

Albus Potter and the Year of the Badger

Chapter 1: Compartmentalized

Albus Potter was making his way through the Hogwarts Express. His brown hair, which he had attempted to tame into a part, still had a wayward cowlick waving in the back. Picking his way through the stream of students in black school robes with his trunk and owl, searching for an empty compartment.

He knew that his parents expected him to stay with his big brother. They should have realized that, in the last few weeks, he had had enough teasing from James Sirius Potter to do him for a lifetime!

"Oh, you've got that runty, little, slithery quality about you," James would say under his breath while Mum and Dad were out of the room. "We might as go ahead and get you some green robes now to match your eyes!"

James had actually put a common rat snake, nicked from the park, in Albus' sock drawer at one point! That prank earned him a private conference with Dad in the den. Once Albus was brought in to accept the apology, James remarked, "I'm sorry Albus. I just thought you'd get on with a snake!"

After loading their belongings on the train and saying their goodbyes, Albus and Rose pushed their carts down the corridor. Their owls, Rose's big tawny screech owl, Celestina, and Albus' Nox, a smooth black long-winged eagle owl, were hooting softly in conversation in their cages, stacked on top of the trunks.

As they arrived outside the compartment they where supposed to ride in, they saw James entertaining some girls his age, bragging animatedly. From the gestures he was making, it was obvious he was telling about the atrocities he had visited upon his sensitive little brother the last few weeks. Tight as twins with Rose Weasley since they were toddlers, it only took one silent look and a nod on her part for them to agree to defy his parents' wishes. So they passed James by, and went on to find another car to ride in.

In spite of the stress from ducking his brother, Albus was enjoying his walk through the train. Bits of lively conversations echoed around him, the sense of history was everywhere. So many wizards had made this same journey, and walked through these posh, red panelled, carpeted hallways. Included in that number, was one frightened and lonely boy named Harry, with a lightening bolt scar on his brow, on his way to destiny all those years ago. It was strange for Albus, to think of his dad being that small, alone and scared, but he took courage from the thought.

Now it was his turn.

Rose, with her sprinkle of freckles, pert little nose and mane of bushy auburn hair, was just behind him. She was prattling on as usual, about things she had read in the copy of *Hogwarts, A History* given her last Christmas. Practically inhaling it, she was now able to quote entire chapters.

"And then the four founders came up with their criteria for the House named for them. Godric Gryffindor had this old hat, which they all enchanted, and that was..."

Albus was only listening with half an ear, just enough to know she was still behind him. He felt he could handle anything if he stayed close to Rose.

It wasn't long until Albus started to worry that leaving James had not been a good idea. Almost to the end of the train, they still hadn't found a compartment. Most of them were full; the ones that weren't contained students that didn't look too friendly to the passing first-years. He fretted about not finding a seat and being stranded in the corridor for the whole trip until Rose put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Here's one! You almost walked right by. Honestly! Are you paying attention Al?"

He gave her Uncle Ron's familiar affronted look that she would dare suggest such a thing! And calmly assured her that he was indeed paying attention. She countered him with a classic Aunt Hermione look that told him she wasn't buying it for one second. They glowered at each other for a few moments, but then they had to grin. Albus glanced through the glass, and saw that the compartment wasn't empty after all.

It was the same slender white-blond haired boy, with the sharp features, pointed chin and imperious manner, they had seen on the platform. He was sitting staring forlornly out the window in his school robes, his head resting on one hand.

"That's the Malfoy boy; Dad told me to beat him at every test," Rose announced, forgetting to keep her voice from carrying, as usual. Over the years, this little defect of hers had generated more than one awkward situation. When the lone occupant of the compartment turned with a start, and a touch of trepidation, and saw them staring at him through the door, awkward was the best word to describe it. Albus watched as Malfoy, seeing no threat, sneered and pulled cold aloofness around him like a heavy cloak the brief moment of vulnerability gone instantly. He dismissed them by turning back to the passing countryside. Not a good first impression, to say the least.

Albus made a quick decision. They could go all the way back to the caboose and not find a compartment this empty, or try to salvage the situation here. Unless this boy was Lord Voldemort reborn, he and Rose could handle whatever he dished out.

"This one is fine," Albus said. He lugged his heavy trunk, with Nox hooting indignantly, to the door and slid the panel back. "Really hate to be a bother, but this is the only compartment open."

Brooding like he was having the first rough day of his life, Malfoy was obviously thinking that this interruption wasn't going to be an improvement. However, Albus could tell Malfoy's desire to not be alone in the car like some museum oddity was outweighing the infringement. The answer hoped for came in the form of a curt nod before the other boy turned once again back to the window.

It was then that Albus had one of what James called, creepy little boy moments, when he realized that, in a way, he had just been indescribably rude. He had told the boy he was a last resort. He tried to think of a way to amend his last statement, but Rose beat him to it.

"Albus, you git! I told you we should have gotten in that last compartment, but no! You said they didn't look like people you wanted to sit with! Now you have us disturbing this boy. He obviously doesn't want our company!"

Brilliant, Rose, Albus thought. Now Malfoy wasn't a last resort, but someone they had chosen! Albus gave her the grateful look she deserved for covering up his social mistake. She wrinkled her nose cutely in reply.

She started to tug their things back through the door to complete the ruse when a very cultured and sophisticated, but somehow soft, voice said, "There is plenty of room..."

Albus's eyes met Rose's from around Celestina's cage, his back turned to their new companion. As he helped her lift her trunk over the track, she winked, and he grinned back. They were going to be such a good team!

Being a half-inch taller than either of them, the Malfoy boy helped them get their trunks into the overhead bin. The owls went in the floor between the seats.

Albus held out his hand to introduce himself and Rose. "I'm-"

"You're a Potter and she's a Weasley, obviously."

Albus took that statement in stride, but he saw Rose's eyes flash daggers at the boy. A telltale flush crept into her cheeks.

"So what!" she snapped. "We do have first names, you know!"

Malfoy looked taken aback by her reaction. It quickly became obvious he honestly hadn't realized his words were offensive. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Rose, used to constant verbal combat with her dad, mum and cousins, appeared off balanced by his lack of argument. "That's okay," she stammered, "I'm Rose and he's Albus."

His hand was as long and slender as the rest of him, when he offered it. "I'm Scorpius Malfoy."

"I'm sorry if I seemed a bit short," he said a little later as they settled in across from each other. "But my looks, and the mere mention of my last name, is causing people to foam at the mouth."

"Well," Rose replied offhandedly, "you happen to be the grandson and son of two of the only Death Eaters acquitted after the Battle of Hogwarts. You should expect for people to find that offensive, wouldn't you say?"

Her words, carelessly given, had an immediate effect of turning things ugly. The weary boy, having had enough of defending his family, blurted out, "Well in case you don't remember, basking in the glory of your family's universal adoration," he said, his pale face flushed with anger, "the great Harry Potter is the one that spoke up in their behalf! He owes my grandmother his very life!"

Rose wasn't going to back down and Albus could almost see weaponry on both sides lining up for battle, as they started to square off. Albus, however, found the situation ironic. He had more in common with this boy, than he did with anyone else on the entire train! Overcoming unrealistic expectations because of family history was a challenge they obviously shared. And here they were, (or rather, Rose was) about to become enemies. All

this impending argument was going to accomplish was to separate him from the one other boy who might just understand what Albus was facing.

In a moment of frustration he blurted to Rose, "So what does it matter! I'm a Potter, you're a Weasley, and Scorpius here is the offspring of a bunch of big, bad, Death-Eater gits! Can't we fight later, and sit now?"

They all looked at each other a moment, stunned. Suddenly, all of the tension and fear and anger flowed into a laughter so hard their stomachs ached.

Scorpius snickered out, "Since your father...is Saint Harry Potter...saviour of the Wizarding world, do you need lighting at home...or do you just use his halo?"

Albus guffawed, "When your dad...washed Lord Voldemort's shorts...by hand...how did he get the sulphur smell...out?"

They were literally howling when the door slide open and the beauty that was Victoire Weasley poked her head in. Her bright strawberry blond hair glistened in the overhead lights, her part-Veela ancestry somehow managed to make the abrupt motion graceful. The Head Girl badge pinned to her dark school robes twinkled.

"Oh, there you two are." Victoire's mother's heavy French accent gave her daughter's speech patterns just enough French flavour to make her even more exotic. "I told your parents I would look in on you. I asked James, but he got snotty, said he hadn't seen you since King's Cross, so I came looking."

She looked around at the three younger students, rolling around the compartment in fits. "What's going on here?" she asked her cousins, her eyes resting on the only occupant not familiar to her. "Why aren't you with James? I'm not so sure your parents would want you sitting with a boy you don't know."

Rose simpered sweetly like her cousin, Victoire, had been known to do. "Oh, we know him. He's the son of evil Death Eaters, haven't you heard? Before you rudely interrupted, he was regaling us with his dastardly plans to destroy the entire Wizarding World at the ripe old age of eleven."

Peals of laughter accompanied this statement; Victoire rolled her eyes and shut the door, which made it even funnier, so they laughed some more.

"I...seriously...need to stop...it's beginning to hurt!" Scorpius said, rolling over on the seat, bent over. Albus was on the floor between the two benches trying to stifle the hiccups, and the two owls in their cages on the floor glared at him, dignified and annoyed, as he worked to gain control. Rose had pulled the school robes she had been wearing since they embarked over her head, leaving just the bushy Weasley tinted brown hair poking out as she attempted to wipe her eyes.

They finally gained enough control to recover, but hysterical laughter was by no means too far off. They sat in a silence that was companionable. Albus, who finally got around to getting his robes on, pulled out some worn Exploding Snap cards that he always seemed to have on him somewhere. Without another word the other two had been dealt in. Two rounds where played by the time the snack cart came through.

The snack lady, who had been travelling the Hogwarts Express for the better part of twenty years, knew the significance of the grouping she saw in the compartment as she stuck her head in. "Any one need some snacks?" she said, her confusion apparent. The look became even more pronounced when Scorpius impulsively bought out close to her entire stock and shared it with Albus and Rose. She rolled away, murmuring about "Strange times we are living in."

Rose and Scorpius both dug into the chocolate frogs to add to their respective Wizard card collections, and soon they were in deep negotiations, trading them back and forth. Then Scorpius held up a Harry Potter card to Albus, who was watching them contentedly munching a sour grape liquorice wand.

"I'm thinking, that I might not be the only first year, dealing with a famous family name!"

Albus saw the familiar handsome face with the flyaway hair, scarred forehead, and glasses waving at him. He waved back absently.

"I think I've got the better end of the deal considering."

Scorpius studied the card, making a statement meant to be off the cuff, but had too much a hint of trepidation to quite pull it off.

"I'm an only child; I have no cousins. Outside of my parents, and grandparents, and now you two, I don't know a lot of people."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Oh, believe me, you aren't missing a thing! We've got so many cousins, and relations, and friends, and friends of friends..."

"All courtesy of being related to Saint Harry Potter mind you!" Albus interjected with a chuckle.

"By the time we get there most of the staff has already been round to dinner!" Rose continued, "Professor Neville Longbottom himself is Uncle Neville!"

"Professor Hagrid broke two chairs at Grimmauld Place last time he visited," Albus said as an aside. "Our elf, Kreacher, insinuated if Hagrid ever comes back, he's going to take the sock."

Into the conversation leapt a cream-colour fur-ball with a chocolate brown tail and face, landing in Malfoy's lap from the storage rack. Albus and Rose were startled, but Scorpius absently reached out to pet him.

"Don't worry, it's my cat, Kublai," he told them as he picked the fluffy cat up by its scruff to look into its bemused chocolate covered face with the turquoise eyes. "Are you up then? I thought you were going to sleep all the way there!"

The cat, in response, batted the end of his nose with its paw.

"Alright, you can stay with me," Scorpius said with mock exasperation, letting the cat settle in his lap before giving Kublai's ears a scratch.

The cat stared at the other two occupants like a king would his serfs, fixing his bright eyes on the two avian occupants, to their alarm. Rose reached out a cautious hand and scratched its ears, receiving a purr in response.

"I'd be a bit cautious, he's a Mongol." Scorpius told her. "He may be purring and friendly right now, but that can change in a second, no warning."

Albus made no effort to reach for the cat. "That's all right, I've had quite enough of cats to last me for a lifetime."

Rose changed the subject. "Well, if you dislike how people treat your family so much, why not change what it means to be a Malfoy?"

His suddenly cool blue-grey eyes regarded her with hauteur. "You say that like it's actually an option."

"Why isn't it?" demanded Rose. "Who is saying that you can't?"

"I'll be in Slytherin of course, you know what that means, not exactly a heroic lot." With those words Scorpius went back to staring out the window, in a huff, his chin in his hand like when they first saw him. Kublai, sensing his mood, curled up and batted Scorpius' hand. His hand moved under his cat's chin, making the little pet stretch his neck and close his eyes in pleasure.

The silence was immediately awkward, but Albus broke it, surprising himself, by saying, "There are other houses, you know."

Rose was aghast. "This coming from some one who has been stressed out for months about where he'll be sorted! Gryffindor or nothing, you said!"

"You two belong in Gryffindor, obviously, and I'm bound to be in Slytherin. I'll bet there's not much chance of us being friends, beyond this point," Scorpius said resignedly, staring out at the countryside

They sat in an uncomfortable silence, only broken by the owls hooting softly. Then they heard the announcement: "We will be arriving in Hogwarts shortly, however, due to some recent unfounded accusations," the voice remarked with a sniff, "you will be required to check all personal items with the wizard on the platform."

It was fortunate that it wasn't long before the train lurched, grinding to a halt. They were careful not to look at each other as they collected their pets and trunks filing out into the crowding aisle.

Chapter 2 Boats, Brothers and other Decisions

Albus maneuvered through the buzzing, scurrying crowd of eager wizards and left his trunk and owl with the wizard watching the other luggage. Suddenly, he felt a thump on the back of his head. Without even turning, using reflexes instilled by enduring years of sneak attacks, he elbowed the perpetrator behind him in the stomach with unfailing accuracy.

"Hey, now! What was that for?" came the familiar voice of his cousin, Fred.

Albus turned to see the burly, caramel-skinned boy with a spray of freckles across his nose, holding his midsection. His light brown eyes glared at Albus reproachfully.

"Sorry, Freddy," Albus remarked slyly, his tone making it clear that he really wasn't sorry after all. "Thought you were James."

Fred's expression was clearly overstated. As the resident family clown, he had quite the selection of comical reactions from which to choose.

"I will forget you insulted me in such a manner," Fred remarked with as snooty a tone as he could muster, "but once you learn to duel, young man, we have an appointment."

Albus snorted. "My dad's Harry Potter. You sure you want to mess with his favourite son?"

Fred waved him off. "Uncle Harry wouldn't dare mess with me! He knows I can make defeating old Voldy look like cake."

Rose, who had just strolled up, caught the last bit. She glared at Fred, arms crossed. "Can we go to the boats now, or are you going to bore us to death with your delusions?"

Fred's mock seriousness broke with a grin. "Voldy's one thing, but she's a scary one!" He chuckled.

Suddenly serious, Fred nodded at a solitary figure, now securing his beloved cat in his carryall for his journey to Hogwarts with the rest of the pets and luggage. Fred held his tongue as Scorpius slouched by, without a glance in their direction, on his way down to the boat dock. The pale boy walked with an invisible bubble around him. No one walked close to him if they could help it.

"Vickie told us you were getting cosy with that Malfoy boy. Couldn't find better company, eh? He's Slytherin material, he is," Fred remarked in poorly hushed tones.

As Albus stared after their companion of the last few hours, and he remembered that last depressing revelation that they were all destined to be enemies.

Albus shrugged. "Who knows? If I land in Slytherin, we might be bunk mates."

Fred guffawed. "Oh, Teddy and I pulled that on James when he was a first year. All the way to the Sorting Hat, we swore he'd be a snake."

Seeing Albus' still serious face, he hastily added, "You know all Potters and Weasleys have beds reserved in Gryffindor tower! Don't even think that, mate!"

"I was kidding about you winding up in Slytherin anyway, so stay away from that Malfoy boy, you stupid little brat!" came the loud declaration from just behind him.

Albus spun and saw his older brother, James, standing a little closer to him than was polite. The spending money he was supposed to have given Albus earlier, clutched forgotten in his fist. It was obvious that he had overheard what was said to Fred, and was about to butt in with his two Knuts worth. Well, it was James; with his brains it was more like one and a half Knuts.

The two brothers had always been as different in outside appearance as they were in personality. Besides the black hair to Albus' brown, James was more rugged in appearance than his bookish brother, with a lot more Weasley showing through than Potter. He wore an impishness and confidence tight around him like an invisible cloak.

Albus smirked. "Come to think of it, if you're an example of what's getting Sorted into Gryffindor these days, I might be better off in Slytherin!"

James was appalled. "You're not seriously considering being friends with that Death Eater prat!"

Rose answered him, the flush on her face showing she had enough of her cousin's attitude.

"Al and I don't care who his family is, James. And you should know better, you arrogant prig!"

Albus whistled under his breath.

James finally found his voice, growling, "If you get into the boat with that junior Death Eater, then Mum and Dad will get an owl before the night is through!"

Albus then noticed that there was quite the entourage gathered behind his red-faced brother. Uncle Percy's fourth-year twin daughters, Molly and Lucy, were there, popping Drooble's Bubble Trouble in synchronicity, complacent as usual. Fred had moved over to stand with Roxanne, who was shorter and willowy, and the main informer on all of the Grandkid's activities.

