.

" Ron, if you could get in contact with Viktor-"

Uncle Ron gave a large groan.

" Dammit Ron, it was twenty five years ago!"

" Fine, fine" he said, his cheeks slightly red.

His father turned to Fairhart next, and the lack of comfort in the air was palpable. When he spoke, it was with something of an uneasy, and possibly regretful tone.

" Sancticus" he said. " Are you still on good terms with WAR?"

Fairhart nodded.

" Good. I need you to do everything you can to get them to keep calm. They'll have a field day if the public appears to be in immediate danger without us giving any warning..."

Albus' first thought was that the public *was* in immediate danger, but something else distracted him. WAR? Weren't they a group of Renegades? Particularly vicious ones? How was Fairhart on good terms with them? And hadn't they been disbanded for years?

" How does Professor Fairhart know W-"

But he was cut off by the next thing that his father said, and it was this, more than anything else that he had heard today in the Hospital Wing, that infuriated him.

" We must get moving" he said. " If we hurry, some of the mistakes that we made today can be rectified..."

" Your mistakes!" Albus shouted, and he pointed a threatening finger at his father in rage. How dare he? How dare he act as though the events that had transpired in the last twenty four hours were to be blamed on anyone other than himself? How dare he ask others to fix his problems!

" Mr. Potter please" Professor McGonagall said, clearly surprised at the volume of his voice. " Not so loud in the Hospital Wing. And what are you-"

" It's all his fault!" he said, still pointing his finger at his father, who was looking very surprised as well. Everyone else was quite silent. " He did this!"

" Albus what are you talking about-" his father started.

" You let him out and this is your fault!" he shouted, and James was now stirring, he was very close to being awoken.

His father's face turned stony. " Okay" he said. " Let's talk about this in private..."

" No! I want to talk about it right here!"

" In private!" his father argued, his face flushed, and for some reason, however angry Albus was, he knew not to object. He father walked passed him and opened the door, then led him out. The second that they were alone in the Hospital Wing waiting room his father turned to him.

When he spoke his tone was low and curious. " What do you know?" he asked.

" Everything!" Albus spat through gritted teeth. " You let Ares out! He was in Azkaban and you let him out!"

His father hung his head low. " How did you learn this?" he asked quietly.

" It doesn't matter" Albus said, and he felt his face burning. " What matters is that none of this would be happening if you hadn't screwed up! You let Ares out just because he was your friend, and-"

" Albus that's not it" his father said. " You don't understand, and I don't blame you, I don't expect you too. But it was a different time then. That was a long time ago. It was before-"

" Before right and wrong?" Albus said, his teeth chattering, his entire body trembling in ire.

His father stared at him. " At the time it was the most reasonable decision. And yes, I admit, my relationship with him certainly played a factor. I thought- I thought that perhaps there was still some good in him, that he deserved a second chance-"

" But he didn't!" Albus shouted. " What could make you think that? What could make you risk that?"

His father stood up straight. " I knew a man" he said. " A man who was given a second chance. And he ended up being very brave. And very-"

" But that's someone else!" Albus said furiously. " What does that have to do with Ares? Just admit it! You screwed up! You let Ares out and now everyone's in danger! Your son almost died! Do you even care? Do you even realize that this could have been avoided? Do you even give a-"

" Of course!" his father said, and Albus saw that he was now openly crying. He had known that he had cried last night, but this was the first time that Albus could ever remember seeing tears pour down his father's face as they were now. He looked pathetic.

" Of course I know! Of course I care! You think I don't I live every day knowing? You think I've had a single thought on my mind other than James! I know it's all my fault! I would die for my children! I would die for them a thousand times! And the idea that they're hurt, that they could have died, that they're in danger because of me, it destroys me! Every day I die a little more inside because I know how much could have been avoided! I would do anything to be in James' place right now! I would rather be dead than see my son in so much pain!"

Albus stared at him furiously, his anger far from subsided, though still at a loss for words. When he didn't speak, his father continued.

" But wanting and hoping isn't going to do anything" he said, and his voice was quieter now. He wiped some tears from his face. " The only way to make sure that this doesn't happen again is to act quickly. Sitting around and crying will accomplish nothing. I need you to understand that. We can point fingers after we're all safe. After we stop Ares."

" What is he after?" Albus asked, his tone now inquisitive rather accusing. " What does *he want?*"

" I don't know Albus" his father admitted. " I thought that he was obsessed with his own personal perfection, with the idea of acknowledging his true potential, but his actions as of late seem to disagree. He definitely wants his new wand working if he took the Book, and I don't know why. But I do know this. I'm going to do everything in my power to stop him. To make sure that he can't hurt anyone else."

Albus looked into his father's emerald green eyes, the eyes that they shared. He could not help but feel angry, and agitated, and even a bit disgusted, but he could not bring himself to say anything of the sort. Instead, he merely nodded.

" Now I must be going" his father said. " There are certain things that need to be done."

" When am I going to see you again?" Albus asked.

" I daresay I'll probably be in the *Prophet* eventually" his father said with a wry smile.

And indeed, he was.

Potter Removed From Post

Representatives from the Ministry of Magic have announced today that the Wizengamot has reached a unanimous decision to remove Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter from his post as Head Auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The decision was made following an incident that involved Reginald Ares, ex-auror and former Headmaster of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, breaking into the Ministry of Magic and stealing an as of yet unidentified object from the Department of Mysteries.

The scene itself occurred over a stretch of several hours, with Ares leading several men (confirmed to be " EP's", or wizards associated with the Dark Arts) into the Ministry and engaging in a battle with Ministry officials. Though there were no casualties on the side of the Ministry officials, some were killed and more than twenty have been incarcerated in Azkaban.

Public reception to Potter's removal has been favorable, though it stays more mixed within the Ministry itself. " It's unbelievable" says Maximus Tothill, an auror who was in Potter's task force before his removal. " The fact that he is shouldering all of the blame for this is outrageous. No one man can be expected to end tyranny, and should certainly not be held responsible for all examples of it."

Tothill's words are nothing compared to the words of Kingsley Shacklebolt however. The Minister of Magic (who, by laws established after the Second War, is not permitted to have a seat on the Wizengamot) has threatened to resign from his position of Minister in outrage over the removal.

" Harry Potter has done more for the Ministry of Magic, and the Wizarding World for that matter, than any other person can claim. His removal is both unfair and circumstantial. The task that he has been assigned- imprisoning Ares and his followers- is nearly insurmountable, and should not be expected to be undertaken by a single, or even small group of individuals. The Ministry and the public with have to come together to stop whatever may occur, and pointing fingers at a national hero does not accomplish this."

Shacklebolt's words are held in little regard by the Wizengamot however. Anna D' Innuella, a highly respected and senior member, voiced the reasons behind the removal and claimed them to be more about inadequacy, rather than directing blame.

" There is no denying that Harry Potter is a talented, intelligent, and noble auror. But his reputation for stopping dark activity should not interfere with the cold hard facts. Not only was he unable to capture Ares, but he was unable to stop him from harming people as well. A Head Auror should not allow such things to occur. Potter is simply not up to scratch with the requirements that a leader needs. We wish him the best in all things, but in a world that is becoming increasingly more dangerous, we feel that new leadership is needed."

As of now, there has been no replacement announced for the Head Auror position.

In other news however, speculation has already begun about what the unidentified object stolen from the Department of Mysteries is. Though early accounts claimed that it was from the famed Hall of Prophecies, this has since been debunked and written off an inaccurate rumor. Most speculation now is directed towards the Thought Room-

Albus folded the paper up carefully and exhaled deeply. He then passed it over to Scorpius, who read through it twice as fast as Albus had, then gave it to Morrison. Morrison read the first line, rolled his eyes, and chucked it in the bin.

They were sitting in the Hospital Wing, which had become something of a casual hangout place for them recently. James was still occupying a bed, though he was recuperating quickly and Madam Clearwater said that he would be out in time for exams. He had barely spoken and was always in and out of sleeping due to being heavily medicated.

Scorpius and Morrison were sitting on the floor opposite him, and sitting on another bed was Mirra. Next to her, laying down in yet another bed, was Rose. Rose had been the least loquacious of them in the days following the incident, and Albus knew that it was due to Darvy torturing her. Apart from James, she was the only one of them required to stay in the Hospital Wing. Still, she had bickered with Scorpius for a couple of moments the day before, which Albus took as a sign of her personality returning. He was glad for it. He never thought that he'd say it, but he had missed her voice.

" It's all for the time being" Scorpius said seriously, jerking his towards the trash can that now had the *Prophet* in it. " After a couple of days of things being worse, he'll get his job back and he'll catch him. It's like Hagrid said, he's too famous to just write off and disregard."

" You really think that the Minister will retire?" Morrison asked him.

Scorpius shrugged. " I guess we'll just have to wait and see. It really depends on what happens now."

" But what *will* happen now?" Mirra asked.

Albus knew exactly what she was referring to. The day after the incident at the Ministry Professor McGonagall had told a very mangled version of what had happened and had asked the students not to worry about it. The papers disagreed however. Every day they arrived with speculation as to what was going to happen, with rumors that Ares had declared war, or that high ranking Ministry personnel were already missing. All in all, the entire Wizarding World seemed to be a bit tense.

" I really don't know" Albus said. " But I guess we just have to trust my dad when he says he's doing everything he can to keep us safe. Though how he's going to do it now I'm not sure..."

" Ahh, we'll all be okay" Morrison said. " Besides, if worst comes to worst, we've got you to protect us, right Al?" he added with a wink and a grin.

Albus grinned slightly. He had told all of them days ago not to tell anyone what had happened when he had been kidnapped, about his confrontation with Darvy. He was grateful for it certainly, but he couldn't help but feel as though it was unnatural. It may have been cool from Morrison's perspective, but Albus very much disliked the feeling of having no control over his actions.

And that wasn't all that they were keeping secret. Morrison hadn't told his parents a thing about what had happened to him, in fear that he would be forced to stay in America. Mirra hadn't told her grandparents either- perhaps because she thought that being involved in two life threatening events at Hogwarts would make them more reserved about sending her there. He looked up and saw that she was smiling at him, a very warm and friendly smile. He smiled back, but found that his face did not blush, and that his hand didn't automatically find his hair either. Whatever he felt for her, it seemed trivial compared to the ordeal that he had just been through. He had been so focused on his brothers life that he had nearly forgotten that he was supposed to have told her how he felt about her. Perhaps there would be time for it next year. His thoughts were interrupted by Lily however, who had just entered, her arms filled with books. She did not visit James as much as the others, and Albus knew why. She couldn't bare to see him laying in bed injured, and she was also busy studying. Indeed, all of his first year relatives had been busy studying for their exams recently. He couldn't help but think that Uncle Percy was somewhat responsible for it. Albus recalled him sending a letter about the importance of exams in his first year, and he knew that his little cousins, particularly Hugo, would have taken it much more seriously than he did.

She slid a book towards Scorpius and took a seat next to him.

" Can you help me understand this?" she asked him. Albus saw that it was a Charms textbook.

" ' Course I can" he said, and he scooted next to her and began rifling through the book. Albus heard Rose snort from her bed and smiled.

His sister looked at them all. " Did you hear?" she said. " About Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

" What about it?" Mirra asked her.

" I just saw Professor Fairhart in the corridor. He's leaving! We're going to have a free period, at least until Professor Handit goes back. Then I guess we'll have free Potions..."

Albus jumped up. " When's he leaving?" he asked.

" Today" she said. " I think he's packing now..."

" I'll be back" he said, and he left abruptly. The next thing he knew he was bolting down several flights of stairs. Of all the people who he could talk to about what had happened to him, Fairhart was the best. He knew more about magic than anyone else that he knew.

He arrived at the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom panting. Trying to catch his breath, he knocked on the door. After a few moments, the door opened and he saw his professor.

" Albus!" he said, his tone full of intrigue. " How can I help you?" he asked.

" I just- I fancied a chat" he said.

Fairhart looked surprised. The one eyebrow that he could raise did so. " Sure" he said. " Come on in."

Albus followed him in and they walked right passed the rows of desks and into the cramped office he had been in twice so far. One look at it told him that Lily was correct, Fairhart was leaving. His small and flimsy bed had been folded up, and the small objects that been on his shelf had been spread out on the table. Albus saw that the empty pensieve was even being used to hold some smaller objects, among them a few old pictures.

Fairhart had his back to him, he was placing a few objects in a trunk off in the corner. Albus picked up the topmost picture in the pensieve and saw that it was very old and dusty. It was also the only framed one. Albus had to squint to see what it was of. There were two people smiling in it, and Albus immediately recognized one as Fairhart. His face was not mangled however, in fact he looked like he had never been healthier. He appeared to be in his early twenties, possibly late teens. His neck length jet black hair was dangling in front of his face with elegant grace, and his face, without the bumps and scars, looked full and happy. He was extremely handsome.

He was accompanied by a beautiful girl, who was smiling just as widely as he was. She too had extremely black hair, only hers was longer and straighter. Albus noticed that Fairhart's arm was wrapped around her, though it was hard to see much else from the dilapidated condition of the photograph. Albus could have sworn he saw that the girls hand was resting on a rather large stomach though- and then he realized it. She was pregnant. He found this strange. Fairhart had never mentioned that he had children before. Though he supposed it wasn't that strange- very few teachers talked of their personal lives.