Just to the side of them was Dominique, Victoire's fourth-year, less Veela, more Weasley-like, silvery-blond haired sister, with a concerned look on her face. Much nicer than her mother and sister, while she looked ready to stand in if things got out of hand, she was smart enough to not get involved and make it worse.

Everyone that was in the family was there except Victoire, who was currently lecturing some students somewhere in the fog, oblivious to the drama her gossiping had caused.

Albus heard Rose's intake of breath for another barrage, but he wanted to fire this one.

"Roxanne over there will be sending an owl anyway," he started, noting Roxie's guilty flush and Fred's futile attempts to stifle a laugh. "The truth is, I would even welcome Hufflepuff if it got me away from a prat like you!"

With those words still lingering in the air like gunpowder residue on a battlefield, he waved merrily to his cousins and gave his brother one last disgusted look as he and Rose turned to go. She stuck out her tongue and followed.

Albus checked over his shoulder one last time to make sure he wasn't going to be jumped, and saw that James was still glaring at him, arms crossed, the money still clutched in a white-knuckled fist. Before he turned away, Albus saw Fred quietly touch James's shoulder, telling him it was time to leave. Albus couldn't be sure, maybe it was the light, but before his brother turned to head for the horseless carriages, he could have sworn he saw what looked like the beginnings of a begrudged admiration.

"Firs' years! Firs' years, come with me!" came the booming, gravelly voice, barreling over the crowd and causing some of the girls to yip.

The voice was familiar from family get-togethers and Christmases all the way back as far as Albus could remember. Sure enough, towering over the cowering new students was the shaggy head and broad shoulders of one Rubeus Hagrid.

"Firs' years come with me. Right this way!" he bellowed, the beam of joy on his face disarming his intimidating size. Albus and Rose joined the flow of school robes headed in the direction of the towering half-giant. So distracted by a first-year girl with blue hair, Albus almost collided with a dark-hooded wizard.

The broad shouldered man steadied Albus, said, "excuse me," in a pleasant baritone voice, and continued past up the path. Rose hissed at Albus to pay attention to where he was going, but he was too excited. This was their first Hogwarts trip, after all.

Hagrid saw Albus, who was following Rose down to the lakeside, and he edged up to them. "Tell Kreacher, er, sorry about those chairs. I offered to fix 'em, but he wasn't having it."

Albus had to chuckle. "Dad did a *Reparo* spell after you left. Kreacher's bark is worse than his bite, he's not mad at you. Mum said visit anytime you want. We'll just have to find somewhere with sturdier furniture!"

Hagrid snorted good-naturedly at that. He waved them to the next boat in line, but they saw in the previous boat, as in the train, there was only one familiar, pale blond occupant, staring out at the water. Scorpius Malfoy's fortunes weren't changing much.

Albus felt a strong sense of irony. There was a moment on his dad's first journey when he chose Ron Weasley over Draco Malfoy; and now it looked as if he had the opposite choice facing him. He wouldn't be disowned for being friends with Scorpius, but his family had made its feelings clearly known about the budding friendship. He exchanged a glance with Rose, who he saw was noticing the same thing, which helped make up his mind.

'Hagrid? Put us in that one,' he stated.

Rose eagerly agreed.

Hagrid paused, a confused look passed on his great unkempt face. "I hate ter see anybody get left out. But, erm, his dad wasn't a nice guy. He can't help that, I know, but I hafta ask if you're sure, Albie."

Albus nodded and Hagrid gave him a wry smile. "Mighty nice of yer. Just watch'im real careful."

Scorpius glanced up as the boat shifted, eyes narrowing in suspicion as his defences were once again in place.

"Were the other boats full?" he commented in that same sneering, arrogant tone he used upon their first meeting.

"Of course not!" Rose snapped. "You've got friends now. Get used to it, Mal-Boy!"

It had finally been said; it wasn't official until that moment. Somehow speaking the words had cemented the forming bond. Albus saw Rose turn away from them, her face flushing as Scorpius turned back to looking across the lake, but not before they saw a tiny grateful smile curl his lips.

"Hold on everybody!" Hagrid called as he waved his battered pink umbrella in the dying light. The boats lurched forward, bringing cries of surprise from the Muggleborns.

As they glided across the placid lake, the breeze played havoc with Rose's bushy locks. She was too busy to notice, staring into the dark depths, trying to see a Grindylow or a Mer-person, or even the famous squid known to protect first years that fell out of the boat. Albus just admired the rolling hillsides, cliffs, and thick-forested acres that made up the land between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. In the dimming light from the retreating sun, it all seemed even more magical than he knew it to be.

Albus turned away from the view and saw that Scorpius was back in his deep thinking mode chin in hand. It was amazing how quickly Albus had learned to read the other boy as though they had known each other for years. He wished there was a way they could be in the same House, all three of them together. He and Rose just didn't have the make up for Slytherin, and he knew it. No matter how upset he got about the thought of being sorted there, he had always known that deep down. Strangely, he didn't think Scorpius belonged there either.

Trying to cheer Scorpius up, he commented, "Not all Slytherins are bad, you know. My dad named me Albus Severus after Severus Snape. He's always said Severus was as responsible for the downfall of Voldemort as Dumbledore, but no one has ever really given him the credit he was due. Well, that's what my dad says."

Scorpius snickered derisively. "Albus Severus? I wouldn't go around advertising that one."

"Why? Is yours any better?" Rose inquired, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Scorpius rose up a little in the boat, pride apparent. "It's Hyperion."

Rose giggled. "Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy? Why didn't they just go ahead and write evil on your forehead?"

"From the reactions I've been getting, it might be there already," Scorpius remarked with a sad little chuckle.

They all would have had another laugh, but the towering, twinkling, spires of Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry appeared through the fog around the lake. The sight of it sprawling all over the hill took their breath away. The fog wrapped around the lower levels and grounds so that the school seemed to exist on an island of cloud. The recently constructed four-story arboretum, located where the greenhouses had once stood, sparkled like emerald glass, adding to the mystery and majesty of the scene.

His dad never took Albus on visits here, telling him he wanted Albus's first view of Hogwarts to be as special as when he first set eyes the castle. Albus was at a loss for words, but as usual Rose had the right thing to say.

"Blimey," she said in an awed whisper.

"Blimey," Albus agreed. "Yeah, that about covers it!"

Chapter 3: A Sorted Problems

The view of Hogwarts didn't get any less spectacular up close. Albus stared wide-eyed at the venerable architecture at stone lain long before his great-grandparents were young, mixed with the newer, huge stone slabs used to repair the gigantic outer walls. Flags waved to and fro atop the towering spires, blown by the lake wind. Then the view was lost as the boats drifted into the underground cavern to the ancient boat dock. The students disembarked, gathered behind Hagrid's bulk, and followed him up the mossy stairs to a doorway built for someone larger than human. Albus wasn't the only one who started as Hagrid raised a ham-sized fist and banged three times on the massive, aged oaken door; the booming bass thrum echoing through the cavern.

The face that appeared as the door opened came as a shock to Albus. He knew his honorary "uncle" had risen to head of Gryffindor house, but the person that historically greeted first years was the Deputy Headmaster, which meant that Uncle Neville was moving up in the world.

"Here they are, Professor Longbottom. Safe and sound, as always," Hagrid announced to some gasps.

"Welcome to Hogwarts!" The serious, no-nonsense tone was one Albus had never heard his "uncle" Neville use. He was beginning to wonder if the jovial man who had been one of his favourite visitors in the past had changed to suit his new position

The other students seemed intimidated by a living legend, a hero of the great battle with almost as much notoriety as Harry Potter himself.

Professor Neville Longbottom kept up the looming impressiveness for another moment or two, then his face cracked and the jolly kind-hearted Neville, more in keeping with the man Albus was used to, peeked out.

"Sorry, can't keep that up. It's just not me. Well, come on, you lot!" he called with a chuckle, waving them inside. "You've got your letters, you're supposed to be here. Come on up, before you all catch your death. Up you get!"

He turned and entered cavernous doorway. The first-years filed passed a beaming Hagrid; the half-giant's grin was comforting to some, frightening to others. He gave Albus and Rose a wink as they passed.

The entrance hall they entered was massive. The ceiling was so high, Albus couldn't even see it, and all four floors of 12 Grimmauld Place could have fit into the room. Stone walls were lit with magic torches, whose wicks were enchanted so that they would never be consumed. Albus tried to focus on following Professor Longbottom, but he couldn't help but examine his surroundings, his head on a swivel. The elaborate stonework was far beyond the descriptions he had been given by relatives, and he had never seen so many Wizard paintings in one place. Those paintings were not being subtle as they pointed and gossiped with each other, picking out features of former students.

"Is that him? Yes, I recognize the eyes. Scrawny little thing, just like his father and his father's father before him!"

"Oh look, Weasley hair and freckles. How many are there? That family gets bigger by the minute."

"Look at that boy; Leprechaun blood for sure. They can change sizes you know. It's a wonder they don't mix more often!"

Albus looked around and saw the smallest boy in the group. His hair was a coppery orange shade and he had more freckles than any Weasley. His bright hazel eyes glared a challenge at the paintings as he went by. One of the paintings suddenly fell off its hook, jolting all of the occupants before falling face down. Albus could have sworn the boy smiled as though it had been intentional.

The professor led them across the flagstone floor, past a pair of massive oak doors that made the doorway from the dock look small. A steady buzz of hundreds of conversations seeped out. He led them by the intimidating marble stairs that swirled to upper floors, and into a small chamber just off the hall.

When they packed into the chamber, Professor Longbottom started searching his robes. "Hold on a bit; I've got my notes here somewhere." He patted himself down and pulled out a small potted plant from one pocket, then put it back in as an actual toad hopped out of another.

"There you are, Trevor," he murmured to the sound of giggles.

Albus knew Uncle Neville wasn't this unorganised or incompetent, so he had to be doing this to set the first-years at ease. He was amused to see that it was working.

"There...my specs!" The professor settled some wire rims on his nose. "Oh well, I guess I need to use a little bit of magic. I must have left my notes on my desk."

With that, Professor Longbottom stretched his long arms out, tugging at the cuffs to show nothing up his sleeve. With a flick of the wrist, a set of note cards appeared in his hand.

Students applauded.

"Oh yes, here we go. To whom it may concern." He looked over his spectacles at the students. "I assume this means you."

Albus chuckled with the others, feeling in on the joke.

"The sorting is about to begin. In Hogwarts, we have four houses." He held up fingers as he counted them off. "Gryffindor: my house by the way, not being biased, just stating fact. Ravenclaw: a real smart lot over there! Hufflepuffs: my wife was one of those, and she turned out all right. Tell her I said that, will ya? And, oh yes, let's not forget old Slytherin: a good house indeed, in spite of any rumours you might have heard. Every student will belong to one of those four. All of them have produced some exceptional wizards. These houses will be your family in Hogwarts. You will eat and go to classes and hang out with your housemates. The connections you make will last a lifetime. I know from experience!"

Albus peered sideways to see if Rose noticed that their "uncle" was glancing over his spectacles directly at them. She had. They traded grins.

The professor continued, "So when they are ready for you, you will follow me to the front and I will put the Sorting Hat on your head. That's it; no wrestling trolls, no spell tests or any such rubbish you may have heard. Oh, and the hat doesn't bite...much." He chuckled as several of the students gasped. "Just kidding, couldn't resist. Sorry."

He turned to the door. "I'll be back in a bit, as soon as they are ready. Don't kill each other. It's the start of term, much too early for all that extra paper work!" He smiled with a twinkle in his eye, and then was gone through the doors.

Albus took the opportunity to look around the room. Over to his left were two girls who obviously were already acquainted, chattering away in French. The blue-haired girl Albus had seen earlier was glaring scathingly at a beauty who was brushing her hair into a feathered golden cascade. There was a very large boy, almost as wide as he was tall, looming over the small boy who the painting thought to be part Leprechaun. There was an Asian girl and a tall, pretty, dark-haired girl with long, straight hair. They seemed to be in competition to see who could flip their bangs the most. Behind stood some unpleasant looking girls and boys who had that Slytherin scowl, and there was one small boy in the back, leaning against the wall with prematurely silver hair; his eyes glimmered like shiny Sickles. He looked up at Albus like he knew he was being watched, and a cold smile curled his lips. Albus quickly looked back to the front, vowing never to cross that boy if it could be helped.

Professor Longbottom returned. "I would tell you to smarten yourselves up a bit, but that's our job, so come on!" He turned and swept through door, leading them into the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

The hall was just as huge as Albus had always been told, even bigger than he had always imagined. The spectacular room was lit with thousands of flickering candles with no visible means of support. The towering windows reached up several stories into the spelled ceiling, which was showing an obsidian night sky, clear and spotted with bright points of light and roving clouds under a yellow tinged moon.

The tables were full of students with empty gold plates, silverware, and goblets. The table to his left, with bright yellow table coverings trimmed in black, had a motley assortment of

students who were smiling encouragingly. Across the aisle to the right was a large table decorated in midnight blue with bronze, full of intense pupils who were studiously focused on the stream of youngsters as they passed weighing their attributes, already. Beyond them was the deep green and silver table with a group of glaring students dissecting the first years with their eyes.

Albus saw a bunch of his cousins at the crimson and gold table beyond the Hufflepuffs. Fred held court with some students, likely giving them the run down of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes products. Roxanne was glaring at her brother, probably preparing to tell on him after she sent the owl off about Albus and Rose's new friend. She didn't seem to realize that after his initial disapproving noises, Uncle George or Ron, who still helped out when he wasn't on Auror business, would owl Fred to send in those orders and collect the money. They had a regular underground trade going.

Percy's twin girls were radiating colossal indifference, as usual, popping bright purple gum in tandem and glancing at some boys, who seemed to be assessing the twins' slender figures from the corners of their eyes.

Across from Fred and Roxanne, with a group of second year cronies, was James.

Worried I'll embarrass the family and get Sorted into the wrong house? Albus thought as he returned James' glower.

They filed by to the front of the room, passing Dominique and Victoire who were sitting together at the head of the Gryffindor table. The younger sister's body language stated clearly that she was not a best mate to her tall, glamorous sibling.

Alternating in and out of the tables were the silvery-white shimmers of the Hogwarts ghosts. The cheerful Fat Friar was leaning down to greet returning Hufflepuffs and offer opinions about the students passing by. The infamous Nearly Headless Nick was chatting as loudly as he floated over the Gryffindors about how he was trying not to shock first years this year. "So do not even attempt to convince me otherwise!" the ghost cried as his head wobbled precariously on his lacy ruff. The elegant Grey Lady was sitting with the Ravenclaws, staring penetratingly at the new students, while the Bloody Baron glowered at her silently from his dark place just behind the Slytherin table, his silvery bloodstains making him grim and foreboding.

The teachers and heads of houses lined up across the front, at the staff table up on a dias. The students followed Neville to a lone stool between the students and staff. He picked up the scroll from his place at the table and patiently waited for everybody to line across the front so the Sorting Ceremony could commence.

On the end of the table was Arcturus Flint, the dark-goateed potions professor and the Head of Slytherin house. The man had a hulking, glaring, intimidating presence, and was bald as a billiard ball. Beside him was the lovely, gentle presence of Padma Patil; she was as sharp as a Hippogriff's beak, but as delicate as an East Indian lotus flower, and Head of Ravenclaw house. She was the challenging professor of Charms. The pleasant, smiling man to her left, making apologies for arriving a bit late, was Atticus Pharel, someone who Albus had only heard about in passing. The stoutly built, balding, brown-haired man was Hufflepuff's Head of House, and Hogwarts' Defence against the Dark Arts Master for the last five years.

Albus knew a few more professors from home visits.

Victor Krum had been added two years previously, after stepping down as Durmstrang's youngest headmaster in history. He now taught flying and oversaw the Hogwarts intramural Quidditch program. Rumour had it that the now retired, legendary Bulgarian seeker had fallen in love with Hogwarts as a Tri-Wizard tournament contestant, and had been looking for the chance to return ever since. His bushy hair, streaked with grey, was pulled back into a ponytail, and his hawk-like, hooked nose had a slight cant from the rogue Bludger that ended his international career. The dark eyes scanned the room from under his bushy eyebrows, narrowing and nodding when he recognized Albus and Rose.

Freya Bast, the former Auror, who taught the Transfiguration class, was catching a lot of stares, as usual. Her long, ash blond hair was the only thing normal about her. Peeking out from that mane were two ears more commonly found on a house cat.

With bright amber eyes that seemed to attract and reflect the light around her, whiskers on a furry feline face, dainty fangs when she smiled and long claws on her tawny furred hands when she waved greetings at students, Freya took some getting used to.

Freya had been one of Albus' dad's best Aurors, with a keen nose for trouble. Most often, he would send her when the situation needed to be scouted out. Her last mission had resulted in her current condition, which was a partial but ongoing transfiguration into a house cat.

She was investigating a pet shop in Knockturn Alley that was selling unusually intelligent pets. She confronted the wizened witch owner, asking for breeder paperwork, and then uncharacteristically turned her back. She was immediately hit with a transfiguring curse, but before it was complete, Freya's reflexes kicked in and she managed to stun the witch. The elderly crone's heart gave out, and she died instantly. As it turned out, the woman was transforming Muggles into house pets for wizards, using an unknown dark spell that only she knew.