" You wanted to talk about something?" Fairhart asked, and Albus' concentration was snapped. He hastily placed the picture back down in the pensieve and saw that Fairhart was still turned around.

" Yeah" Albus said. " Erm- you're leaving?"

" That is correct" Fairhart said, turning around and throwing a small silver instrument into the pensieve as well.

" Why?"

" I'm needed elsewhere" he said. " New mission."

" But why not stay as a teacher?" Albus asked as Fairhart nonchalantly threw more things into the pensieve, then placed it in his trunk. " Everybody loved you..."

" You are very kind" Fairhart said, a small smile forming on his face. " But I'm afraid that my business at Hogwarts is complete. Your father would prefer I do other things."

" But he's not even Head Auror anymore..."

" True" Fairhart said, nodding his head. " But I still think he knows what he's doing more than the Ministry does. Always remember that Albus. Don't follow those who demand your loyalty. Follow those who have earned it."

There was a brief moment of silence following this, before Fairhart continuing speaking. " But that can't be why you're here" he said. " To see me leave."

Albus took a seat at the small table that was being cleared of objects. " Well I- I wanted to apologize" he said a little shamefully. " For accusing you of- you know. Being a bad guy and all."

" Apology not necessary" Fairhart answered him. " I do not blame you in the slightest for your suspicions. I understand the confusion of the situation. In my attempts to be clandestine, I must have inadvertently seemed antagonistic. If anything I'm reasonably pleased of your weariness towards me. It shows how intelligent you are."

" Well I know you don't want to hear an apology" Albus said with a shrug. " But I needed to give you one."

Fairhart laughed and took a seat across from him. He appeared to be done packing. " You are wise beyond your years Albus."

Albus smiled. He had one more thing to say however. The real reason that he was there was to ask a question.

" Professor" he said, and Fairhart looked at him. " I wanted to talk to you about something."

He explained what had occurred in the Department of Mysteries. Everything from Rose's scream to the melting of the chains, from being unable to understand what his friends were saying to having blasted Darvy through several walls. Fairhart listened intently the entire time, his face supported by his fist, occasionally looking as though he wanted to speak but choosing not to. When Albus had finished, Fairhart waited another couple of moments before speaking.

" Well Albus" he said. " As we've discussed before, it is not unnatural for young wizards to perform incredible feats of magic despite having no control over their actions. And in some cases, it's done primarily for the sake of experimenting with their abilities."

" But-"

" Let me finish" Fairhart said, holding up his hand. " But what you describe is a phenomenon that seems to differ with that. You claim that were unable to feel your own body, correct?"

" Right" Albus said. " And it's like it wasn't my own mind thinking either."

" Hmmm. And your appearance. Golden eyes? Was it merely the iris, or the entire eye itself?"

" I don't- I don't really know. I only know that detail from Morrison and Mirra. But it seemed like everything that I saw was...tinted."

Fairhart scratched at his chin. " Power of that magnitude- performing wandless and nonverbal magic - should be connected more with emotion and instinct rather an actual thought process. Can you remember how you felt? Any particular emotions?"

" I was scared" Albus said. " And angry. And that's really it."

Once more Fairhart scratched at his chin. " Well Albus, we've already exhausted the idea that you share your power with another wand, and the idea that you weren't in control of your actions in the slightest seems to disagree with it as well. Like your last situation with uncontrollable magic, I feel that this one is also easy to classify."

Albus looked at him, expecting a very suitable answer-

" Another anomaly" Fairhart said. " And it does not do well to dwell on it."

Albus hung his head low. He had thought that Fairhart was his best bet at getting an answer. He didn't want any other adults to know what had happened. Still, the fact that Fairhart had told him not to worry about it was somewhat comforting.

A strange silence followed after this, a silence that Albus couldn't quite explain. It was rather peaceful, both he and his professor staring down at the round table. Deciding it was best to speak, Albus asked something else.

" So when do you have to leave?"

" Soon" Fairhart said with a frown. "I'm going to finish writing up your theoretical exams, and then I'm done. It's a shame, I really would have liked to say good bye to all of my students."

Albus nodded. " I'm sure that they wanted to say good bye to you too" he said.

Fairhart smiled, then turned around and began digging through his trunk.

" I nearly forgot" he said. " There's something that I want to give you."

Albus peered around him, trying to see what Fairhart was grabbing, though he couldn't get a good look at it. He expected to see something strange or unique, possibly even dangerous. But then he saw what Fairhart had taken out. Two dusty bottles of Butterbeer. He passed one over to him.

" A toast, I think" Fairhart said, opening his bottle and raising it up. Albus did the same and he heard the bottles clink together.

" A toast to what?" Albus asked. " My dad catching Ares? Ending a war before it begins?"

" Anything you want" Fairhart said. " Though I am toasting to something else. To Patented Potter Pick Up Lines! May they aid you in all of your romantic endeavors!"

They both shared a laugh, then downed their bottles in one gulp.

Fairhart did indeed leave soon after that, bidding Albus a pleasant farewell and leaving the confines of the castle for whatever his next mission was. Meanwhile, Professor Handit took the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts again (of which he was ecstatic), and Potions became a free period. Not that classwork mattered anymore.

Exams were officially upon them, and though Albus was given the option of not taking them due to his ordeal, he felt that they would at least help him take his mind off of the numerous things that were frequently bothering him. Most prominent among these was his worry over his brother. James was supposed to be mobile by exam time, though he had yet to leave the Hospital Wing.

Albus found that the difficulty of the end of year tests had been somewhat exaggerated by his professors however. None of the written exams included subject matter from passed their third year, and the practical tests hadn't been bad either. For the first time, he didn't accidentally blow something up during Charms (which, according to Professor Flitwick, gave him an extraordinary amount of extra credit) and Herbology had been as simple as potting a few Fanged Geraniums. The theoretical exams that Fairhart had left for them were by far Albus' favorite however. It was two sheets of questions meant to be answered entirely with opinions, with the guarantee that the only way to not get a perfect score was to neglect to do

it.

Transfiguration was an entirely different matter however. Albus felt that he had skimmed by the written portion of the test with at least the bare minimum required to pass it, though his practical examination seemed to do nothing but torture him. He was unable to conjure a single inanimate object, and he struggled with what should have been relatively easy switching spells as well. Professor Bellinger gave him a weak smile as he left the classroom and told him that effort counted a great deal, only making him feel worse. Muggle Studies was as equally unsuccessful. Comprised almost entirely of listing famous muggles, Albus was forced to create fake names for forty five minutes.

Finally, the last day of exams came and Albus only had one test left. The practical exam for Care For Magical Creatures. The task was simple- Hagrid had given the students a single thing to do. Successfully feed a bowtruckle.