Through the years of trying to halt the spell and reverse the affects, Freya had acquired an amazing amount of transfiguring knowledge, learning from everyone she could, even Minerva McGonagall herself, but she had had to retire from public life because of her looks. Albus' dad, still feeling responsible for her condition, made a requested to appoint her to the Transfiguration post at Hogwarts when the interim teacher that took over after McGonagall retired. Now Freya found acceptance and fulfilment as one of the most demanding but popular professors.

And there, in the centre of them all, was the Hogwarts current headmaster: Kingsley Shacklebolt.

A few years older than when he held the post of Minister for a record fourteen-year run, he was as lordly a man as Albus had ever laid eyes on. His African descent was obvious in his dark blue robes decorated with stars and a dark blue, gold-trimmed kofia flat on his baldhead. A grey, tightly trimmed beard, covering a strong jaw, and his dark eyes radiated the strength of character and iron will that had rebuilt the wizarding world in the aftermath of the war against Voldemort. All he did was rise and, without a word, the Hall quieted.

Kingsley's voice resonated in the hall, unassisted by magic, but with a magic of its own. "I wish to welcome our newest students to Hogwarts. I will make the necessary announcements later, but as for now, let's get these bright young wizards Sorted shall we?"

Neville nodded, and so it began.

Albus was surprised that now that the dreaded moment was here, he wasn't as nervous as he felt he should have been. The old, tattered hat was brought out and the tear at the brim sang in its raspy, magically projected voice:

*I am the Sorting Hat, the one and the same,
I have no doubt you've been informed of my widespread fame,
I will place you, young ones, where you will remain,
So pay attention all of you, to my small refrain,
Gryffindors are fiery and bold, be sure that they'll be first,
To lend a sword or arm, when things have reached their worst!
Hufflepuffs will not be missing, in that day of strife,
You can be sure those earthy ones will be loyal in the fight,
Ravenclaws are ready, bright and right and smart,
In their Aerie, intellect is as dear as heart,
Slytherin, those watery ones will always meet their aim,
With shrewdness, craft and cunning they are sure to have their fame,
All of these are equal; all will have their time.
There is a place for everyone to be whom they are inside,
But finding that's not your job, young ones, that pleasure is mine you see,
For I am the Sorting Hat, just leave it up to me!*

The song was met with wild applause.

Albus shifted nervously as Neville walked to the front and begin the roll call. The first name was familiar.

"Abbot, Olivia!"

A little pink-faced, dark-haired girl with blue eyes and pigtails came to the stool. She was the very image of Neville's wife, Hannah, except Hannah was blonde. Albus seemed to recall Neville mentioning that Hannah's first cousin had a daughter his age.

The decision of the hat, so large on her head it nearly touched her shoulders, was almost immediate.

"HUFFLEPUFF." it called to cheers from the yellow and black table.

Olivia handed the hat to Neville, who gave her a wink, and then sat down gratefully at her house table.

"Baldwin, Allen!"

A handsome, swaggering boy came forward, obviously used to attention.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat called as soon as he got settled with it on his head. The boy sat the hat down and strolled casually over to the loudly cheering bunch at the red and gold table.

Things proceeded quickly from there; a little round boy with the unfortunate name of Gaspar Boone was sorted into Hufflepuff, letting out a loud sneeze as the hat was taken off his head. An extremely slender boy with long blond hair and the unfitting name, Thor Boot, went to the riotous Gryffindor table next. The boy who seemed to be part Leprechaun turned out to be called Cormac Collins, and he joined the happily cheering Hufflepuffs, getting a pat on the back from a tall boy with careless finger-combed curls. He was broad shouldered, with intense grey eyes and a charming smile. There was a Head Boy badge pinned to his robes.

One of the French girls, Aimee Couture, who had her light blonde hair in a fashionable bob, smiled with a little gap in her front teeth as she became the first Ravenclaw.

A sullen boy, Richard Cresswell, with his black hair in a ponytail went to Hufflepuff next.

"Donovan, Liam!"

Slinking to the front was the silver haired boy that had chilled Albus earlier. When the hat concealed his sombre eyes, Albus felt better.

"Slytherin for sure!" Albus murmured to himself.

"RAVENCLAW!" the hat called, and the spooky boy made his way passed Albus to the Ravenclaw table, which clapped politely as they got another member.

Margo Duval, the other girl from somewhere French speaking, turned out to be the next Ravenclaw.

Gorman, Azure!

The girl with the spelled-blue hair stepped up to get her "Ravenclaw" announcement. Albus thought, that Ravenclaw bunch is getting interesting!

Maya Goyle was a very large and unpleasant looking girl, and the very first Slytherin. Her glare once she reached the table fit right in.

"Grego, Rhys!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Ivy, Iris!"

HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Janski, Conner!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Jung, Joy"

GRYFFINDOR!"

"Kerry, Kian"

"SLYTHERIN!"

After the Asian girl from the Great Hall, Shi Lui, went to Ravenclaw, Albus's wandering attention snapped back on the proceedings when he heard,

"Malfoy, Scorpius."

The murmuring began at once, and Albus saw the Slytherins move down to make room. He watched as his new friend squared his shoulders, and pulled that cool arrogance about him as he walked up to the chair. The Hat was placed on his head, and after a few moments of intense discussion with the young man upon whom it rested, it announced,

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

The gasp from around the room was very apparent as the confused young man pulled the Hat off, staring at the battered cloth. Neville took it from his hands and kindly pointed out the Hufflepuff table. Albus saw James smirk as he leaned over to talk to Fred. Scorpius sat down, looking dazed. He got a pat on the back from the tall Head Boy, but the rest of the table just stared at him as the ceremony continued. They weren't even clapping in their shock.

Neville tried to hide his amazement at that strange turn of events by calling the next name on the list immediately.

The Sorting continued, with the large boy Albus remembered from the previous room, who turned out to be Grant Nedved, going to Gryffindor.

Albus tried to catch his new friend's eye, but Scorpius was staring out one of the towering windows, not even paying attention, lost in what appeared to be morbid thoughts. Albus almost missed his own name. Neville had to call it twice.

"Potter, Albus!"

A steady buzz of murmured comments accompanied him to the stool, and the Hat. A large fist of nerves was clenched in his stomach. To his surprise, as soon as the Hat was down over his eyes, he found that the slight scent of must and burnt leather was actually comforting.

"Let me see, yet another Potter. You lot are always such fun to sort! I see ambition, a laxity with rules...Slytherin? No...not enough ruthlessness in this one. Boldness is definitely here, possibly Gryffindor, like your father and his father before him. Well, him and all of those Weasleys? That would be the obvious choice...what say you, young wizard?"

Surprised to be asked, Albus realized that this was the moment when he could seal his own fate. His father's words came back to him: *"It doesn't matter where you are sorted, we will*

be proud of you." In the dark of the Hat, he looked over at where the Hufflepuff table must have been, and thought about his new friend sitting there, alone in a House he had never expected.

"Ah, I see," exclaimed the Hat. *"You've got great loyalty, young Potter. You want a fair playing field for everybody, even for one that traditionally should be your enemy. Well, dear boy, there can be only one place to sort you!"*

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

The reaction was instantaneous. The whole Hall erupted with his relatives calling out for him to be re-Sorted. The entire staff table stared with open shock; all except Professor Pharrrel, who was beaming ear to ear, as though he had just won the House Cup. Albus realized as he got out of the chair, giving the Hat to a suddenly pale Neville Longbottom, that he had a chance to be his own boy for the first time in his life, same as Scorpius. As the only Potter in Hufflepuff, the expectations would be so much less. He was a little sad, knowing that Rose and he would be separated, maybe for the first time in his life. The Hufflepuff table was cheering as he walked over and sat down, walking past all of the seats offered and planting himself beside Scorpius, who looked just as shocked as Neville.

"You didn't tell the hat to sort you into Hufflepuff so we'd be together did you?" he said in a low voice, as though he feared that he would be blamed.

"No. But here we are, so cheer up, Mal-Boy! We just turned Hogwarts on its ear," he whispered back, as the Sorting ceremony continued.

It looked as though Neville was sleepwalking, almost terrified to place the hat on another student, but he relaxed when there were no more surprises for a while. The hair-tossing beauty, whose name was Rachael Vane, went into Ravenclaw, and then it was suddenly Rose's turn.

Weasley, Rose!"

She strolled over, her back straight as the Gryffindors cheered, sure that the Sorting would be right this time.

Rose sat down and the Sorting began. She started talking almost immediately, and the Sorting Hat responded. She burst out into a big smile as the announcement was made.

"Got to be, HUFFLEPUFF!"

If there had been pandemonium over Albus, there was a near riot over Rose. The streak of Weasleys in Gryffindor, going back six generations, had just been broken. Professor Pharrrel was beside himself clapping. The Hufflepuff table was celebrating as Rose handed the hat to Neville, who looked nearly faint, and she actually skipped over to the seat that Albus had nudged Scorpius over to make.

"What did you do?" Albus said to Rose, amused as the din calmed a bit.

She was smiling ear-to-ear. "I can't be at Hogwarts without you, Al! Besides, if we are going to win the House Cup for Hufflepuff, it's going to take all three of us."

Scorpius grimaced. "If we survive the night, that is."

Albus decided truer words had never been spoken in the great halls of Hogwarts than those.

Chapter4: Of Badgers and Broomsticks

The rest of the Sorting was over with Brian Zabini going to Slytherin, but the buzz was still a low hum. Neville placed the sorting hat to the side and collapsed into his seat, waving off a hurried whisper from Professor Bast. He looked like he had aged five years since he placed the hat on Albus' head.

Professor Shacklebolt stood. His presence brought immediate silence to the hall.

"What has been sorted has been sorted. There have been a few surprises this year, but I expect..." he paused, his dark eyes causing the Gryffindors to study their empty plates, "for all involved to behave like Hogwarts students."

He smiled and the hall relaxed.

"There are a few announcements for the year." He cleared his voice meaningfully. "Because of the new *Magical Creatures Equality Law*, and the *Dobby Elf Liberation Act* there have been a few changes of note in our staff. You are now not allowed to issue any orders to house-elves. They are now officially employees of Hogwarts, and are to be respected as such." His resonating voice seemed to find a lower, menacing octave. "Any abuses will be punished severely."

Indignant glares from highborn students were cowed immediately.

He indicated an empty chair on the end of the dais. Due to Professor Binns finally realizing he's dead at the end of last term-" Shacklebolt waited for student cheers to die down. "Our staff took on a new addition, who is at present on his way here by special night transport from Transylvania. I hope you will make Professor Hemophilias welcome."

Albus shot a puzzled look at Rose. *Professor Hemophilias traveling at night from Transylvania-could he be a vampire?*

Rose knew what was on his mind like always. She whispered, "We'll ask Uncle Neville."

Suddenly, there was a cacophony of noise as a little man with wicked dark eyes and a wide mouth flew out of one of the walls backwards tossing something that looked like a helmet from one hand to the other blowing raspberries. On his heels were a number of ghostly horses ridden by knights in period garb except that all but one were headless carrying a head under their arm shouting threats as they gave chase through the other wall.

Following in their wake was a ghost holding a lantern and using a cane, but floating along at a good clip nonetheless. "I'm going to get you, Peeves, if it takes me the next century!" he

shouted. Dour looking, with large jowls, the apparition carried a ghostly cat under his arm. She stared at the students with disdainful lamp-lit eyes.

The whole parade slipped through the other wall leaving silence in their wake.

Into the hush, Nearly Headless Nick sniffed. "Serves them right, those decapitated snobs."

Clearing his voice, mustering some dignity, Shacklebolt said, "It seems during the holiday, our long time caretaker Argus Filch passed-from his earthly body at least-so we have added a new caretaker to the staff for the times he will need corporeal assistance."

He indicated a corner off to the side, where stood, a goblin. Short, with large ears and nose and a long black beard he was twisting around one thick finger. He studied the student body with a diamond-hard, penetrating stare seemingly marking the troublemakers.

"Growltooth shares Mr. Filch's authority."

At that statement, the little goblin smiled, but his sharp, pointed teeth didn't make it friendly.

"And lastly," Shacklebolt finished in his deep baritone voice, "if I hear of one more student getting lost in the Forbidden Forest because someone..." His eyes found an innocent looking James Potter and Fred Weasley. "I don't know who, informed them that Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class is taking a field trip to see the centaurs. I will look into the matter myself."

Albus saw his Fred look over at James, and saw James shrug as if to say, "New year, new pranks!"

Kingsley smiled and declared, "That is all. Lets eat!"

The tables where suddenly full of mouthwatering amazing food, roast beef and chicken, pork and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, roasted potatoes, fries, puddings, carrots, peas swimming in butter, ketchup, and shepherd's pie. Desserts, too, so many and varied Albus wouldn't have been able to imagine such a spread if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. He was going to be buzzing from all of the sugar in that tasty treacle tart all night, he wagered.

After a half hour filled with mumbled words and gluttony, Albus looked around the Hufflepuff table. He noticed that most housemates didn't look extraordinary. Most were normal looking wizards-the lone exception being that tall Head Boy-but they all looked excited for the coming year.

He observed Scorpius studying his hands as if he was counting the whirling patterns in the flesh, and Rose was contemplating two rather unique-looking girls who were across the table from them. They both had flowing golden blonde hair held back from their faces with ribbons, one pink, the other purple. With smiling, bright blue eyes, they appeared very girlish, but the arms folded on the table in front of them were oddly knotted with muscle.

Albus glanced over to the Gryffindor table.

His brother James was not eating, apparently feeling guilty for all of the teasing about house sorting, shaken by the unexpected turn of events. Albus caught his eye, smiled and nodded to show he was fine. James gave him a considering look, and then grabbed a dinner roll.

Several students introduced themselves to Albus and Rose. Scorpius was studiously ignored, which seemed fine with him as he avoided all the looks shot at him from the Slytherin table. Rose noticed the stares. "What's their problem?" she asked.

Scorpius had barely touched the food in front of him but was shredding his napkin nervously. "In my world, being a Hufflepuff is the next thing to being a squib." Some Hufflepuffs nearby overheard that comment and it earned him even more glares. It was plain to Albus that Scorpius meant no malice when he stated what was to him a simple fact. Rose understood, too, since she let the comment go uncharacteristically without challenge.

"We'll all be great wizards, Scorpius, mark my word," Albus said, with more confidence than he really felt. "We're going to change things around here."

Scorpius laughed shortly. "In case you haven't been paying attention, we already have!"

The feast was over and Albus, Rose and Scorpius heading out, following the Head Boy, "Come along, I can't wait to show you your new home!" he called.

Albus almost got separated a couple of times because of looking at the sights. He saw a Nearly Headless Nick floating along, who sublimely tipped his head to the side in greeting. Most of the stonework in this section was less than twenty years old because of the battle that took place on this side of the castle. They turned to the right by the great staircase, down a flight of stone steps to what would be directly beneath the dining area.

They exited to a huge high-ceilinged kitchen. The walls were stone, nearly covered with hanging brass pots and pans with a large brick fireplace at one end. Four huge wooden tables were positioned exactly the same way as the tables above. Elves were hovering around and cleaning dishes, levitating them onto shelves high above with unerring accuracy. In their squeaky voices, they called a greeting to the children, inquiring if they wanted a snack to take down with them.

Scorpius, who had barely eaten at the feast, nodded. Instantly, he was pestered with all sorts of food from the eager house elves, until he had to beg off.

Rose grabbed a large loaf out of his hands and handed it back. "Don't take advantage," she said sternly.

Scorpius imitated her bossy manner as soon as her back was turned, causing Albus to stifle a laugh as they followed the Head Boy over to a large still life of a bowl of fruit dominating one wall.

"Now pay attention," he instructed. "This changes from time to time." He reached out and scratched an apple twice, a pear once, and traced a finger across a banana which wiggled as if ticklish.

Students giggled as the portrait swung out. A short flight of stairs led down to a long broad corridor lit by torches. The round walls were of packed earth and the stone floor lined with casks. From *Hogwarts: A History*, Albus knew it had been a cellar during the earliest days of the castle. The timbers overhead were dark with age.

They came to a round oak wood door, which their leader swung out, held it, smiling warmly as they filed by into the inviting light.

Albus entered the common room and paused. It was, in a word, cosy.

The burrow-like room was two stories tall and the furniture was made from old round casks and upholstered in plush bright yellow and black. Deep couches and chairs were situated around a simple oak mantled fireplace stained a deep brown, almost black, same as the furniture. It was lit and giving a pleasant glow. The dark wood flooring had large, elaborate throw rugs the colours of a bumblebee.

There were no windows this far down, but it had the effect of making the place seem even more comfortable and inviting. Brown earthen walls lit by torches and lined with canary yellow tapestries with crest of a black and yellow field showing the fierce Hufflepuff badger decorated the walls. There were perfectly round barrel top tunnels leading off to either side.

The place resonated with Albus on a deep level he couldn't explain. He just felt like he had arrived where he always had always belonged.

"Welcome to the Hufflepuff common room, or as we like to call it, *The Cellar*," the Head Boy said with a dramatic sweep of his arm. "Through the middle door on the left are three tunnel branches. You first years take the middle one. It branches off to two tunnels. The girls are on the left, boys on the right. There will be a list at that first branch listing where your assigned bunks will be; your trunks will already be there."

As the students filed wearily by, the Head Boy placed a gentle restraining hand on Albus' shoulder. "I would like to have a chat with you three if you don't mind," he said quietly as their fellow students closed the tunnel door behind them.

Albus watched as Scorpius found a barrel top end table and laid the food on it. He leaned against the earthen wall and crossed his arms petulantly. Albus and Rose slumped down into a love seat suddenly weary as well.

"I'm Roderick Yates," the young man began. "My mother was a Diggory. You might have heard who my cousin was, maybe the most famous Hufflepuff of the last twenty years."

"Cedric Diggory, co-winner of the Tri-Wizard cup," came the reply not from the love seat, but from Scorpius. "Killed by Peter Pettigrew the night of Voldemort's return to a physical body."

They all turned and looked at him, but he was studying the dark varnished oak plank flooring chewing his lip.

"That's right," Roderick replied. "Take a look at this." He pointed to a plaque that was affixed to the mantel over the fireplace in a place of honour. It was cast in well-polished

gold, showing a face very much like the young man in front of them with a warm smile and careless curls, apparent even in the stillness of the metal. On it was written,

*If the time should ever come when
You have to make a choice
Between what is right, and what is easy?
Remember a boy,
Who was good, and kind, and brave...
Remember Cedric Diggory...Albus Dumbledore*

Roderick waited until they gathered around and read it, then he made sure they met his eyes. "You three face a challenge that the other students don't have. Because of your last names, they're going to paint you as some kind of failure because this is your House. They will accuse you of not being good enough to be somewhere better. Know this, if you are loyal, and true, willing to work hard for what you want to achieve, then you are a true Hufflepuff. There is nothing better than that!"

He paused to gather himself, then said, "My cousin, Cedric, was never ashamed of this house, even though he was the best at Hogwarts in his year. Don't dishonour him and his legacy by hanging your head, no matter what your families think!"

His words lay heavy on the air and he gave them time to sink in, then he smiled and the charming young man was back.

He engaged them in conversation while Scorpius ate, answering any question that was put to him. In the end, he wished them a good night and left after receiving promises that they would be prompt in going to bed.

"No wonder he's Head Boy!" Rose exclaimed when the door to the boys' dorm clicked shut.

"Yeah, he's nice," Albus said. It was then that he saw Scorpius pluck a furry little cat off of the ground.

"Kub? How did you get out here?" Scorpius asked as the cat playfully batted his nose.

Albus exchanged a look with Rose. "Careful, Mal-Boy. You keep that up people might think you're nice!" he called.

Scorpius curled his lip. "Perish the thought!" He fed Kublai a piece of left over ham. "Good night."

He carried his cat out, talking to him in quiet tones as he left the Common Room.

"Did we do the right thing, Al?" Rose asked, looking around at their new home.

Albus said, "It's already feeling like home to me."

Rose smirked. "I hope dad gets over it."

Albus smiled. "It could have been worse," he said, indicating the door that just shut after Scorpius.

"True," Rose replied.

Without another word, they hugged and left for bed.

Albus took the tunnel indicated by the list and wound up in a circular room with an elaborate wrought-iron chandelier, now dark. The floor was lined with five four posters with black and yellow bedspreads. Albus' familiar trunk was sitting at the foot of a bed.

The walls had enchanted torches in gold sconces recessed into the earthen walls between the paired beds that gave just enough light without disturbing the sleepers. The lack of windows had the effect of making the darkness cave like, but extremely cheery.

Scorpius sat on the bed closest to Albus'. He was still in his robes, stroking Kublai, in what Albus was beginning to call deep-thought-mode.

Albus had one of those moments of insight that his Dad said were so uncanny, they should have named him Trelawney, not Albus. That statement earned Dad a smack on the back of the head from Mum, although Albus wasn't sure why, she called it a "bad joke." He wasn't sure what a Trelawney was, but he didn't think it was good. He just knew, without a doubt, that Scorpius was sitting there thinking about his family's reaction to his new House.

"Not unpacking won't undo the Sorting, you know," Albus said quietly. The sound didn't seem to be carrying, so he guessed there were muffling enchantments in place when the torches were out.

Scorpius looked up. His cool blue-grey eyes were blank. "What if I am close to Squib? I've never been around other wizards. I just assumed with my heritage, I must be passable." Almost as an after thought, he murmured, "Maybe I was fooling myself."

Albus decided to take a different tact. "Well, Rose and I were sorted into this house and our parents are the saviours of the Wizarding World," he bragged straight-faced. "You're hanging with Saint Potter's kid now. Just hang back and bask in the glow."

"What am I worried about then?" Scorpius said dryly. "All I have to write on my *N.E.W.T.'s* and *O.W.L.'s* is that I hang out with Albus Potter, they'll give me straight O's for sure!"

"Exactly." Albus' straight face was crumbling. They both started smiling before too long.

Scorpius sat Kublai down on the black and yellow oriental carpet between the beds and the little fur ball crawled under to explore. He reached over and began rummaging through his trunk. Albus followed suit and they worked in silence, until Albus saw the latest copy of *Which Broomstick?* as Scorpius was laying his schoolbooks out of a side compartment for the next day.

"You already in the market for a broomstick?" Albus asked. "We aren't even allowed to have those until next year."

Scorpius pulled the magazine out and flipped to a page pulling out the insert. He showed it to Albus who whistled when he saw the illustration. "That's the new *SkyBolt* isn't it?"

Scorpius nodded. "Yeah it's really expensive, but it's going to make all previous brooms obsolete within months!"

The wizard photo showed a pearl white, flawlessly finished racing broom rotating on a platform in the sky with perfectly shaped bristles that looked somehow artificial. "It's made of a new polymer that will actually hold a spell like wood does," Scorpius said enthusiastically. "They are lighter and faster than any broom before and they come in four colours, ghost white, midnight blue and serpent green, and screaming banshee crimson. Wooden brooms will be outmoded in no time."

Albus thought the lines were beautiful, but it was somehow too synthetic.

"Is this the same company that made the *Firebolt*?"

"No, but it's based on those same lines."

Albus shook his head. "Actually, the *Firebolt* is more slender here and the birch twigs are longer and more tapered."

Scorpius gave him a considering look. "You sound as if you've actually seen a *Firebolt*. They were only in production for one year, then the wizard that held the patent decided he didn't want the broom to become so common everybody had one. To find one today would be unthinkable expensive!"

Albus nodded. "Unless your dad got one of the first series while he was still at Hogwarts."

Scorpius' jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding! You've actually seen a *Firebolt*?"

"It's over the mantle at home. Dad started Apparating everywhere he went because he had too many people following him around. He said it was one of the worst things about becoming famous, that he could no longer fly his broom."

"You've got maybe the finest broom ever spelled hanging over the mantle? Like an old dusty family heirloom?" Scorpius seemed outraged at the thought.

Albus hid a laugh. "I thought you said the *SkyBolt* was going to make it obsolete in a matter of months."

Scorpius sneered at the advertisement. "This is a soulless mass produced product." His tone changed, became almost reverent. "A real *Firebolt* was individually stamped and hand carved with independently fitted twigs and elaborate gold engraving. You won't find craftsmanship like that anymore, they're legendary!"

Albus gave his new friend a tolerant stare. "You seem to know more about it than I do." As he placed some socks out for the next day, he said, "Dad flew me on it one time, and I've never climbed faster on any other broom, I tell you!"

Scorpius had a faraway look in his eyes, unpacking forgotten. "All of the broom records are held by a *Firebolt*. The *Skybolt* will soon break most of the speed marks, but the climbing diving and manoeuvrability will never be equalled."

Albus chuckled. "I'll tell you what, you can write a love letter to it, and I'll see if I can get you two together. I'll expect a June wedding, Dad will want to give it away."

Scorpius snorted. "Very funny."

The preparations for bed went quickly. After the wall torches dimmed, a voice broke the silence.

"Albus?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"Your welcome!"

Chapter5: Greater Expectations

The next morning, Albus was up and ready, seated on his bed as the other bunkmates began to stir about.

One seemed to be ecstatic about having an actual "Son of Potter" in Hufflepuff. After all, everyone at the Sorting expected Gryffindor.

"I'm ever so glad to meet you!" Gaspar Boon, the podgy boy Albus saw at the Sorting grabbed and pumped his hand. He spoke rapid-fire fast, almost without breathing. "Call me Gas," he said finally, gasping as if to remind himself of the need for oxygen.

Albus wasn't the sort to want a fan club. He pulled his hand away and looked over at the boy who was leaning against his bedpost. "Hullo," he said, "What's your name?"

"Rick." He jerked his head toward Scorpius. "You sure you want to be friends with that?"

The boy had a ponytail like Uncle Bill, but that didn't make him a nice person. Albus didn't over-react, the way Rose would have. He said, "Why wouldn't I be friends with Scorpius?"

Rick looked at him with poorly disguised disgust. "You're Harry Potter's son," he said with a snort. "And you don't know why you shouldn't be friends with a Malfoy?"

"I know what it's like when people think they know you because of your name."

With an exasperated sigh, Rick pushed away from the bed and sauntered out.

The short, curly, orange-haired boy from the Sorting came over. "Tha' Rick was talking 'bout you last night. I don' think he likes you much. My name's Cormac, by the way." He said offering his hand.

Albus' accepted it. "Pleased to meet you, Cormac. I didn't catch Rick's last name at the sorting, do you remember what it was?"

"Richard Cresswell was what they called out," said Gas eagerly. "He and the hat argued a bit, before he was placed in Hufflepuff, at least it looked like an argument, seems to be an angry sort!"

Albus grinned. "Nice pun, that!"

Gas realised what he said and chuckled. The way he beamed at Albus was a bit disquieting, but Albus shrugged it off.

Cormac was watching Scorpius get organised, but it was more curiosity showing on his face than anger or distrust.

Albus turned as Scorpius was gathering his books in his satchel and his pewter cauldron for Potions class. "Ready yet, Scorpius?" he called out.

"Can't help that you get up at the crack of dawn, Potter. Some of us do like to sleep."

Albus said, "Well go back to bed then but I'm going to breakfast." He hid a smile as Gas and Cormac stared at them with amazement. They looked astonished that a Malfoy was ragging a Potter-and not being hexed.

When the two friends walked by, Scorpius noted their stares. "Are they mental?" he murmured.

Albus chuckled.

They had just reached the common room when Scorpius said, "You know that Rick chap did have a point. My name is not going to earn favours, even for a Potter."

Albus shifted his books and kettle under his arm. "I'm not asking for any."

They made their way out of the Painting, waving to the elves that squeaked out greetings as they went about their way cooking breakfast for the students above.

In the Great Hall, under a clear morning sky, they found Rose at the Hufflepuff table with a crowd of girls around her-probably pumping her for information. Rose wasn't responding. She wasn't a morning person, she scarcely formed sentences for the first half hour, and was rather beastly for the next.

She waved tiredly for them to come over and hissed at a couple of curiosity seekers to make some room. They scattered once they saw how evil she could be. Albus would swear on Dumbledore's beard he had seen her eyes glow red before, but it could have been the morning light.

They settled in, causing several of the remaining well-wishers to wander off after throwing disapproving glances at Scorpius. It was one more reason to call him friend in Albus' book.

He heard a screech overhead as several owls swooped in dropping letters and packages.

Rose gave a start when her great Screech Owl Celestina dropped a thick letter on her head. The owl, was smart enough to not be in Rose's range this time of the morning and barely paused on its way back to the owlery.

Albus looked for Nox, his black eagle owl, but he didn't see the wide wingspan in all of the madness of swooping feathers. A mature and dignified tan and white spotted tawny swooped down and dropped a large red letter in front of Scorpius and fled. He looked at it with curiosity.

Rose became fully alert when she saw what it was. "Oh no!" she squealed, as the letter began to shake and smoke. She fished out her unicorn hair, birch wand.

"Albus, what's that spell Mum uses to keep us from eavesdropping?"

Before Albus could answer, the letter suddenly opened by itself and roared,

WE CANNOT BELIEVE THAT YOU GOT SORTED TO HUFFLEPUFF!
WHAT WILL YOUR FATHER THINK WHEN HE GETS BACK FROM
ROMANIA?

YOUR GRANDFATHER IS TALKING TO THE BOARD RIGHT NOW!
YOU ARE NOT TO GET TOO COMFORTABLE, YOUNG MAN!

The letter burst into flames, leaving shards of red paper and smoky vapour all over the table.

Albus turned to a shell-shocked and pale Rose. Even though the moment had passed he couldn't help himself. "For future reference Rose, it's *Muffliato*. Grandma Molly's are louder, don't you think?"

Scorpius was even paler than Rose, which was saying something. "Was that, what I think that was?" he asked quietly.

Albus shrugged. "That, my dear Scorpius, was a Howler. Your Mum tried, but she's no Weasley. Can you please pass the marmalade?"

Scorpius slid it over. "You've heard worse?"

"Get a letter from Mum Malfoy?" came a low, menacing voice from behind Albus.

He turned to see four colossal Slytherins strolling over. It looked like a pack of Grims had descended. "Not good." Albus whispered, spreading the marmalade on his toast.

Albus looked around for a relative. As many as he had at Hogwarts at the moment, it was worth a glance. He saw James talking with Fred and pointing at Scorpius with a smirk. It was obvious that he wouldn't be much help.

His sweeping eyes moved on and found someone at the big double doors that made Albus relax and actually smile. He turned to Scorpius and found his friend staring at the Slytherin ringleader.

A seventh-year boy with the black goatee fuzz, the Neanderthal loomed over them. "I'm thinking that the mighty Malfoy's thin blood is finally showing through after all," he said in a voice shockingly cultured and mild, almost pleasant.

"Who is this?" Rose asked Scorpius.

"Roq MacNast," said the boy.

If he expected a show of respect or fear he was disappointed. Albus said to Rose, "Roq? And I thought Scorpius sounded bad!"

She snickered and even Scorpius smiled a little. MacNast's hand stowed into his robes. "Think twice before you insult me. I don't care who your father is, Potter." He pulled out a mahogany wand.

A bored voice called out from the door, "You might want to learn to use that wand before you pull it out and hurt yourself, MacNasty."

The large boy tensed. His cronies suddenly had other things to do as he turned to face the owner of the voice.

Albus lightly elbowed Scorpius. "Watch! This is going to be good!"

Leaning against the doorframe, twirling his wand absently in his fingers, was Theodore Remus Lupin.

Albus' "honorary cousin," Teddy was a tall, handsome boy with tattered robes: not from lack of funds considering the finances available to his godfather, but from disinterest in fashion and desire for personal comfort. Most of the pictures Albus had seen of Teddy's father showed Remus Lupin in a similar state of disrepair.

When Teddy became the best seeker on Gryffindor team in the last decade, and managed to win the Quidditch cup three years in a row, tattered robes became the style at Hogwarts.

A Metamorphmagus like his mother, Teddy changed his hair colour all the time. Albus' mum called it mood hair. Albus could see from MacNast's wary gaze that it was known at Hogwarts as well. At the moment, the brown had a slight orange tint, which meant, "I am not angry, yet, but don't mess with me."

Teddy straightened to his full height. "As I recall, after our last duel, MacNasty, Madam Pomfrey said she had never used that much Essence of Murtlap on one student, nearly her entire stock!"

MacNast flinched. "What are you doing here, Lupin? You graduated a year ago!"

Teddy sauntered over, wand spinning in his fingers with amazing dexterity. "Oh, I have an internship in the Ministry's Auror office this year courtesy of the youngest and most successful Head of the Auror office in its history. I believe you know his son. He's the boy you're currently threatening to hex."

MacNast dropped his wand back in his robes. "I didn't threaten anyone, but if I did, it's none of your concern."

Teddy prowled forward. "Well, he happens to be my favourite god-brother, so it does concern me." He invaded MacNast's personal space, his hair flashing red and his eyes a glowing, wolf yellow. "I want you and your jackals to know, he and his friends are under my protection, at

lease until he learns the spells and deals with you himself. Until then, I'm your problem. Are we clear?"

MacNast backed away. "I'll spread the word, Lupin, but I can't guarantee everyone will follow it."

Teddy's hair and eyes faded back to their normal brown colour. "Fair enough."

After MacNast left, Teddy reached down and ruffled Albus' hair making the cowlick worse. "Wotcher, Albie."

"Gerroff, Teddy!" Albus said, trying to slick his hair back down.

"You're supposed to be keeping him out of trouble, Rose," Teddy said smilingly.

She wiggled her fingers at him weakly in response, her face flushing almost as red as her hair. As usual, when Teddy Lupin was around, the normally talkative Rose seemed to lose all ability to speak.

"Speaking of keeping out of trouble," Teddy said in low voice. His hair suddenly became a bright flaming red. "You two!" he bellowed, his wand freezing in his hand business end toward Fred and James who were trying to slip out unnoticed. "Over here," Teddy commanded.

They sheepishly obeyed.

His suddenly yellow eyes bored into theirs. "Your younger brother was staring down some seriously nasty fifth and sixth years, and you boys were leaving him to the wolves. Please explain." The words were mild and the tone was conversational, but that made it all the more menacing.

"C'mon, Teddy," James said. "I'm second year and Fred is fourth. What did you expect us to do? Honestly!"

Teddy crossed his arms in a way that his wand stayed in view. "I expect you to be Gryffindors, even if these three aren't in your house. Gryffindors will always stand up for those younger and weaker. Especially against Slytherins!"

James and Fred had the decency to be embarrassed. Their faces flushed and they stared at the floor.

"If I hear from anyone at this school-and you know I still have friends here-that you lot left Albus out to dry one more time, I will go straight to the top," Teddy said in a dire tone.

James and Fred looked alarmed. "Dad?" James said timidly.