" Alright, come here you little blighter" Albus said, crouching down and staring at the bundle of twigs. It's small beady eyes rested on him for a single moment, and it gave a squelching noise. Albus knew, somehow, that this was the same creature that had stabbed his hand months ago.

" Nice and easy" he muttered to himself, inching his way across the grass, a small brown bag of rice in his hands. He gently pulled out a small clump of the rice and slowly moved his fingers towards it-

" Ouch! Dammit!"

He dropped the brown bag in pain and the bowtruckle scooped it up. After given another squelching noise it ran off, leaving him to mop the blood on his hand up with his robes. He saw Hagrid walk by with a giant clipboard.

" I din' see nothin'" he said with a wink, and judging by the way his hand was moving he was writing a giant " E". Albus smiled at him in appreciation.

The end of exams brought a significant amount of joy to the school, but Albus still couldn't help but feel ominous about his brother's slow recovery. Then, on a Saturday in early June, it happened.

He was eating dinner amidst his merry housemates, all of whom were talking and laughing loudly, excited at being done with their examinations. The fifth and seventh year students in particular were being outrageously noisy. Albus was picking at the remains of his mashed potato when he heard Morrison give a shout.

" James!"

Albus spun around and saw his brother hobbling towards the table. His arm was in a sling, but otherwise he looked fine. He could have had a bit more color to him, sure, but he was no longer the color of clouds at least. And best of all about him was the wide grin he was wearing.

The Slytherin table went quiet. Albus saw that all heads were turned to his brother, who was walking slowly, apparently still feeling the after effects of Ares' curse. A single person tried to utter a " boo" but he was shushed by someone Albus thought may have been Atticus. Only when his brother was in talking distance did someone speak.

" How are you pal?" Morrison asked excitedly.

" I'm good, thanks" James responded.

" Good to hear" Scorpius said, and James nodded in his direction. He then turned to his younger brother.

" Can you come with me for a couple of minutes?"

" Sure" Albus said, beaming at his brother's appearance. He followed his brother out of the Great Hall while the chatter of the table resumed.

" How are you feeling?" Albus asked him.

" I've been better" James admitted, and Albus noticed that his voice was still a tad bit raspy. " But I'm alright."

They were still walking now; slowly as James could not move very fast. They began walking up the stairs and Albus noticed that his brother had to move at almost one step at a time.

" You want some help?" Albus asked him, making a grab for his brother's good arm. He batted it away though.

" I'm fine, I'm a grown man" he said with a small smile.

" So you didn't take your O.W.L's?" Albus asked him, eager to make conversation with the brother that he hadn't spoken to in weeks. It was strange- he had had so much to say, though now he found himself merely talking for the sake of talking.

" I'm still going to take them" James answered. " There's still two weeks of school left. They said I can take them at my own pace."

They continued walking all the way until they reached the seventh floor, and only when they were feet away from it did Albus realize where they were headed to. The headmistress' office.

" What are we-"

" I want you to be here to see this" James cut him off. He then announced the password.

" Wulfric" he said, and the stone gargoyle that they were in front of slid away at once, revealing a small set of stairs that spiraled. James stepped on to them and Albus went right after him. The stairs began revolving upwards and soon they were directly outside of Professor McGonagall's office. James knocked.

" Come in" came the strict voice of their headmistress.

James opened the door and they both entered. They saw that Headmistress McGonagall was sitting behind her desk, a number of small silver instruments and contraptions in front of her. She looked very tired, and Albus couldn't help but wonder why she wasn't at dinner. A few of the portraits on the walls were speaking. Albus instinctively looked at the portrait that he knew was of Severus Snape, but it was currently unoccupied.

" Mr. Potter!" she said, and Albus knew that she was referring to James rather than to himself.

" It's good to see you up and about once more!"

" Good to be up and about" he said.

" And to what do I owe this pleasure?" she asked.

James dug into his pocket with his uninjured hand. After a few moments, he pulled out something small and silver. Then Albus realized what it was. His raised his eyebrows in confusion.

James placed his Prefects' Badge on the desk. " I need to resign from my position as Prefect" he said.

Professor McGonagall pushed her spectacles down. " I'm sorry?"

" I'm resigning" he said. " I'm sorry if that causes trouble for you, but I think you should give this badge to someone who deserves it. Obviously there'll be a new fifth year prefect next year, but you can give this to someone in my year."

" I don't think I understand you, Potter" she said. " What's the meaning of this?"

James answered her, and Albus noticed that he looked determinedly away from his younger brother.

" I don't deserve this badge" he said. " I let the power get to my head this year. I gave detentions when they weren't necessary, I used it as a tool for intimidation, and I did everything with it that a person in my position shouldn't be doing. I wish I'd been smart enough to give this back sooner. I let it get in the way of the things that were really important this year. I'm just not noble enough for this job."

Professor McGonagall looked astounded, and indeed, Albus was looking at his brother with a look of shock as well. This must've been some sort of joke. Surely, James was not asking to be stripped of his power? James would *never* do something like that.

" Well Potter" Professor McGonagall said, dumbfounded. " I must say I am shocked. This is the first time in recorded Hogwarts history that a Gryffindor Prefect has resigned. It's unheard of!"

" Now really Minerva" came a soothing and wise voice from somewhere within the room. " Is it really the first time that a Potter has done something previously unheard of? You really should have expected this, to be quite honest..."

Albus looked around the room at all of the portraits, though they were all moving and it was impossible to see which had spoken. Still, he knew that voice from somewhere...

James was not distracted however. He nudged the silver badge across the desk tensely, as if asking Professor McGonagall to take it so that he wouldn't be tempted to change his mind.

" Sorry if this inconveniences anything" he said, and he turned to leave, Albus still standing motionless, unsure if this was a dream or not.

" Potter wait!" Professor McGonagall said. James turned around. " I hope you know that in returning your badge, you are being *awfully* noble."

James tilted his head to the side as though to ponder this, and Albus was quite sure that James was close to changing his mind. Then he turned back around.

" Yeah I know" he said cockily. " But I have too much fun breaking rules. I'm good with

resigning."

Professor McGonagall buried her face in her hands. " These Potters will be the death of me..." Albus and James both laughed, then left the office.

Having his brother back whole and healthy was a gift like none that Albus had ever received. James had called yet another family gathering just days after he was allowed out of the Hospital Wing, and Albus was so happy to hear James laugh and talk again that he sat through the entire meeting. He particularly liked the version of events that James told Lily and their younger cousins about what had happened in the Department of Mysteries. Apparently, James had dueled Ares and was winning before finally sneezing- resulting in a momentary lack of defence in which Ares had blindsided him with a curse.

All too soon however, the year came to an end, forcing Albus to spend more time packing his things than spending time with his brother. On the final day of the year all of the students gathered in the Great Hall for the end of term feast, in which not only would scrumptious food be devoured, but the winners of the house cup would be announced as well.