"Worse," said Teddy, his voice dropping to a lower register. "Grandma Weasley."

"Sorry, Teddy, Sorry, Albus" James and Fred mumbled before they slunk out of the hall.

Teddy glowered, but as soon as they disappeared his hair returned to normal and he picked up a slice of toast off Albus' plate. "So Hufflepuff, eh?" he said, munching the toast. "My mum was a Hufflepuff, and I had a lot of friends down there. Have you met Roderick yet?"

"Sure Teddy, help yourself," Albus murmured under his breath. The older boy could eat twice his body weight at one sitting. Louder, he said, "Yeah, first night, he's a good guy, at least so far."

Teddy absentmindedly wiped crumbs off his mouth with his sleeve, a gesture Albus' dad once called a small rebellion against the extreme tidiness of Andromeda Tonks. "Wait until you see him guard the rings," he said, "He's the best Keeper I think I've ever seen and you know we've seen the best!"

Scorpius had remained silent up to that point. He said, "The best? What do you mean?"

Teddy studied him for a moment. "Well, Albus' mother Ginny was Chaser for the Harpies for several years, and we know Oliver Wood so we got great seats to all the United games, plus Professor Krum-considered by some the best Seeker ever-is a family friend." Teddy took another bite. "So you keep up with Quidditch, Malfoy?"

Scorpius appeared surprised to be asked like a regular person. People spat out his name like it was an insult. Somebody using a mild tone and asking out of curiosity instead of ulterior motive took him aback. He sputtered, "I love Quidditch, I follow all the teams. Father and I go see Puddlemere, Harpies and the Arrows, and we've even caught the Chudley Cannons a time or two. He's got box seats in several stadiums."

Teddy winked at his "cousins." "I like this guy! I don't know what your dad was going on about, Rose."

Rose gargled in reply.

Teddy heard some giggling and looked over to see some very shapely sixth and seventh year girls pointing him out. He started to wave but then he changed the gesture to a comb through his unruly hair that had suddenly gone bright green. The girls looked over their shoulders and scattered when they saw Victoire Weasley glowering with her arms crossed.

Teddy raised a hand in greeting and started across the Great Hall. He abruptly turned back. "I almost forgot, here's a letter from your Dad, Albus." He thrust the envelope onto the table. "If you'll excuse me, I need to avert certain death with sweet talk."

Albus and Scorpius waved goodbye. Rose just whimpered, having forgotten the act of speech for the time being.

Albus opened his letter and read:

Dear Albus,

Your mother and I were surprised at the news Neville brought us, to say the least. We really expected you to be in Gryffindor. That being said, I want you to know that I couldn't be more proud of you and Rose. You tell her that her dad is my oldest friend and I have never known him to take surprises very well but I have also never known him to stay upset long. He will come around, just hang in there, your mum is already at work on your behalf.

Study hard, listen to the professors and do your best. Earn points for your house even if that means you beat Gryffindor. Give your greatest effort. The only way I will ever be disappointed is if you don't try.

I have also heard of your friendship with Scorpius Malfoy. I trust your judgment and from what I have seen he will need some friends when people hear his last name, it's not as respected as it once was. Be careful though, and mindful that he was brought up to believe that purebloods are better, and his father wasn't always the nicest.

Anyway, I will be sending Teddy around to keep an eye on you for me, if he can keep his eyes off of Victoire long enough, that is! I stay in touch with the professors, so know I am never too far away.

*I love you son,
Your dad*

His dad always signed letters anonymously because of interceptions by people looking for inside information on the Potters. Albus didn't mind. He handed the letter to Rose so she could read that bit about her dad; she had recovered from Lupin-lock a little bit by that point.

Her thick letter had a package of snacks, extra parchment, her quill set and a couple of books she forgot plus a letter about Uncle Harry's letter in case she didn't see it. Her mum was maddeningly thorough and the resident expert on Undetectable Extension Charms.

Scorpius looked on in amazement while she laid things out on the table and then stored away in her satchel.

"Aunt Hermione sent it," Albus explained. "There's liable to be anything in that package."

While they were gathering their things they witnessed an entirely different way to stave off bullies.

Albus saw Gas and Cormac enter the Hall and was about to wave when a Gryffindor in a sizable group of friends called out, "Hey look, a typical Hufflepuff sorting! One little shrimp and a fat boy!"

Cormac handed Gas his cauldron and started for the Gryffindor in a dead run. The bully's face showed shock, and he was just reaching for his wand when Cormac lowered his head and shoulders, spearing him in the lower abdomen.

Albus recognised it as a rugby tackle from a match he had watched on the telly at Uncle Ron's and Aunt Hermoine's house.

Cormac backed away from the now curled up older student, glaring defiantly at the others in the group whose hands had reached for their wands. They all froze when they saw Gaspar staring them down just behind him, with his wand extended expertly in one chubby hand, the cauldrons he had been holding draped over his other arm.

"My mum works at the Ministry in Underage Magic, she showed me a good Jinx for self defence," Gas said loudly. "I never got the hang of it. I need practice."

The older Gryffindors backed down and helped their gasping friend up, leaving the Hall with menacing glances back. The students still at breakfast cheered as Gas handed Cormac back his cauldron.

"Na bad fer a shrimp and a fat boy, eh!" Cormac announced as they made their way through the well-wishers to the Hufflepuff table.

After breakfast, Albus, Rose, and Scorpius checked the schedules left with their trunks and made their way down into the dungeons. It wasn't long before they found the Potions classroom. Hufflepuff, according to the schedule, was sharing with Ravenclaw. With no windows, it wasn't as dark and dank as Albus' anticipated, however it was creepy with dead specimens and potion ingredients contained in bright lit jars stored in shelved alcoves in the walls.

Albus was considering where to sit when Liam Donovan slinked by and took a seat in the back. His decision made for him, Albus took a table on the front row. Scorpius gave him a dubious look then joined him. Rose slouched in, placing her things on the other side of her cousin.

Professor Flint swept in promptly at the proper time, setting his satchel down on his desk. His cold eyes swept the class, pausing on occasion. The silence stretched out.

"I am sure that you all have pre-conceived notions about what Potions are or are not," he stated after a minute. "But I assure you, the possibilities you will learn in this class will cause you to re-evaluate your assumptions."

"Can anyone tell me why potions is the most stable and predictable form of magic?" he inquired as his intense eyes swept the room.

Albus looked around and out of the whole class he only saw two raising their hands: Scorpius and Rose. The two French Ravenclaws were checking their hair, Gas was trying to be invisible while Cormac just fiddled with his potion ingredient phials. Olivia was whispering behind her hand to a little round girl, also in Hufflepuff, in front of another two Hufflepuff girls who were quite the contrast, a confident attractive blond and a little mousy girl who wouldn't even meet the professor's eyes.

"Albus Potter?"

Albus froze. *Called out in class already-the Potter curse!*

He turned around to the front to see Professor Flint regarding him with interest. Rose was practically coming out of her seat in her eagerness to answer the question, Scorpius' hand was raised lazily but confidently as if to say I know the answer but don't care if you call me on it. But the professor's dark eyes didn't even acknowledge them having locked on to the target.

"Y-yes?" Albus managed to stammer.

"The answer to my question, if you will." There didn't seem to be rancor in his tone, more of a measuring interest.

Albus' mind started to flutter in panic, but he considered the question logically. "Potions are basically like cooking," he began.

Professor Flint nodded for him to continue.

"If you add the right ingredients in the right order," Albus said, "you get the same result every time?"

The answer wasn't very confident, and there was silence after.

"Why didn't you raise your hand Mr. Potter?" he asked quietly in the silence of the dungeon the echo made it seem menacing.

"I wasn't sure I knew the answer," Albus said, his voice almost squeaking.

Professor Flint leaned close. His eyes were so dark they almost looked black. They bored into Albus. "You will not coast in this class, Mr. Potter," he said softly. "Parents and families mean nothing to me. Participating to the best of your ability is the only behaviour I will accept. Am I understood?"

"Yes."

Flint smiled fractionally, and it disappeared as quick as it appeared. "Class, please write down the answer that Mr. Potter just gave. Howbeit simple, it was a very solid one. Also note what I just said to him about class participation, apply accordingly."

Flint then turned to the blackboard and began with quick, precise movements to write down instructions directing a piece of chalk with his wand.

Albus let out a breath he wasn't aware he was holding.

Scorpius leaned over. "I'm thinking that maybe I got the better end of the deal, considering," he whispered with a chuckle in his voice.

Albus glowered at him.

Rose leaned in. "What a grump!"

Albus couldn't agree. He realized that he really had been coasting. He had been looking around the room rather than considering that he might know the answer. The warning was a good one.

"Class, you have on the board the instructions for a simple Calming Draught. No doubt this being your first week some of you will probably need one. Pair up into teams of three, and place a small phial of your results on my desk in forty-five minutes. You have five minutes to find your partners and then the time for the assignment will begin."

Albus, Rose and Scorpius immediately began the assignment. They grinned at each other as they used Rose's Pewter cauldron.

Rose read the instructions as Scorpius added the ingredients and Albus stirred. The potion was supposed to, at the midway point, turn a grass green, but it stayed a dull yellow. Rose, her hair deflating somewhat from the fumes, was getting distraught.

"Are you sure you added those ingredients right?" she snapped at Scorpius.

"Are you sure you read those instructions right?" he retorted scathingly.

They glared at each other over Albus's head.

Albus felt the heat as they began to argue in earnest. He checked the board, and remembered the order that Scorpius had added the ingredients, lemongrass, lavender, kelpie hoof shaving, and chamomile. He saw that Rose had read one of the portions wrong because of the way Professor Flint drew his fives, and that Scorpius had accidentally added a little too much kelpie hoof.

As they continued to bicker, Albus pulled out *Introducing the Wonderful World of Potions* and checked the table near the back as indicated by the table of contents. There were counter ingredients listed, and he traced a finger to kelpie hoof shaving. The counter turned out to be Doxy dropping. He checked his own potion supplies and found the label he needed.

Scorpius was still bickering with Rose when Albus laid a small piece of Doxie dropping on the desk in front of him.

"Here, add that," Albus requested.

Still glowering at Rose, Scorpius dropped it in.

Within a quarter of a stir the potion turned grass green. Albus continued stirring. "Next?" he asked Rose.

She glanced at the board and called out the next ingredient, her cheeks flushed.

Scorpius kept his head down and his eyes averted as they finished the final group of ingredients.

Albus tried to keep the smug look off his face but he couldn't quite. He was rewarded by a good-natured smack on his shoulder by Rose.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing his shoulder.

They traded grins.

Out of the whole class, only one phial was the proper bright acid green. Several were brought up varying shades with one from the French girls, and a boy with dark hair and deeply tanned skin, was so hard in the phial that it clunked on the desk.

Professor Flint raised an eyebrow at Albus' successful potion and told him to feel free to keep the rest for personal use. Theirs was the only team allowed the privilege.

The groups that finished were the lucky ones, Gas and Cormac and Azure of the Ravenclaws managed to send up a cloud that made them all woozy, the small explosion melting the cauldron onto the table in a bubbling hiss.

Professor Flint reached in his desk and pulled out a beaker of bright purple fluid and poured out three portions into three small glasses levitated them back to that table with a practiced ease. "Drink that, and clean up that mess," he ordered, before addressing the class.

"The difference between this particular Calming Draught and a powerful stun bomb is three grams of Kelpie hoof. This is a good illustration of how vital it is to follow the directions and to be precise with your amounts," he explained. "I expect a six inch essay on my desk before next class on that subject-oh, and by the way, five points to Hufflepuff for a successful brewing for Mistery Potter and Malfoy, and Miss Weasley. I give five more points for Albus Potter, for not losing his head when the brewing went awry. Everyone is dismissed as soon as his or her workstation is clean." He pointedly began packing his satchel.

Rose and Scorpius stared at Albus, apparently realizing how close they came to being the unfortunate students in the back currently wiping up potion and trying to pry the melted cauldron loose.

"I think you might be good at Potions, Albus," Rose said admiringly.

Albus shook his head. "Dad wasn't."

"He wasn't, but you are," she insisted stubbornly.

Albus stared at the potion as they apportioned the rest out into three smaller phials. It had all seemed so simple and easy to him, but judging by the dubious contents of the other phials on the desk, maybe it wasn't.

As they filed out with the other students Professor Flint looked up. "A word, Mr. Potter."

Rose and Scorpius gave him worried looks as they filed out. Gas and Cormac left with a glowering Azure following with her melted cauldron, still smoking. She was making loud declarations about how she should have known better than to team with boys.

As the noise faded, Albus stood across the desk nervously trying not to swing his cauldron. Professor Flint was studying him with an intensity that didn't help him much in the nerves department. He thought about taking a swig of his portion of the calming draught after a few moments of scrutiny.

"Would you like to know why I seem to have higher expectations of you, Mr. Potter?" the professor inquired mildly.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about genetics, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir."

"Well, we Slytherins place a lot of importance on genealogy, and you have an amazing family history."

Albus felt a flush of anger. This was about his father again, it always seemed to come down to his father. "Well, sir, I'm not my father!" he declared.

An icy spike of fear pierced him as he realised he was just cheeky with a professor on his first day. Those ten points to Hufflepuff might have just been cancelled out!

Professor Flint appraised him coldly. "You are correct, you are not your father," he stated finally. "You have gifts he doesn't have, just like he has some gifts you don't."

He picked up his satchel and gave Albus one last considering look. "Next time you see your father, ask him about Lily Evans, and her ability with potions, and what that has to do with your ability. You'll see what happened today in a new light. You are dismissed."

Albus turned and left the dungeon quickly, his head a mass of questions. He almost ran full speed into Rose and Scorpius backing away, obviously eavesdropping. He walked on by them in a huff; they caught up with him halfway up the stairs.

"Wait up, Albus," Scorpius called.

Albus slowed just enough to blurt out, "I don't want to talk about it!"

Scorpius smirked. "That's all well and good, but we've got flying lessons with Professor Krum out on the grounds in a few minutes, and you are headed the wrong way."

Albus felt embarrassed. Rose was laughing at him behind her hand.

Scorpius was trying not to smile but failing. "Honestly, Albus, if I had known how genetically superior you are, I would have let you do more than stir!"

Rose broke out in a fit of giggles that became peals of laughter when Albus tickled her, saying, "I'll give you something to laugh about!"

Once they headed out to the flying lessons, Albus forgot about his encounter with Professor Flint. His dread of this class had haunted him all the past year.

He was scared of heights.

Chapter 6: Something Happened on the Way to Normal

The day was incredibly bright with few clouds overhead as they strolled through the Front Gate, between the winged boars, and out to the field opposite the lake, just beyond Dumbledore's tomb. *Perfect day for flying* Albus said to himself gloomily. He was sure he was about to be revealed to the entire class for what he really was. A coward. The familiar shame welled up inside him.

His dad was the youngest Hogwarts Seeker in over a half-century, and his mum was a famous professional Chaser, and he was terrified of flying.

It was just a jumble of swirling images when he dared think of the day when he first flew. He remembered the feel of his death grip on the broom, the wind in his hair and the moment when it all went wrong. James never admitted to it, even though he got grounded for nearly a year afterwards, but someone put a sticking charm on the broom, then hexed it to fly wild. Fred and James both were laughing hard at Albus' panic, but they ran behind him terrified as he zoomed straight into the orchard at high speed, and was dragged through several trees. It was one of the worst days in Albus' life. He was in St. Mungos for the better part of a month drinking Skele-Grow through a straw. James and Fred both waited on him hand and foot, showing that even though they never admitted to it they did feel guilty about something. Since that day, no matter what his dad or mum tried, he got a panic attack anytime he rode a broom alone.

And now that was precisely what he was going to be asked to do. Terror gripped his heart.

Rose knew, and she leaned over and whispered, "You'll be fine."

He nodded and gave her a brave smile, but he knew he was going pale as a Hogwarts ghost. He glanced over at Scorpius, and for the first time since he had met the boy, he saw him smiling. It wasn't a sarcastic quirk of the lips but genuine enjoyment. His hands seemed to be clenching a phantom broom and his gait had become confident and coiled like a spring. Albus didn't need to see him on a broom to know he was looking at a born flyer.

Of course he was wondering how their friendship was going to be affected when Scorpius realized he wasn't.

He saw from the badges of the other group that they were sharing this class with the Gryffindors. He couldn't help but compare the two houses as they mingled. There were two blond, muscular Gryffindor boys chatting easily, that hulking boy Michael Nedved was over to the side in conversation with Gaspar and Cormac, or at least Gas was in conversation with him! A little wide-eyed white-blond girl with freckles was giggling with a smiling brunette, whose laughter echoed across the field drawing glances. Thor, the tall, thin boy, with the ponytail was quietly conversing with the only other person with a ponytail, who happened to be Rick Cresswell from the Hufflepuffs. As soon as everyone realised that Albus, Rose and Scorpius had arrived, all eyes and gossip shifted to them.

Albus knew in his mind that his sorting was unexpected, but seeing the focus he and his two friends were drawing drove the reality home. This other group of boys and girls standing around waiting for class to begin were, at one time, going to be his house mates, not the ragtag mixed bag of Hufflepuff. All of the Gryffindors looked confident and seemed to share a common thread, with the exception of poor Thor, that is. Albus had a stray thought that maybe he and Thor got switched, but when he saw the brooms on the ground that thought retreated, he definitely did not feel like a Gryffindor!

He made an abrupt turn to head back to Hogwarts, but Rose, expecting the move, looped her arm through his and spun him back.