Albus merrily helped himself to roasted turkey and corn, as well as large portions of steak and kidney pie. The food had never tasted so delicious. He saw that Morrison had abandoned his utensils and was eating everything by hand so as to ensure that he got the most from his mouthfuls. Scorpius had already started on dessert and was eating his second helping of pumpkin pie. A few seats down from him was Atticus, who caught Albus' and winked. Albus realized that it was his last day at Hogwarts.

Albus' mouth was still full of mashed potatoes when Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and began announcing the amount of points that each house had. Albus thought that his table may have exploded when Slytherin was announced as the winner for the first time in more than ten years. He noticed that many people ruffled his hair and patted his shoulder in thanks; it was his phenomenal performance on the Quidditch field that had gotten them there, after all. The other tables all clapped half heartedly at this, though Albus was quite sure that a few people from the Gryffindor table had whistled...

The noise died down when Professor McGonagall cleared her throat once more. With the Hall silent, she began speaking in a clear and strong tone that indicated that she had somewhat rehearsed what she was about to say.

" Yes, congratulations to Slytherin House!" she announced. " But as our feast draws to a close, and thus the school year ends, I feel it important to say a few things. A few choice words that I hope you all pay the utmost of attention to."

Everyone stayed silent. All of the students were now looking up at their headmistress expectantly.

" You have heard, I am sure, that significant changes may soon be upon us. Rumors and unconfirmed stories, cold hard facts and strongly supported theories. You are no doubt all aware that the world that you return to is very much confused. But now I say this. I am not leaving this school. For all of the changes that may occur, I must make it very clear what Hogwarts is.

" Hogwarts is more than just a school, more than just a place to read your textbooks and enjoy your meals. Hogwarts is a home. Here, at this school that I love, and have loved for as long as I can remember, you are valued. You are appreciated. You are loved. There may very well be a time- whether it be in the not too distant future or years after I am gone- where you will find that the world that you live in is different. Is hard. Is dangerous."

Albus noticed that her eyes lingered on the Gryffindor table for a moment, and he was sure that she was looking at James.

" But Hogwarts is a safe haven. Everyone in this hall is a part of a family, our family. And everyone in this hall will always be welcome at Hogwarts in the worst of times, just as they are in the best. For those of you who feel as though they don't belong anywhere, for whatever reason, know that you all belong here. You are not just a part of this school. Hogwarts is a part of you."

There was a moments silence before someone from the Ravenclaw table began clapping loudly, and soon enough the entire hall had risen to their feet, all four tables, all of the professors, everyone was applauding. Albus clapped with the rest of them, wearing a grin that could not be removed from his face, a feeling of comfort in his chest that he did not understand but appreciated. It was as if after everything that he had been through this year, the school was still there for him. Hogwarts was always there.

The next day was filled with much whining. Students randomly hugging each other, some

hurrying around to get the things that they had forgotten to pack, others groaning about their inability to use magic over the summer holidays. Albus stood waiting by the scarlet train alone with his trunk. Scorpius had forgotten to return some books to the library and had hurried off to do so. Morrison was still in the common room looking for stray socks.

" End of the year Potter."

Albus turned around and saw that it was Atticus. He had a large grin on his face.

" What's up?" Albus asked him.

Atticus shrugged. " Just saying bye. This was my last year after all."

" What do you plan on doing now?" Albus asked his captain. " Know what you want to be?"

" I'm taking a year off to kind of tour the world" Atticus said, brushing his sandy blonde hair from his face. " Everyone in my family has. Then I don't know. I may try and play reserve for a Quidditch team. Puddlemore United and the Kenmare Kestrels both recruit right out of school."

Albus grinned. " Well good luck" he said. " Any idea who the Slytherin captain will be next year, by the way?"

Atticus smiled at him. " I gave Professor McGonagall my recommendation, but that's it. I think I made a pretty good choice though."

" Who-"

" Stay sharp Potter" Atticus cut him off, catching the eye of a few of his friends who were calling over to him. " And try and keep in touch won't you?"

Albus nodded as Atticus walked straight passed him. No sooner had he left did someone else arrive. It was Morrison.

" To think" he said. " In four years, that'll be us saying good bye to thirteen year old's, ready to spend a year doing nothing all over the world."

Albus grinned. " I can't wai- hold on a second."

He stared at his friend, who smiled. Albus saw that his face was completely free of facial hair.

" You shaved! You shaved your mustache off!"

" Not exactly" Morrison said, still smiling. He leaned in a bit closer, and his voice grew quieter.

" Hair thickening charm" he muttered.

" What?"

" Hair thickening charm" he repeated. " It was a fake. I just took the charm off."

" No way" Albus said, completely shocked. " Why?"

" Why did I take it off?"

" Why did you put it on!"

Morrison laughed, then gave a shrug. " I don't know. I got really tall over the summer, and my voice got really deep. My muggle doctor said sometimes people just go through growth spurts quicker than others. Told me I'd have facial hair soon. Told me it'd get me girls... I thought I'd speed it up."

Now it was Albus' turn to laugh. " You put a hair thickening charm on your upper lip to get girls? That's real cool Morrison..."

" Just don't tell Scorpius" Morrison said. " He hates the thought-"

" All packed?"

They both turned. Scorpius had just pushed his trunk up to them. " It took me forever to put some of those books back. Next year I reckon I'll have to be a bit smarter and take out les-" But then he stopped when he saw Morrison's face. " You shaved!" he exclaimed.

Albus and Morrison exchanged a look before Morrison answered him.

" Yup" he said. " Don't worry, it'll grow back over the summer. Maybe with a beard too now that I think about it..."

They boarded the train laughing, and soon they were whizzing passed grassy plains, stuffing their faces with pumpkin pasties and playing games of Gobstones...

" So all in all, a pretty eventful year, huh?" Scorpius said.

" I'd say" Morrison said. " Almost failed Divination. Narrowly avoided untimely death."

" Ahh the whole narrowly avoiding death isn't *that* eventful" Scorpius said. " You should have been there in the Forest last year. Now *that* was scary."

Morrison scoffed at him. " You're kidding me right? A Forest? I was in the depths of the most secret place in the world! I was-"

" Guys" Albus spoke up, interrupting them both and trying to let his uncomfortable tone be

audible. " I'd really rather we not talk about this.."

They both nodded and stopped at once, though then Scorpius turned his attention to him. " But what about you Al?" he asked. " Would you say you got anything accomplished this year?" Albus thought about it. If anything, the entire year had been a series of disappointments. This irked him slightly. He realized that he was looking forward to his summer vacation a great deal more than he should be. For all of the comfort that the magnificent castle gave him, part of him was glad that the year was over. It was strange, but he felt that despite Professor McGonagall's rousing speech, he lacked a really good reason to go back after his vacation. " There's some things I wish would have happened" he finally said. " With certain people."