Scorpius cocked an eyebrow at them, getting used to the long established interplay between the cousins. "What are you two doing?"

Rose smiled sweetly. "Albus thought he forgot something, but I brought it with me." She handed her cousin one of the Calming Draught phials.

Albus looked at it dubiously. "Are you sure it won't poison me?"

Rose glared at him. "Professor Flint confirmed it was alright to use!"

Scorpius interjected, "Yeah, but Professor Flint is a certifiable nutter."

She shot him an evil glare. "You're not helping!" she hissed.

Albus, not wanting to referee another Scorpius/Rose fight, popped the cork out and downed the bright green liquid without further protest. It tasted like lime liquorice wands, as soon as it landed in his stomach, reassurance seemed to circulate through his body. He felt, in a word, calm. He handed the phial back to Rose with a cocky smile that would have made James proud, and they strolled the rest of the way into the clearing like they owned it and the other milling students were guests.

Professor Krum was standing by a big box watching them as they arrived. He gave Albus a meaningful nod. As a family friend, he knew of Albus' uncharacteristic fear. But he obviously

wasn't going to make a big deal of it. It was fine with Albus; as a matter of fact everything was fine with Albus!

"Class! Gather around please," Krum barked, startling the sun baked, lazy students into action. They all crowded around expectantly.

"Since the *Muggleborn Assimilation Act* took affect, I have used this first class to teach those not born in the vizard world the game of Quidditch," he said with characteristic brusqueness. He opened the box and inside was a Quidditch set, one Quaffle, two struggling Bludgers, and a little Golden Snitch buckled in.

As Professor Krum began to teach the positions, Albus, long well acquainted with the sport in question, serenely studied the field they were in. It was as far from the Forbidden Forest as it was the Front Gate, and off down an embankment some safe distance away was the old Whomping Willow. Nasty as ever, he saw the tree swat a little bird as it flew too close, in his artificial calm he smiled as the feathers floated to the ground.

Albus's attention snapped back as a Quaffle hit him in the chest.

"Pay attention Mr. Potter." Krum grumbled.

Albus rubbed the sore spot on his chest then he tossed the Quaffle from one hand to the other a little, he had never realized how long his fingers where until he saw how he could actually palm it.

In his mind he recalled the event he and Rose called *The Great Snowball Incident* which occurred at the Burrow the previous Christmas.

Fred, James and Teddy had ambushed Rose, Albus and Dominique as they made their way back from visiting Aunt Luna. The ambush had taken place as they passed through the orchard. Caught unawares they where pelted mercilessly. Then Rose, red-faced and furious, yanked her wand out of her robes and cast a *Protego* charm, taking advantage of the fact that they where under parental supervision for a couple more months, something she couldn't do Hogwarts age. As snowballs pelted off of her shield, Albus staged a counter attack, flinging snowballs at Fred and James and Teddy with pinpoint accuracy and with a velocity that surprised even him. Fred, Teddy and James, decrying the sneaky tactics, retreated. Rose, Dom and Albus had celebrated like they won the Quidditch Cup.

Albus's musings ended abruptly when his eyes settled on the chest that held the Quidditch supplies. The Bludgers where struggling so hard that they where rattling the case.

"Not good." Albus murmured to himself.

Krum seemed confident that they where harmless, so much so, he wasn't even paying attention as he handed beater bats to the two athletic looking Gryffindors. "The spells on these Bludgers have worn off a bit so they will not be capable of much, don't worry."

"Professor," Albus blurted, "I don't think those Bludgers are safe!" Krum gave a tolerant stare. "I used them just last class, you worry too much." With that he disengaged the buckle holding them in place with one foot. They shot out and up so fast they nearly knocked him off of his feet. His face crinkled in confusion before he realized, not only where those Bludgers not worn out, they where dangerous.

"Vun for the gate!" he yelled. "I'll distract them." he grabbed his broom, mounted and kicked off in one smooth motion.

The class turned to head back to the gate, only to see that it was closed. That was when the panic set in.

Professor Krum was too busy to call out any instructions and Albus knew if they bolted down toward the Whomping Willow, the Bludgers would be the least of their problems, and if they went too far into the Forbidden Forest, then they might lose students there. They were standing in no man's land. On the other side was the lake, the great squid waving lazily beside the big ship that doubled as Professor Krum's home. That, however, was twice as far away, and those Bludgers would have a lot of time to do damage. The large glass arboretum was closer, but didn't have an outside entrance on this side. He glanced up at the professor, Krum was good, maybe the best ever, but those Bludgers were taking after him with a vengeance! He swooped and turned and rolled but he was taking some vicious hits.

Albus had a moment of crystalline clarity. He couldn't just stand there and watch; he had to do something.

Rose was pulling her hair out staring up at the faltering professor, streaks on her face where she had begun to cry.

"Rose!" Albus barked. When she looked at him she looked at him he asked, "How strong is your *Protego* charm?"

She looked confused for a moment but then her clever mind caught up. "I'm not sure. Not enough for the whole group." she said wiping her eyes, reaching for her wand.

"Gas!" Albus yelled, the round boy, who was nearby, jerked and stared at him. "Were you bluffing about that jinx?" Albus asked.

Gas looked confused, "J-j-inx?" Albus' was surprised to hear his voice calm considering how hard his heart was beating. "Stay with me Gas, this morning, were you bluffing?" Gas shook his head. "It's a *Jellylegs* jinx, Bludgers don't have legs to jelly."

Albus tried not to roll his eyes, as he waved him and Cormac closer. "Rose, teach Gas that *Protego* charm. I saw how he held his wand, he can learn it. Cormac, you're fast, you gotta run, and go get help."

Albus was surprised to see them all nod and immediately follow his instructions. Cormac paused before running off, he clasped a hand on Albus's shoulder. "Luck be with ya," he said with a strange solemnity, then he was gone. Albus was right about how fast he was. The little boy was covering ground!

"Scorpius," he called out.

Scorpius, who was focused on the drama above them, didn't hear him until Albus yelled his name again. "Krum needs help," Albus said. "Can you out-fly a Bludger?"

A look of determination crossed Scorpius's face. He rushed past the paralysed and panicking students and grabbed a school broom. He kicked off from the ground and rose like a rocket into the air. His body curled over the broom like it was a part of him. Albus watched him soar, wishing for a moment, that he could fly like that.

Scorpius arrived just in time. Krum took a shot to the back of the head that almost knocked him off his broom.

The woozy, disoriented, professor banked his broom away as one of the Bludgers attached itself to the tail of Scorpius' broom. The other Bludger lost interest in the professor and swooped down at the students. Rose had them organized around her and Gas. The Bludger began smacking off of their shields.

Gas wasn't as confident with his, but it was holding so far, although his face had gone red with the effort. Being first years the shields wouldn't last too long, but maybe long enough for help.

Scorpius, despite the slow school broom, was doing surprisingly well, pulling off some maneuvers that Albus hadn't seen before.

Under Rose's protection, Albus's eyes found Professor Krum, to his alarm, he realized the near unconscious man was going to be in the Whomping Willow within the next few moments.

Albus sprinted out from under the shield running toward the Willow, not sure what he was going to do when he got there. He had the Quaffle gripped in his left hand as he ran. *How am I going to disable the Willow with just a Quaffle?* He suddenly remembered his father's stories about that old tree. There was supposed to be a knot on the trunk near a place that used to be a door, before it got filled in. The Quaffle in his hand was a lot bigger than a snowball. That knot was a lot smaller than James, Teddy or Fred. He glanced up to see that the meandering semi-conscious professor was swinging ever wider, and soon to be in range of the Willows upper branches shortly. They seem to be quivering with excitement.

Albus reached the outer limit of the trees reach. A limb slapped down in front of him to let him know this. He circled desperately out of range studying the base. Finally he saw a large knot beside an old mossy pile of dirt piled against the trunk. Not even pausing to think, he reared back and slung the Quaffle. A few limbs tried to hit the red ball as it passed through but it was moving too fast, nailing the knot dead centre. The tree stopped dead just as Krum's broom got entangled in the upper limbs. He heard some shouts and turned. The Bludger, that had been attacking the students, was headed for him. Not seeing any other way, Albus pulled his last resort out of his robes. His wand.

That creepy, too knowing voice came unbidden to his mind:

"Made of Rowan, eleven inches, medium springy. It's one of wands I acquired from Gregorovitch's widow. I've never found the young wizard to whom it belonged, though." The man, speaking those words, was the old man Ollivander himself. His nieces and nephew ran the shop, but when he heard that Harry Potter's son was in the store, and had gone through every wand in stock, he came hobbling out. His bright silver moon eyes studied Albus with a calculation to make your skin crawl. In his claw like hand, he carried a well worn slender box, from which he pulled out a long and tapered, intricately carved, dark wood wand. Albus' first thought had been that it was beautiful. Albus's hand warmed as soon as he came into contact, and his shoulder that was sore from swishing and flicking countless wands suddenly felt fine. He flicked it and so many sparks came out it set a workbench on fire. Ollivander had his wand already out and did an Aguamenti spell to put it out. Albus stared stunned at wand in his hand, in the carving: he picked out a monster. It had a lion's head, dragon's body, and a snake for a tail and breathing fire. "That wand, young man," Ollivander wheezed, "is the only Chimera scale wand I have ever laid eyes on, very powerful." He looked over Albus, to his father and said with an eerie finality, "I think we can expect great things from this son, Mr. Potter."

The wand in Albus' hand was singing with power up his arm; he was told it was his imagination, but it always frightened him. The only offensive spell he could remember was one that he had heard Kreacher use trimming the hedges out front.

He raised the wand and sighted down it, before he could change his mind, and bellowed, "*Reducto!*"

A jet of bright orange light burst from the wand nailing the rogue Bludger dead centre, reducing it to dust. The explosion sounded like a cannon shot.

He heard gasps and turned to see that the students had followed the Bludger down. The sound was still echoing through the clearing when another flash of light shot out and hit the remaining Bludger. It stopped chasing the now exhausted Scorpius, and dropped to the field below. Next thing Albus knew Professor Krum was being levitated expertly down to the ground. Following the stream of light he saw Professor Pharrel standing wand in hand with a sweaty Cormac. The balding man was waving them frantically away from the Willow with his other hand. "Come on, away from there, that knot doesn't paralyse that blasted tree for long!"

They all walked toward him, numb now that the sense of urgency was gone.

Scorpius grabbed Krum's now rider-less broom out of the branches, and brought it down to the ground with him. He landed to cheers and sudden acclaim.

Suddenly Albus's nerves, strangely absent, caught up. He hit all fours and lost his breakfast on the ground. He rolled away, onto his side and started trembling, and crying.

The magnitude of what had just happened, and what he had just done was passing through his mind.

Concerned students were hovering around him. Rose shoved her way through. She had seen his panic attacks before. "Back up! Give him some space!" she growled. Her hand rested cool on his forehead, "It's going to be alright Al," she said softly.

Albus took one glance at the eyes of his fellow classmates, and saw the same reverant look he had seen in the eyes of those looking at his father. *No it won't*, he concluded to himself as he curled on his side trying to remember how to breathe, *Not for a Potter*.

Chapter 7: Mythologies and Apologies

Some time during all of the bustling and rush to get him to the hospital wing, the cries and demands for information from his relatives, answered by the loud "Back off!" from Rose, and the many hurried ministrations by the grandmotherly nurse Madam Pomfrey, Albus fell asleep.

He awoke in pajamas, sometime later, to a familiar hand brushing his hair away from his forehead.

"Dad?" he murmured.

His dad leaned over him with a sad smile. "I didn't mean to wake you up, son. I was just checking for a scar."

Albus tried to smile for his dad but it was more of a grimace. "Sorry you had to come all this way."

His dad looked affronted. "Have I ever not come when you needed me?" he asked with a soft urgency.

Albus shook his head, and tried to sit up. His head swam a bit but he was able to make it.

His dad watched him with a look of bemusement. "Panic attack?"

Albus nodded. "It hit me all of a sudden. Lost my breakfast in front of everybody. Pretty embarrassing."

"I'm the one who should be embarrassed. Son, I owe you an apology."

Albus turned to his dad shocked. "What for?"

His dad took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "For not trusting you."

He continued on before Albus could protest. "You were afraid of flying. It hurt me that you couldn't enjoy something that I deeply love, but I let it go and didn't push. You were afraid of your wand. I never insisted that you use it. I figured you would when you were ready. You were terrified about the Sorting. I told you my secret to put you at ease. I've done all I could to make your way as painless and easy as possible. I tried to shelter you from everything I didn't have anyone to protect me from. All that effort, and what happens?"

He stared expectantly at Albus. Albus wasn't sure what he was getting at, so he shook his head.

His dad, sighed and said, "You became a hero anyway."

Albus started to protest, but his dad gave him a look that told him he wasn't finished.

"Out of all of my children, you are the one I worried the most about." He said. "You were always so afraid of everything. I never insisted that you do anything that frightened you. Suddenly, you're at Hogwarts less than forty-eight hours and you're sorted into a House I never anticipated, became friends with someone I never imagined, and wind up saving a bunch of Gryffindors with, from what I've been told, amazing ingenuity and courage."

Albus sputtered, "But I threw up! I had one of my attacks. They had to carry me to the Hospital Wing."

His dad's eyes, silenced him with a quiet intensity. "The fact you vomited, and had a panic attack, makes what you accomplished no less amazing. True heroes have weakness before, and afterward, but never during." He paused a moment then said, "I underestimated you, son. For that I am sorry."

Albus wasn't sure how to take that, but he launched himself off of the bed his dad caught him in a hug. He felt the love his dad had for him, but this time he also sensed some weariness that he didn't understand.

"So what happened, Dad?" he said pulling back, "Is Professor Krum okay?"

Harry nodded. "Ole Krum has taken more than one Bludger to the head over the years, son. St. Mungos wants to keep him for observation. As for the rest of what happened, we're still looking into it."

"Where's Mum?"

"I asked her to go with Krum's wife. I wanted to have a talk with you. She'll be back in a little bit, but she and I won't be staying long." He chuckled when Albus' disappointment showed on his face. "We'll have dinner with you and James. If we do much more than that, and Hogwarts will be in an uproar."

Albus hugged him again. "Thanks for coming, Dad."

"Always," his dad replied.

"Am I interrupting?" came a voice from across the room. They both turned to see the feline features of Professor Bast.

"Alright there, Freya?" Albus's dad called.

"Very much indeed," she answered as she crossed to the bed. "I just wanted to take a look at Albus' wand before Transfiguration Friday. It wouldn't do to have my class blown up like that Bludger."

Albus felt ashamed. "I didn't mean to."

Freya had a warm, comforting smile on her face. "I know. But since I heard that Bludger exploding all the way in my classroom, I thought I should decide the best course of action, beforehand."

Harry stood up. "I need to go tell Madam Pomfrey, he's okay to leave. I'll be right back."

Albus found his wand in the carefully folded robes on a chair beside him. He hated the tingle he felt as he picked it up, and handed it to the professor.

She took it gently, studying it carefully. "What is the core?" she asked.

"Ollivander told me Chimera scale."

She gave him a strange look. "Are you sure?"

Albus was taken aback. "He made sure we knew. Why?"

Professor Bast studied the carvings, then handed the wand back carefully with the tapered end pointed away. "It's fine, Albus. We just need to find a slightly different way to teach you Transfiguration, that's all."

Albus stowed his wand. "Why?"

She sighed as if trying to find the words. "Well Transfiguration is a science of subtlety, and your wand is anything but."

Albus stared at his hands. "I knew it. My wand is a freak. Just like me."

He suddenly realized who he was talking to, and what he had just said. He looked up to apologise and saw her laughing silently, so hard tears were beginning to collect in the fur at her eyes. She swiped them away, licked the back of her hand absently and slicked the fur back down.

He started to offer his apology but she placed one furred hand gently against his lips. "Please don't ruin it by apologising," she said with a slight wheeze.

"What did I do?" he asked, alarmed.

"You forgot," she replied with a smile. "You opened up to me about not fitting in, like I wouldn't understand. That is the nicest thing anyone has done for me in more years than I care to remember!"

She sat on the bed beside him and put an arm around his shoulders. Her chest made a gentle rumbling sound, oddly like a purr. "Let me tell you a secret, Albus. Something it took me years to learn." She turned so he could see her face.

"There is no such thing as normal."

Albus was confused. "What do you mean?"

She smiled, and her dainty little fangs flashed. "Everyone in this world is different. There's not one the same, even twins. So how can there possibly be a standard to judge by? Normal could only be one person. That would make him or her...abnormal."

Albus thought for a moment or two. "So what is, normal?"

She smiled and patted him on the back. "Normal is boring Albus, dreadfully dull, really."

She stood to go. "Us Hufflepuffs might not always be the best at everything, but we are never dull."

Albus stared at her. "You're a Hufflepuff?"

Professor Bast looked around to see if anyone was nearby, then, reached into her robes and turned the lapel inside out to show a small gold badger pin. "We're not supposed to play favourites, but I keep this over my heart. I'm a 'Puff for life. I am very proud that you are one too. See you in class Friday. Don't worry, we'll work things out."

She waved, passing his dad on the way out. They had a short discussion before they parted.

Albus smiled when his dad said reassuringly, "Everything's set. Grab your stuff and let's get something to eat."

Chapter 8: Mal-feasance

When they arrived at the Great Hall, Albus knew he was in trouble.

There were two distinct groups of people at two different tables eating dinner.