" Hey mate, there's always next year" Scorpius said reassuringly. " I mean I was wrong earlier this year- you do have a shot with her."

Albus shrugged. He didn't really want to get into now, not in the last few hours that he would be with his friends.

The train ride went by agonizingly quick, and before Albus knew it they were already slowing down, people leaving their compartments and pushing their trunks through the narrow corridors of the train. Albus departed and stood by Scorpius and Morrison, waiting for their parents to come and pick them. Now that Albus thought about it however, he wasn't entirely sure who he was looking for. Rose had told him that Uncle Ron would be there, though he had heard from Fred that Uncle George would be picking him up. He was cut off from his thoughts by the arrival of Mirra and Rose however.

" There's my grandparents over there" Mirra told the bunch of them, indicating the elderly couple waving at them from a considerable distance away. It was hard to see them through the cracks of other people bustling about the station.

" Then I guess you have to get going" Rose said sadly, giving her best friend a large hug.

Mirra nodded and turned to the three Slytherin boys. She approached Albus first. He slightly raised his arms in anticipation for the hug that he would get-

She gave him a swift kiss on the cheek. It was fleeting- so fast that the only proof that it had occurred was the slightly wet spot on the side of his face. He felt his face burn up and knew that he had turned a bright red, though he did everything in his power to stop himself from making it noticeable.

Mirra too was now a bright red. It was as though in the heat of the moment of saying good bye she had accidentally done something. She quickly turned to Morrison and Scorpius and kissed both of them on the cheek as well, though neither of them went red. She then gave a tiny cough and turned around.

" Erm- have- have a good summer" she said to them, walking away quickly and pushing her trunk in front of her so absentmindedly that she nearly knocked a young boy off of his feet.

" You too" Scorpius and Morrison chorused.

" Yeah, you too" Albus shouted a bit louder than necessary, returning back to reality and still touching his burning cheek. He couldn't help but notice how wide his grin was. There it was- that was his accomplishment of the year. That was his reason to go back.

He turned to his two friends, both of whom gave him a fleeting smile and a quick thumbs up, though they didn't dare say more with Rose there.

" There they are!" Rose announced loudly, pointing her finger behind him. Albus turned around and did a double take. What looked like an entire army was standing by the street, several black Ministry cars waiting to go.

There was Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, Uncle George and Aunt Angelina, Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey, Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur, and even Uncle Charlie. He saw his mother and father as well. All of them were waving over to them, and Albus saw Lily and his younger cousins running towards them.

" Looks like you have to go mate" Morrison said, eyeing the group of them. " Rejoin your pack."

Albus wasn't listening however. He had just caught his father's eye, and saw that he was smiling at him. He had not seen him since that day in the Hospital Wing, and in just a few weeks it was amazing how radically different he looked. His face was gaunt, his eyes drooping from lack of sleep. Even his hair looked thinner, as though he had been tearing it out. Albus felt something resembling, but not quite, pity. His father was not the hero that he had been at the beginning of the year- he was not the symbol of justice that he had envied. But he was still his father. He returned the smile.

" Alright, this is me" he said, and he noticed that Rose had already said goodbye and was

walking towards her family. He turned and smacked both of his friends hands.

" Have a good summer mate" Scorpius said.

" Take care of yourself pal" Morrison added.

" Same to you guys" Albus said, and he gave them both brief hugs. " And Morrison," he added before turning around, " I want to see a beard on September first..."

Both of his friends laughed as Albus began walking towards his family. He hadn't gotten very far however before someone tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around. It was James. He looked very healthy now, his arm was no longer in a sling and the color in his face had fully returned.

" Come on" he said, jerking his head to the left, towards a large group of people. " I want to give you something."

" Huh?"

" Come on" James repeated, and he steered him away. Albus heard his family begin talking loudly about holding them up. They concealed themselves behind the group of people, out of sight from their entire family.

" What's going on?" Albus asked his brother as he dug through his pockets. Then James pulled out a folded up piece of parchment and thrust it into his hands.

" That's yours now" he said.

Albus looked down at it in surprise. He felt his jaw drop; he knew what he was holding.

" The Marauder's Map!" he breathed. " But-why-"

" That map should be aiding troublemakers" James said plainly. " Not hindering them. I used it for all of the wrong reasons this year."

Albus looked at his brother in shock. " Why not just get rid of it then? he asked. " Why give it to me?"

" Because it belongs to a Potter."

Albus laughed. " And how do you know that?"

James grinned and shrugged. " We've got an owl named Marauder don't we?"

" Oh come on James, that's just a coincidence..."

" Maybe it is" James said. " But something tells me that these blokes- Moony and Prongs or whatever- they'd want a Potter to have this map. I know Hogwarts back to front. Now it's yours. And maybe one day, when you've set enough hallways on fire, you can give it to Lily..." Albus cracked a smile at this, then asked his brother something that'd been bugging him.

" What's with you?" he asked. " First you return your badge, then you give me the Map..."

James gave him a weak smile. " Getting sliced open and ending up with a massive scar across your chest really puts a new perspective on things, to be honest. When I was laying there in the Hospital Wing I was thinking...Well I don't know what I was thinking. But I knew that I'd made a lot of bad choices this year and I told myself that if I did get back up, I'd make sure that they couldn't be made again."

Albus stared at his brother, somewhat uncomfortable. He had never heard his brother speak so seriously before. Before he could say anything however, his brother had begun walking.

" Alright" he said. " Enough little girl talk. Let's get going."

Albus walked by his side, and there was a small stretch of silence before his brother said something else.

" So..." he said. " How was the kiss?"

Albus blushed, and he noticed that his pace quickened a bit. " What are you on about?"

" Oh come on" he said. " I saw it. You were practically snogging her."

" I was not!" Albus shot out. " She just gave me a kiss on the cheek" he said.

" Yeah, but she clearly missed" James said. " Had you seen it from my angle, you'd of known that she was going for a bit of tongue."

" She was not! You shut up or I'll give you another scar!"

" Ha! You wish you had a scar this cool! It's even better than dad's. It looks like a giant sword."

Albus snorted. " You mean it's a straight line?"

" Well that's what a sword is isn't it? And besides, girls like scars. Maybe if you had one you *would have been* snogging Mirra back there. You should chuck yourself down the stairs when we get home to try and get one..."

" No, I'm alright thanks" Albus said, laughing and pushing himself away from his brother. They were now back in the view of their family, who had all started getting into their cars upon

seeing them.

" You sure?" James asked, and he dove for him and began ruffling his hair furiously. " If you're scared I can do it for you..."

Albus fought his brother off but James still managed to wrap his arm around him. Together they walked back to their family laughing- not a single thought of Ares, or of their father's removal from his post, or of any great change that may occur- ruining the moment.

The End

Well that's the end. What did you think? Better than the other two? Worse? Somewhere in between? Personally it was my favorite. Any favorite moments or new characters? I love hearing from you guys, don't be shy!

Also, though this was the last chapter, I will be posting an Author's Update/Book 4 preview in a couple of days to answer any questions without being spoilerish (so feel free to ask them!), to address some common criticisms (pleasantly of course), and to reveal some tidbits of information about the next book (including the title) to keep your appetites wet.

As always, reviews are not necessary, but are certainly appreciated. I'd also just like to thank all of you for reading period. The more readers I have the more inspired I am to continue writing, and the idea that people are enjoying my work is one of the best feelings in the world. So in short, thank you for all of the support, and I hope you all enjoyed this book and are looking forward to the next one!

Vekin87

Authors Update/ Book 4 Preview

Hello readers! As promised, this update is used to give tidbits of information on book 4, answer some questions, and address a few common criticisms.

But first, and I feel redundant in doing this as I've done it before, and I know you're growing tired of reading it, but I wanted to thank everyone for being a part of this. Everyone who reviewed, everyone who will review, anyone who's even read these stories has inspired and motivated me to write my best work, and it is a truly enthralling experience. The thought that the product of my imagination is being enjoyed really does keep a smile on my face. So to all of you- whether you've reviewed or just read and enjoyed- thank you.

Now on to a few questions that you've asked. To start I'll put an easy one.

Q. Did you kill J.K.? Because I've heard that if you kill her, you become her.

A. Recent evidence suggests that the only person powerful enough to kill J.K Rowling is, in fact, J.K Rowling. And thus, the theory that her killer would become her is a paradox that I don't think I'm capable of fathoming. To be short- No, I am not. For those of you would like to know a bit more about me, my name is Kevin. I am eighteen years old and I am lazy. Very lazy. I'm from the eastern side of the United States and I live in generally " less than ideal conditions". I graduated high school and am currently looking for work. I've been playing the guitar for two years (probably my second favorite hobby after writing) and I love pickles. Seriously, they're awesome. I would slaughter a man with my bear hands right now for a jar of Claussen Pickles. Dead serious.

Q. When will we see the next book?

A. I cannot say for sure, though unfortunately, it may be a while. As my story gets more complex it becomes harder to plan out fully, and I confess that book 4 is less planned out than three was. There will most likely be a 2 month hiatus at the least,

but once I do start posting chapters, I should be able to do it a very quick rate much like I did the last few chapters of Book 3. Just know that I am working hard to make Book 4 every bit as enjoyable to read as my previous ones.

Q. Will we find out how " Charlie" and " Donny" know all about the secret passages?

A. Actually, I can answer this right now. They're just two misbehaving kids. Much like how Ron and Harry found things with little to no help at first, so did they. It should be noted however that Eckley has three older brothers, all of whom graduated Hogwarts. True, he may lie about some of their endeavors, but one could imagine that he knows a considerable amount about the castle just from them. there be more scenes or involvement with the grown-ups?

A. Yes. How much more I cannot say, as it's sometimes hard to incorporate them (what with Albus away for almost the entire book) but there should be a noticeable increase. Like I said, it's not entirely planned out, but as I tackle more adult issues, it's only natural that adults be more involved.

Harry be the new DADA teacher or who will be the new potions teacher?

A. Professor Handit returned as the DADA teacher, though there will be a new Potions teacher, and they will be an OC (Original character).
is Snapes second portrait?

A. This will be revealed, though probably not in the next book.
there be more romance, sarcasm, comedy etc

A. Well that goes without saying :)
we see more from other houses?

A. A bit, though my stories are still largely Slytherin based.

we see new characters and/or become acquainted with other classmates?

A. Plenty of new characters, though how many are classmates I cannot say.

there be any more Scorpius and Rose interaction? I'm wondering if they are getting together or him and Lily

A. There will be a bit of romance for Scorpius, but I'll leave it at that.
we see more Hugo?

A. Absolutely. In fact, of all the Weasley kids, he's my favorite to write, though I'll touch on this later.

Q. So, will Scorpius join the Quidditch team? Okay thats a spoiler, can you at least tell us if he tries out?

A. He will at least try out. Once more, I'll leave it at that.

Q.1. Will we see more of Hermione? We heard she was at the DoM during the battle, what I would like to know is why she was part of the reinforcements? Were the reinforcements old members of the DA as well as Aurors?

A. The DA has pretty much merged with the OotP, which is basically under Harry's command, thus making them an extension of Aurors. It's all pretty connected now. Fairhart for instance was not in the Order, as he's an OC, but he still uses a patronus to send messages, which is their way of communicating. Hermione being reinforcements is really just Ron's instinct. He needed help fighting, Rose was in danger, and he knows his wife. She's probably stronger than half the Aurors anyway. And yes, you will see more of her. I want it to be noted that I do not dislike her as a character, I just don't use her a lot because it feels like cheating. She knows so much that if Albus could just ask her something there would be little mystery. I much prefer Ron's drunken antics and Albus' own sneaking to help him gather clues. In book 4, when there's no particular " mysterious new object" to find, Hermione will get much more screen time.

there be a new Minister?

A. I cannot say. There will definitely be a new Head Auror however.

Q. Will we find out more about "The portrait of Fate and Fortune" and what Albus saw?

A. Eventually, but probably not Book 4.

Q. Will we see more of Fairhart's past?

A. Fairhart's story will be uncovered through all of the books, he's one of my most well thought out characters. You'll probably learn a bit more about him Book 4, but believe me, there's enough to span the rest of the series.

there be character deaths?

A. Yes. In Book 4 and the rest of the series.

Q. Will we see the Malfoy family again? I really would like to see more of them.

A. For the rest of the series, definitely, though I'm not too sure on Book 4, this particular area needs fleshing out. And on that topic, someone asked a while back if Lucius' refusal to join Ares in Book 2 would be important. Let's just say this will be touched upon in Book 4.

Q. What about what we saw with Albus at the DoM, will we learn more?

A. This too is a mystery that spans the series, but you'll get significant chunks of info in Book 4.

Also, someone mentioned Harry getting out the Elder Wand. This is a good idea, but I want to debunk it right now. Apart from the Cloak, which I can hardly get rid of, the Hallows are off limits for me. I just don't think that bringing them in to my series would do them justice, thus I stay with my own magical objects (The Foulest Book, Dragonfang Wand, etc). To be fair however, I don't think it would do Harry much good either. Ares was quite right when he taunted his former mentor- Harry lacks the will to do what's necessary. If he's unwilling to kill or cause major harm to someone who he once considered an ally, the Elder Wand won't help him much. That's pretty much all for the questions, sorry if some were less than satisfactory- I do want a few secrets kept however. And now on to answering some common criticisms. For those of you who'd like a few answers as to why I did certain things, or just want to see me admit some major problems I've found in my own work, feel free to read. For those of you who don't want to hear me whine and make excuses, skip ahead to the Book 4 tidbits section, I won't blame you in the slightest.