A group of his relatives sat at the Gryffindor table. They were talking excitedly with two seats left open beside his brother James. Albus' mum was seated at that table as well. To her immediate right was...*Uncle Ron?*

Sure enough, the tall, thin man with the Weasley red hair was sitting there stiffly, staring furiously forward with a flush in his cheeks, his ears red.

Across the aisle Albus saw his group of friends from Hufflepuff. Rose sat beside an empty seat. She looked just as flushed and angry as her father.

It was a safe bet that Albus had just missed yet another Ron/Rose free-for-all.

It was also obvious that Albus had to make a choice.

As usual, James made the situation worse.

"There he is!" he declared loudly. "That's my brother. I told you he should have been in Gryffindor!"

He led the cheers and patted the seat beside him encouragingly.

Albus was suddenly furious. After all that teasing, and all of the pranks this last year, now he's claiming me as a Gryffindor?

Albus' dad had his hand on Albus' shoulder. He must have felt the sudden tension, because he instantly diffused it.

Giving Albus a nudge in the direction of the Hufflepuffs, he said, "James, you know that Houses sit together. Besides, I want to meet Albus' friends."

James was shocked. He looked down at his plate to hide his embarrassment, his cheeks flushed.

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks dad," he murmured.

He saw his mom look up, exchanging a look with his dad; then she nodded and turned back to her conversation with Molly and Lucy, like nothing had happened.

Uncle Ron, however, was staring at Albus and his dad, openly aghast.

Rose slid over one more seat, shooting her dad a triumphant look. There was little doubt now about what their row had been over.

The two tables and practically the entire Hall were whispering and pointing. Long used to ignoring such displays, Albus and his dad took a seat and immediately tucked in. Albus, ravenous from missing lunch, and losing breakfast was working his way through a plate of savory beef stew, while his dad munched a steak and kidney pie.

Out of the conversation at the table, the loudest one was between Gas and Cormac.

Gas, turned around in his seat, was chatting so animatedly about the presence of "the Harry Potter" in the Great Hall that he didn't notice that his hero was seated right behind him.

Cormac kept trying to get a word in edgewise to tell him, but he just couldn't break into the long stream of superlatives.

Albus' dad, privy to some of the statements being made about him, exchanged a wry smile and a wink with Albus.

He tapped the little round boy on the shoulder. "Please pass the salt?"

Gas paused just long enough to pass the salt, glancing up at his fellow tablemate as he did so, and turned back to Cormac, who was smiling.

Gas froze. Spun around and did a double take. Made an "Eeep!" sound. His eyes rolled back and he promptly fainted.

Cormac gently caught Gas and with Albus' dad's help brought him to rest face down on his own arms, moving his plate of food.

Cormac gave Albus' dad a bemused look. "I'm thinkin you mus' be Harry Potter?" They shook hands over Gas' inert form. Albus' dad said, "From Rose's description, you must be Cormac, and this has to be Gas."

Albus finally realised what he had been missing since he first set eyes on the Hufflepuff table. He turned to his cousin who was muttering under her breath.

"I'm in Hufflepuff. The nerve of insisting I sit with him at another table. He needs to get a grip. Why my mother ever married him is beyond me."

"Rose," Albus called.

She turned and snapped at him. "What!"

"Where's Mal-Boy?"

Rose looked over her shoulder at the empty chair, seeing it for the first time. "I didn't know he took off. He got answer owl from home just a bit ago, about Professor Pharrel asking him to play Seeker this year."

Albus shook his head to clear it. "Did you say, play Quidditch this year?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "You didn't think you were the only one to be asked after the way he flew did you? Honestly, you can be so dense sometimes. Kind of like *your* Uncle Ron."

Albus' jaw dropped.

He spun to see his dad looking apologetic. "I was going to tell you, later."

"You told him no, right Dad?" Albus sputtered.

Albus' dad smiled, "I'm not going to be over-protective this time, Al. I've learned my lesson. Tryouts are next Tuesday. I know you can do it."

Albus closed his eyes, and did his breathing exercises. He concentrated on his slow inhales and exhales. The last thing he needed was another panic attack today.

"Are you okay, son?"

Albus peeked at his dad through the corner of his eye. "Getting stressed out won't do me any good?" he said hopefully.

"Not this time. We've got you a flying instructor coming this weekend. He's been guaranteeing for years that he can teach you to fly in one afternoon. Until now, we haven't taken him up on it."

Albus heard the slight hesitation in his dad's voice. "Why not?"

His dad smiled. "We didn't want to scar you for life!" he answered with a chuckle.

"You're not helping, Dad!" Albus exclaimed, his chest beginning to hitch again.

"Sorry," his dad said, handing him a glass of water. "Don't worry, he won't hurt you. He knows if he did, your mother would kill him slow, resurrect him, and kill him slower."

They both laughed, relaxing.

Albus thought about a few moments before he blurted, "Why did Professor Pharrel ask me to try out? He's never seen me fly."

His dad and Rose, and Cormac all gave him incredulous looks.

Rose spoke first, as usual, "Albus, you git! You threw a perfect Quaffle strike, over twenty meters, and hit something the size of your dad's fist! Are you seriously surprised that someone wants to try you out at Chaser?"

"But it was a lucky shot," Albus muttered.

He saw Cormac tense out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked the boy showed no sign. But he was concentrating on his food a little too much.

Albus made a decision. He pushed back from the table. "Dad, I need to find Scorpius."

Rose shot him a look. "Not without me, you don't."

His dad nodded. "I need to go and make peace with your relatives anyway." Before he switched tables, he signed a bit of napkin, and handing it to Cormac for Gas for when he came to.

Albus and Rose headed for the massive double doors. As they passed by James, he saw his brother's eyes narrow. James mouthed the word, "Later." Albus glared right back, and mouthed, "Bring it."

The Cellar wasn't far, and they got there in record time. There were some third years playing chess and a fifth year studying by the fire, but no Scorpius. Albus ran back to the dorm room and it was empty as well, except for Scorpius' kitten napping on the bed. He woke long enough to give Albus a tolerant look and settled back in.

Albus had a moment of inspiration. He got down eye level with the cat. "I need your help finding your master, Kub. Would you mind?"

The kitten opened his eyes and regarded him for a minute, stretched, yawned and then batted Albus' nose gently with his paw.

Taking that as a yes. He gently picked the little fur ball up, carrying him like he had seen Scorpius do.

Albus' didn't like cats, as a general rule, but he felt a warm spot for this one. After all, they had a friend in common.

When he got back to the common room Rose gave him the look he deserved. "How's a cat supposed to help us find Scorpius?"

Albus shrugged, and they went out. As soon as they got up to the Great Staircase, Kub's paw shot out pointing in its direction.

Albus and Rose exchanged an incredulous look. "I guess we go up," Albus concluded.

They made their way up through the castle, getting some looks as they stared at the kitten at every intersection. Making steady progress, they made it all the way to the top within minutes.

Scorpius was in the Astronomy Tower, leaning against the battlements and staring out at the rolling moonlit hills with his chin in his hand. At the sound of the intruders, he turned and gave them a cold glare; "I would appreciate it if you two would leave."

Rose shrugged. "Have we ever left you alone? What makes you think we're going to start now?"

Albus placed the kitten on the ground; it darted across the distance and shot into Scorpius' surprised arms.

"We brought you a friend. If you would like to talk to us, we'll be back in The Cellar." Albus tugged on Rose's sleeve and they turned to go.

"Wait."

When they turned back, Scorpius had scooted down to a seated position, his back against the stone wall. He cuddled the kitten against his chest, trying to hide cheeks suddenly wet with tears.

"Please, just wait."

They walked back slowly and slid down on either side of him, close enough that their shoulders touched.

No one said anything, not even Rose. They just sat there in silence, as he cried.

Kub leaned up and began licking the salt from his cheeks, causing Scorpius to chuckle. It seemed to help him to gather himself.

"I'm sorry. For losing it like that. Very undignified."

"Yeah," Rose agreed, "We can't have the next Dark Lord sobbing himself silly can we?"

Albus interjected, "It's not very intimidating, mate, honestly."

They slyly looked at Scorpius to see that he was laughing silently. Soon they joined him.

After a few minutes the silence crept back, but it was warm against the chilly night.

Albus broke it. "Can I ask what the letter said?"

Scorpius was silent for a few moments. "It said, no."

"No?" Rose gasped. "What do they mean no? You were absolutely brilliant today!"

Scorpius took the compliment with a wry smile. "My grandfather wants me to be brilliant for Slytherin, as soon as he can get the board to overturn the Sorting. My mother's siding with him. Dad's somewhere in Romania, I never know where, grandfather sends all the owls. There's nobody else to sign. It's impossible."

Albus thought about that for a few minutes. "Well I'm not going to be the only first year playing Quidditch this year. I happen to know a person who does the impossible all the time. He's my dad. If anyone can find a way, he can."

Rose leaned forward past Scorpius. "They were going to flood out from the Headmaster's office, as soon as dinner was over. We'd better hurry!"

They left the tower, rushing down the stairs, accosting a few students to tell them the way. They arrived at the two gargoyles in a shorter amount of time than they would have thought possible.

"Password?" One of the gargoyles grumbled.

The other one suddenly blurted out, *"Felix! Look, it's Harry Potter's son. What do you need, young man?"*

Albus, not used to being talked to by statuary, managed to say, "We need to talk to my dad before he leaves."

"Well go on up then!" it said. *"Felix, be a dear and get out of their way?"*

"Felixis," the other one whined, *"They need to have the password, we can't just let anybody go on up!"*

"Felix, you can be such a hard head!"

"Hellooooo, I'm made of stone!"

The one called Felixis waved Albus over. *"The password is Zaire. Honestly."*

Albus called out, "Zaire!"

Felix grumbled but moved to the side and the circular stone stairs rose out of the floor, moving up like an escalator.

"Thanks," Albus called as they went past.

"Don't mention it, dear," Felicis said.

Felix just grumbled, *"Oh sure, you look like someone we know, let's just tell you the password so you can go on up and trash the place!"*

They reached the large office door and clanked the brass knocker.

"The Headmaster is not in the office at present, go away," came a bored voice from within.

Albus exchanged glances with the other two, and they pushed through the door.

The office within was decorated in tan and gold, with tropical plants growing from pots in the corners. Albus recognized several antique Dark-Art detection devices featured on pedestals, the oddest being a fake magic eye which rotated and focused on the intruders. They passed a large ornate Foe-Glass, and a gold and jewel encrusted Sneakoscope as they made their across a carpet of soft reeds to the large desk. Portraits of former Headmasters and Mistresses, some sleeping, surrounded it.

"I am assuming you students do know the English language. You were told, he is not here, go away." The rest of the awake Headmaster portraits where glowering at the speaker, but he didn't seem to notice.

He had long stringy hair and a pale sallow face, and his black eyes glared at the students in question. The plate underneath the fram read "Severus Snape."

"Now, now Severus," came a voice from the centremost portrait, "we mustn't be rude." Albus' head was spinning as he realized that the other portrait must be Albus Dumbledore. He recognized the half moon spectacles, perched on a crooked nose, and the kind, twinkling blue eyes from the Chocolate Frog card.

Dumbledore stared at the three for a moment. "You must be Albus Potter. That has to be Rose Weasley. And that young man has the look of the Malfoy clan."

They all nodded but couldn't speak. It wasn't often that you get to talk to a legend. They found it a bit overwhelming.

"So, what do you need the Headmaster for?" Dumbledore asked politely.

Rose was the first to find her voice. "We're trying to catch Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny before they floo on out."

Dumbledore beamed. "Well, seeing as they have yet to do so, I imagine you will find you have accomplished your aim. Just wait a few more minutes."

His penetrating eyes focused on Albus. "I have heard that you have had quite the day, young man."

"Y-yes sir." Albus managed to stammer.

Dumbledore studied him over his spectacles for a few moments. "Well, we can hope that the rest of your days at Hogwarts will contain far less excitement."

"It seems that the Potter gene for causing trouble, and then acting the hero, has bred true," came a clipped statement from Snape's portrait, "I find that I am not surprised. His father was nothing but trouble when he walked these halls."

Albus saw Rose's cheeks flush, and was surprised to see Scorpius showing anger as well. However, as he glanced back at Dumbledore, he saw the old wizard smile. It almost seemed that he had been awaiting such an opportunity.

"Young Master Potter, kindly tell my portrait-mate, your middle name."

Albus looked the other painted visage in its black glinting eyes, trying not to smirk, and said, "My full name is Albus Severus Potter."

Watching the portrait try to compose itself through the shock, Albus thought, *this is almost worth having the middle name the rest of my life! Well, almost.*

"Are we sure that it's him?" came his dad's voice from behind them as the office door suddenly opened.

They spun to see Albus' mum and dad led by Professor Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt froze when he saw the students.

"How did you three manage to get into my office?" he asked gravely.

"One of the gargoyles told us the password," Rose stammered.

Shacklebolt visibly relaxed, and sighed. "I need to get new gargoyles!"

They all went to a sitting area around the fireplace. Albus related the problem to his dad. Deep in thought, Albus' dad asked Shacklebolt, "How close a relative does it have to be to sign the permission form?"

Shacklebolt thought for a moment. "At least direct lineage. Grandparents or parents, liability issues dictate that much."

He asked Scorpius, "I have heard no mention of your grandmother. As I recall, she was fairly lenient when it came to your dad."

Scorpius looked up from his kitten with surprised look on his face. "We haven't heard from her for some time. After she divorced Grandfather, she declared that she was going to see the world. The last postcard we received was from the South of France."

"Divorced? Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy are divorced?" Albus' dad asked, sounding out the thought. He suddenly brightened up and actually smiled. Albus had a joyous thought, *I knew he could do it!*

Albus' dad and mum exchanged another look; they seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Will she come?" Albus' dad asked. His mum nodded. "If you asked."

"Shacklebolt, can I use your fireplace for an incoming floo?"

The Headmaster nodded.

When Albus' dad pulled out a small compact mirror, he saw the strange looks he was getting. "I got the idea from Muggle portable telephones. This will take a moment." He walked away from them, talking into the small mirror. Then he came back. "It will be a few minutes yet."

He turned to Scorpius. "Mr. Malfoy, I've heard some stories that you are a flyer. What's your favorite team?" He and Scorpius were soon discussing Quidditch and flying tips, with Shacklebolt interjecting, Kublai allowing his ears to be scratched like a gentleman. Rose and Albus' mum began talking in quiet tones before too long.

Albus' eyes found Snape's portrait; he was amused to see that the sallow man was staring at his dad with a look of utmost confusion. Dumbledore, however, looked content, and was having a conversation with a portrait of a man holding an ear trumpet.

With a flash of green light, an elderly, severe-looking witch with gray-streaked brown hair and an aristocratic bearing, popped out of the fireplace. She began fussily dusting her dress for ash.

Albus recognized her immediately.

Scorpius, however, turned white as a sheet. "Aunt Bella?" He stammered.

Andromeda Tonks gave him an affronted glare. "I most certainly am not!"

This meeting is starting well, Albus thought.

Chapter 9: The End of a Very Long Day!

Andromeda crossed the room, studying Scorpius like a breeder looking for bloodlines. "Yes, you've got Black blood in you," she said as she used her wand to clean her hands and dress.

Scorpius looked affronted. He let Kublai down to the office floor to explore, and said, "I don't know what you're talking about. Why do you look like pictures of my Aunt Bella?"

She ignored him, turning to Albus and Rose. "Albus Potter, and little Rose, already in the Headmaster's office? For shame!"

Albus prepared to defend himself, until he saw the smile tugging at Andromeda's lips. Rose had no reaction to the teasing, so he glanced over.

She was taking a closer look at the magic eye through the glass. That was his cousin. When she wasn't causing massive destruction with that sharp tongue of hers, she was curious about everything.

"Where's Theodore?" Andromeda said as she finished and turned to Albus' mum and dad.

"Oh, he was out on the grounds earlier, helping in an investigation," Albus' dad replied.

"Well, call him," she snapped. "He needs to be here."

Albus wasn't surprised when his dad immediately followed her orders; Andromeda was sweet, most of the time but, but there was nothing but grit underneath.

His dad walked a few feet away and pulled the compact back out.

Andromeda rolled her eyes and gave Albus' mum a hug.

Scorpius was still openly staring at the newcomer. His usual aloofness had vanished, swept away, it seemed, on a wave of confusion.

Albus' dad cleared his throat meaningfully as he finished with the compact.

Albus' mum and Andromeda were looking at some pictures the younger witch had pulled out of her bag, both ignoring his attempts to get their attention.

"Ladies," he called.

Andromeda turned to him, her arms crossed, the aristocratic glare she gave him making him immediately uncomfortable. "You're the one who called me Harry Potter. Since I'm doing you a favour, you might want to show a little more patience."

Albus' dad held up his hands in an *"I surrender"* gesture.

It wasn't long before Teddy Lupin knocked and came through the door, sporting bright blue hair.

Headmaster Shacklebolt was clearly exasperated. "How did you get the password?"

Teddy shrugged. "The gargoyles were too busy arguing, I just walked right by them."

Shacklebolt rolled his eyes. "I've got to get new gargoyles!"

Teddy looked around the room, winking at Albus as he walked by.

"Wotcher, Grandmum."

She turned her glare on him, drawing him up short. "Wotcher yourself, Theodore. Just look at your robes! And need I remind you, your hair is not blue."

Teddy shrugged as his hair went back to its normal brown.