1. A lot of people thought that I didn't really give the minor characters, particularly the Weasley family, enough development. And there was some disappointment on them all going to Gryffindor as well. There actually was a good reason for this, but I screwed up near the end. Before I started writing Book 3 I knew I was going to put Albus through crap. What with fighting with James, and Mirra and Eckley, and his fathers blunders, I knew he was going to be alone. It was essential to his development that he remain alone however. I seriously contemplated putting some people in different houses (Hugo, for example) but in the end decided not to. I felt that had I given Albus a crutch- someone who was an outcast like him, he wouldn't have been so desperate for help this year. This would have made key moments like Fairhart's advice impossible, because he'd have had a solid support system outside of Morrison and Scorpius. Of course, this backfired. Once I got to the latter half of the book, when Albus was taking steps to resolving things, and had become friends with his brother, and worked things out with Mirra, I realized that I'd done very poorly on some of my minor characters. I tried introducing them but realized I'd spent too much time on Albus ignoring them for them to have much personality. I will try and fix this in Book 4. I can make no promises, as the cast will be larger and more in depth, but I will try.

2. Mirra. Some people seemed to think that I under developed her, and I kind of agree. From my experience, girl trouble is always worst when the girl is mysterious, and in my attempts to make Mirra ambiguous I feel that I also made her dry. Just another example of backfiring. Believe it or not, she does have a personality and some cool things about her, of which I will try to make known in Book 4. I don't just want her written off as Albus' crush, and hopefully it isn't too late to change that.

3. There's been some criticism towards how this book was written, in terms of being mostly inner dialogue. I certainly understand this, though to be fair, it was planned like this, and I wouldn't change it if I could. This is the first book where Albus has moral dilemma's, where he really has to think to himself. As he starts seeing things more gray than black and white, I wanted him always arguing with himself, always unsure. This will probably be the last book with so much inner dialogue, but I really did think it was necessary. I want Albus to question " right and wrong" and " bad and good". JK created the ultimate physical antagonist in Voldemort, and I can't possibly hope to replicate or better that. What I can do however is give Albus an inward challenge Though there are " bad guys" in my stories, at the end of the day, I want Albus to see his biggest enemy in the mirror. The HP series was " How do we kill Voldemort?". I want my series to be " What gives me the right to kill so and so?

". Characters like Fairhart were given a prominent part in this book to sort of introduce Albus to different ideas, and indeed, if you follow Ares closely, you'll see his own marred ideals as well. The questions is, who is Albus like? Does he agree with his father? With Fairhart? Dare we think it, with Ares? This inward dialogue may have plagued this book a bit, and I'm sorry if it did, but overall, I think it was essential to the series as a whole, and that's ultimately what I'm going for.

4. Slytherin should be edgier. I kind of disagree with this. Pure Blood fanaticism had mostly been abolished, and though the Slytherin reputation lingers, there's nothing to suggest that Albus and Morrison should act like Slytherins from years ago. The way I see it, these kids are barely teenagers, and haven't grown up with the same issues as their parents. Really, it's all about personality, not tendencies, and I'd imagine that most students would be pretty much the same around this age. As they grow things may change (Scorpius in particular will get a bit edgier), but for now, they're really just kids who got sorted into where they asked to go.

5. Continuity errors. There's really no excuse for this. I've seen this mostly with my first two books, but I'll comment on it here. I generally pride myself on staying pretty close to canon, but a few huge blunders were pointed out, and all that I can do is apologize. Book 1 features Thanksgiving in Britain Just proof that my tiny American brain can't fathom any countries other than the big, bad, ozone layer destroying U.S.A. I also screwed up some ages to the Weasleys, and even made Dominique a boy by accident. Adding or taking away portions of a characters anatomy is probably the most non canon thing I can think, so sorry for that as well. If it makes you feel any better, Dominique can be a Hemaphromagus- A wizard capable of changing gender at will.

Let it be noted that I don't mind criticism at all though, and I encourage it. I understand that the only way for me to get better as writer is to know what people like and dislike, and I appreciate every bit of critique I've been given. Really- thank you for trying to make a better writer. I will try and return the favor listening to your words and by writing as best as I can.

And now the book 4 tidbits! Just to kind of wet your appetites...

1. The first chapter of Book 2 was a Darvy scene, and of Book 3 a Fairhart scene. Book 4's first chapter will be, for the most part, an Ares scene.

2. Ares mentioned a " change" in this book, and Harry commented that he's not sure what Ares' full plans are. The extent of what Ares plans on doing will be fully revealed in Book 4.

3. Likewise, the additional powers that the Dragonfang Wand has will be revealed as well. I feel that these abilities may actually turn off a few readers, but I have the best intentions for my series, and if you stick with it, I think you'll like it.

4. Things will be a bit darker in Book 4, and there will be some touchy subjects. Book 4 will thus be rated M. Don't misconstrue that as Book 4 being some sex filled teenage romp filled with cursing, it's just that things will be a bit more mature at some points. Here's an example. A major character will die in Book 4.

of the chapter titles I have planned out include " Courting Rose", " The Spy", and " The Date".

6. One of my favorite original characters, Warren Waddlesworth, will be introduced. Some of my sharper readers may remember that name from Book 3, and thus, might have a small inclination as to what's going on in Book 4...

7. And finally, and this is subject to change, though it probably won't, Book 4 is tentatively titled as " Albus Potter and the Rise of the Dark Alliance".

Also, and I feel bad to shamelessly promote myself, but some people have mentioned that they'd be interested in reading some original work. I've written a few stories, but I tend to write poetry mostly. For those of you interested in reading them, I write mostly narrative poems, and have a profile for them as well. As of now there's only one uploaded, but it's 7 pages and I've heard it's pretty good. I should sporadically upload some more every once in a while.

My profile name is Vekin91 on fiction press .com (For some reason it won't show up without the spaces, but it's all one word). Feedback is very much appreciated, so feel free to read and review. I am trying to keep my poetry profile separate from my FF works, as my poetry profile is really made for people who I have yet to tell I write

fan-fiction, so if you do review, try not to mention my Albus Potter works. Of course, I'm thankful for any and all reviews and readers.

Wow, what a long authors update. I guess it makes sense, it was a long book and it's a long wait until book 4. Well anyways, this is the last update for Book 3, and I hope you enjoyed it and are looking forward to Book 4!