Even with her disapproving studying of his rumpled robes, she still gave him a warm hug.

Albus' dad smiled. "Well now, we're all here."

He turned to Andromeda. "Do you remember the incantation?"

The look she gave him was answer enough. He gave her space with a sheepish grin.

She pulled out her polished, immaculate wand, touched it to her lips for a moment, then with a flourish she called into the emptiness,

"Turjours pur, throughout history. Ye of the Black line I summon, make your way to me! Narcissa Black Malfoy, get your arrogant, pompous and pampered arse here! Now!"

She turned to a thunderstruck room, one eyebrow raised. "She'll be here shortly, but she won't be happy about it."

Headmaster Shacklebolt recovered first. "Harry, when I let you borrow my private office floo, it wasn't to bring two very powerful witches, who are most likely hostile to one another, back into proximity!" he bellowed.

Scorpius managed to stammer, "W- what's going on here?"

Andromeda turned to him, but her face was kind. "I think your Grandmother has some explaining to do, Scorpius. Don't worry, she will be here shortly."

Scorpius looked exasperated. "How do you know my name? No one here has used it."

Andromeda and Teddy exchanged a look, but said nothing.

The wait wasn't long. In an explosion of air, a tall, disgruntled witch with white-blond hair, popped into their presence, dropping an elaborate teapot, which she had evidently used as a Port-key. Her wand was out and her bright blue eyes scoured the room. Her eyes rested on a amused Andromeda Tonks. "Do you have any idea how much that stings!" she roared.

"Hey there, Cissy," Andromeda said in a bored tone. "Did you have a nice trip?"

Narcissa Malfoy, was about to launch a curse, when suddenly Scorpius shot across the room and wrapped his arms around her waist, forcing her to pause.

"Grandmother!" he cried, buried in her bodice.

She quickly stowed her wand, vengeance forgotten. She hugged him back and they forgot the room.

The rest of the offices occupants walked away from the reunion to give them some time.

Headmaster Shacklebolt, to change the subject, asked about the incantation that Andromeda had just used.

Andromeda sat down in a chair like it was a throne. "It's passed down through the Black line, only a Black can use it," she explained. "It was originally intended as a call to arms for the Black ancestors, if our lands were ever invaded by non-magical folk."

Shacklebolt thought on that a moment. "So you recite the incantation, and the person summoned has to come? Or what will happen?"

Andromeda smiled; it wasn't a pleasant one. "The sensation is similar to being plunged headfirst into a nest of angry wasps, as I recall. I haven't been summoned for many years."

Albus' dad was sitting on the arm of the chair that Albus' mum occupied. He stated, "They couldn't use that summoning on Sirius or Andromeda, because once they were disowned, the spell on them was broken. I remembered Andromeda mentioning that to me at Christmas one year."

Andromeda looked over at Narcissa and Scorpius; the look was wistful. "My sister honoured the House of Black, so she was never cast out. That is why the summoning worked on her. I am willing to bet I could summon young Scorpius there the same way."

Narcissa was fussing over Scorpius, and his face had gone pink with embarrassment. "Grandmother, don't!" Scorpius grumbled as Narcissa tried to wipe his cheek, beginning to head back towards the rest of the group.

As they approached, Narcissa's face lost its warmth and became cold, aloof, and aristocratic. *I can see where Scorpius gets that skill*, Albus thought. *And I know what it means when Scorpius does it. His grandmother must be really uncertain at the moment.*

"My grandson has informed me why I am here. As much as I love him, I must regretfully decline to sign."

Scorpius' face couldn't hide the fact he was crushed with disappointment.

Andromeda threw up her hands, exasperated. "You can't break free of Lucius even now that you're divorced! Where is your Black blood now, Cissy?"

Colour leapt to Narcissa's cheeks. "You do not call me that. You lost that right long ago. And who are you to lecture me on what is characteristic of Black blood, Andy?"

Andromeda stood. She was shorter than Narcissa but no less impressive.

Scorpius looked up at his grandmother. "Why does this lady look like Great Aunt Bella?"

Andromeda's words were slow and clipped, "You told him of Bellatrix, and never told him of me? What kind of person do you want him to be when he grows up?"

Narcissa stared coldly at the shorter witch. "Scorpius, please tell her what you know of your Aunt Bella."

Scorpius stared at his grandmother a moment, then complied. "She was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's right hand, she killed and tortured a lot of people, and she was killed in a one-on-one duel, just before the Dark Lord fell."

Andromeda smiled at the young boy. "Now ask your grandmother how many sisters she has."

Narcissa answered before Scorpius could ask. "You told me at Dora's funeral, to leave, and that you wanted nothing to do with me or my husband or our family."

Andromeda's eyes fell. "I was wrong."

The shock on Narcissa's face was apparent. "What did you say?"

Andromeda looked back up, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I was wrong. I'd just lost Ted, Dora, and Remus, and was trying to raise Teddy. I had so much anger, I threw away the only family I had left. But this isn't about you, or me, or Lucius. This is about that little boy you're holding. He only knows he wants to play Quidditch. Don't take that away from him."

The silence stretched out for a few moments. "Scorpius," Narcissa whispered, "this is your Great Aunt Andromeda, and that young man over there is Teddy, your cousin."

It wasn't a tearful reunion, and it wasn't greeting-card perfect. The two sophisticated witches didn't embrace or tearfully apologize; they just nodded as if an agreement was passed.

Narcissa called out to Headmaster Shacklebolt, "Where do I sign?"

The tall man found the parchment on his desk, and brought it over with a quill.

As she scratched out her name, he said, "May I ask, what changed your mind?" She handed the parchment and quill back. "No, you may not."

Scorpius beamed. "I've got an aunt and a cousin, and I get to play Quidditch!"

Narcissa's bearing cracked for just a moment. "Consider this the next few Christmases and birthdays rolled into one. I will most likely get cut off for this."

Andromeda smiled at her sister. "If you ever need help..."

Narcissa cut her off. "I have some other resources, thank you."

With that, and one last hug for her grandson, she picked the Port-key back up and was gone in a blue flash.

Albus watched the whole scene with shock. "So Scorpius and Teddy are cousins?" His dad nodded. "Family business, Albus. We had no right to say anything."

To punctuate the moment, Uncle Ron came bursting into the office and breathlessly declared, "I'm sorry, I can't floo out until I find..." He stopped when he saw Rose. "There you are! What are you, barking mad? You know I've got to say goodbye to my girl!"

Rose rolled her eyes and she ran over. He plucked her off of the floor and hugged her. Then they began talking quietly.

Albus looked at his dad and mum. "Suddenly, I'm feeling a lot more normal." His dad and mum chuckled and offered him a hug. "You'll get over it."

"Ron?" Headmaster Shacklebolt said as Uncle Ron and Rose walked up, arm in arm. "How did you get in?"

"*Zaire*, Felicis told me. You need to get new gargoyles, mate!"

Shacklebolt sighed. "Tell me about it."

After Scorpius retrieved Kublai, Teddy agreed to walk him back to The Cellar, they left chatting animatedly. Albus silently walked the halls alone. He had said goodbye to his parents and left Rose talking with her dad. He just wanted to get into bed.

Then he realized that the staircase had turned him around, and he wasn't sure where he was. He started down a new hallway, panicking, when he was suddenly upside down, hanging by one foot. I wasn't long before he heard some flopping noises, and he got to see what a goblin looked like upside down.

"Ah, a student out of bed," the upside down goblin said in a smooth-cultured voice, stroking his long beard. "Whatever shall we do? Caretaker Filch's ghost is a few flights up chasing the Poltergeist yet again, but he can be summoned quickly."

"W-what do you want?" Albus stammered. He was getting a bit of a headache.

"Well let's see, young Master Potter. You don't have too many valuables with any true value. I do wish young Master Malfoy was accompanying you."

"You've been through my stuff?" Albus said, outraged.

"I am the caretaker, it is advantageous to know what I am expected to take care of. We goblins don't believe in private property. That is a human concept. If it has been placed under my authority, I should have access to it."

Albus tried to think but he was getting a bit dizzy. "What do you want from me?"

The goblin was thoughtful. "A boon will suffice. You will owe me. Be sure you pay my debt before the end of the year."

As Albus was lowered to the floor, he glared at the goblin, "What's the boon?"

The goblin smiled with his little sharp teeth. "You'll know it when you see it, young wizard." He pointed one bony finger the way Albus should go, and then flopped off down the opposite corridor.

Albus was livid; how dare that creature hang him upside down like that! He ought to go back up to Headmaster Shacklebolt's office right now. However, he knew he would probably get lost on the way.

"What are you doing, Albus?" Rose asked as he turned the corner in the direction he was pointed. She was descending the stairs, but she didn't look lost.

"How are you finding your way around?" He demanded.

She smirked. "I memorised the floor plan before I came to Hogwarts."

Albus rolled his eyes, but followed her. Soon they were walking through the round oak door of The Cellar.

Albus was surprised to see Cormac waiting by the fire. "Hey Albus, canna talk to you a minute?"

Rose said goodnight, gave Albus a hug, and was gone.

He walked over to sit opposite Cormac. The firelight revealed worry lines etched into the boy's face.

"What's wrong?" Albus asked.

Cormac seemed unsure whether to say anything, but finally began. "Remember when you called your Quaffle strike this morning, lucky?"

Albus nodded.

Cormac sighed like he was lifting a heavy weight. "You might have been right about that."

Albus found himself growing nervous about where this was leading. "Why do you say that?"

Cormac was quiet for a minute, "Do ya know what I am, Albus? I canna tell you unless you already suspect."

Albus leaned back, rubbed his tired eyes, it had been the longest day of his life. "You're half-Leprechaun, aren't you?"

Cormac let air out like a deflating balloon, "Ya figured it out. I was hoping you'd know. Me mum was Leprechaun and me dad was human. I didna know until three years ago. Well three years ago Leprechaun time. Staying with me mum's folks it's hard to tell."

Albus was intrigued. "What was three years ago human time?"

Cormac looked at him calmly. "Thirty years, give or take."

Albus' mind was swirling with the possibilities. "And your father? He was human, right?"

Cormac stared off into the fire. "My mum went back to her people, she didna know I had power, because of wizard blood I had in me. My father had it in his blood from four generations back, he didna know either. My power came to me when I was seven years old. We were in a car; he complained about the traffic lights, I changed them all to green. We were hit by another car coming from the other direction." Cormac looked into Albus' eyes, "I turned one side but the other side was still green. I killed me father."

Albus was stunned. Finally he ventured. "So. You can make things happen. All wizards do that when they come into their power, it's not your fault."

Cormac shook his head. "My power is different, I can cause things to become more likely, both good and bad. I can't control which way it goes. Think about it, after I said *Luck be with ya*, Professor Krum got hit in the back of the head and wound up headed for the Willa, but you had the Quaffle, knew where the knot was, and had enough arm to make the shot. Good and bad luck at the same time."

Albus sighed. "So that Quaffle shot was lucky. If you take away the Calming Draught too, I'm not as special as everybody thought.

Cormac shook his head. "The only way you coulda made tha shot, was if you were capable of hitting it anyway. All I did was make it more likely. I'm not full blooded, I can't make anything happen that's not probable normally."

Albus shook his head. "I've got a head ache. I need to lie down."

Cormac smiled. "I know, it's confusing, but I needed to tell ya."

Albus met his eyes. "Why me?"

Cormac pulled his wand out of his robes. "I recognized my people's workmanship when you pulled out yer wand." Albus had one more shock in a day of shocks. The wand Cormac held out was as intricately carved as the one in his robes. He accepted the offered wand. "Is your wand Chimera scale too?" Cormac shook his head. "No, not that powerful. They plucked my Great-Great Grandda's beard while he was nappin for the core. You should have heard him yelp! You've never heard a person curse until you've heard a 600 year old Leprechaun let fly!"

They both chuckled.

"What does this mean for me?" Albus said, handing the wand back.

Cormac stowed his wand. "I'm not sure. If it's in your possession then it belongs to ya, that's all I'm sure of."

Albus rubbed his eyes. "Can we talk about this some other time? My brain is melting."

Cormac nodded.

They started across the common room when Albus said, "Cormac, you didn't kill your father, I'm sure about that."

Cormac shook his head sadly. "It all comes ta the same thing Albus."

They left in silence.

Chapter 10: Vampires, Roses and Wand Work...Oh My!

To Albus' relief, the next day was normal. Well, normal for Hogwarts.

As they made their way up to the Main Hall, Albus was amazed at the turn-around in Scorpius' fortunes. Those who had turned away from him in complete disdain the day before, were actually bordering on tolerating him now. Albus was greeted with the usual warmth, then the other

students would glance off to the side, so as not to be obvious, and add, "Malfoy" under their breath.

"Just think," Albus said gleefully nudging Scorpius in the ribs. "By this time in a couple of months, they might actually glance at you!" Scorpius rolled his eyes, adding, "And a couple months after that, they might actually say my first name too. Before they run off in shame, of course." Albus grinned. "That's the spirit. Be positive!"

Scorpius favored him with a wry smile.

At breakfast, Rose was her normal, cheerful morning self. Rating somewhere between a rampaging Hippogriff, and a Troll with a toothache. She had empty seats in a wide berth around her, indicating that she had caused some carnage already.

They got some pointed looks from Slytherins as they settled in, but Teddy's protection was apparently being taken seriously. They all immediately found other things to do.

Another Howler arrived for Scorpius with the owls. This time, however, Rose was able to cast a *Muffliato* in time. The only one who heard what was being bellowed was Scorpius.

Albus and Rose tried to eat their breakfast like nothing was happening, until the explosion of red paper. Scorpius was a little less shell-shocked this morning as the charm dissipated. "Sorry," he explained sheepishly. "Until yesterday, I'd never gotten one of those in person. Still not used to it."

"Not to be nosey." Rose began.

"That's never stopped you before." Scorpius quipped.

She stuck out her tongue at him, before continuing, "What was this morning's Howler about?"

Scorpius calmly swept the ash off of the table, "It seems that paper work for all students involved in Quidditch, are registered with the Ministry. Grandfather still has friends there. He is not amused."

Albus tried not to pry, but he had to know. "What do you mean, not amused?"

Scorpius calmly stared off into space his face flushed in anger. "Grandfather let it be known to me, that I will have no access to my racing broom at home, and that no one in anyway related to the Potters are going to help me acquire one." He turned to Albus, his eyes were cold, "If anyone, directly connected with the Potters, helps me, Grandfather will bring interference charges before the Intramural Quidditch Counsel, and have me suspended.

Albus considered that for a moment, stomach clenched with nerves. The plan was brilliantly diabolical. Lucius couldn't stop his grandson from playing Quidditch for Hufflepuff by withholding permission, so now he was handicapping his grandson from being able to compete adequately.

Albus was beginning to see why Slytherins made such formidable enemies.

Rose was blustering, muttering vile threats under her breath, "Somebody should go and find that old man and..."

Albus interrupted her before she could finish the thought, "So you can't be helped by anyone having to do with the Potters, what about Professor Pharrel? Dad got his first broom from his Head of House."

A grin dawned on Scorpius' face, "They allowed him to use it?"

Albus nodded.

They went off to find Professor Pharrel's office before class. It was located in the back of the spacious DADA classroom.

The professor answered the door, and graciously waved them inside. It turned out to be opulent, trimmed in oak, and lined with shelves of dark art detection devices and duelling trophies. He listened carefully to the problem, and promised to work on finding a solution, then urged them not to be late for their first class.

Even though they flew down the hallway, they arrived at Charms a little later than the other students.

As they reached the spacious airy room, all the happiness they had felt earlier abated. They were greeted with the sight of angry, disgruntled first-year Gryffindors, already seated, collected in the back tables in a united block.

It seemed as though Albus' heroics the day before did not earn him fans in that tower. A group of Hufflepuffs saving them, was an extreme embarrassment to a House known for bravery and boldness. Upperclassmen most likely did not let that pass.

"Hail, the conquering hero comes." Said the taller of the blond duo from the day before with venom dripping.

"Hail, the cowering jerk doth sit." Rose spit back. Albus rolled his eyes. *Here we go.*

Any impending violence was cut short by the arrival of Professor Patil. Her calm gaze took in the obvious separation in the two houses, but she didn't comment on it.

She launched into the lesson quickly with no preamble. She wasn't one to make speeches and ease anyone in.

Soon only the sound of her voice and scribbling on parchment was heard as she taught about the use of Charms. Particularly how wand movement and intent played a part. Rose and Scorpius seemed able to keep up. Rose was copying word for word, while Scorpius was using a relaxed occasional notation style. Albus' brain felt like it was frying.

Finally Professor Patil assigned practical work on the Charm *Wingardium Leviosa*, levitating feathers.

Scorpius managed to get his feather up off of the desktop rather quickly, ahead of a red-faced Rose.

Albus saw a sly smile as Scorpius' watched her struggle. Scorpius finally leaned over and murmured, "Your wrist is too stiff." Rose glared at him, but the moment she loosened up her wrist, her feather left the table surface.

"Don't you dare say, I told you so!" she hissed. Scorpius looked affronted that she would think he would stoop to such depths, but as soon as she looked away he mouthed it. Albus had to snicker.

Rose turned on Albus. "Well, funny boy, you gonna levitate that feather or just fan it with your wand," she demanded.

Albus grimly raised his wand, noticing the silence in the room around him, except for a few chairs backing away. He had been watching Rose and Scorpius, and he thought he had the motion and the pronunciation down. He ignored the tingling in his wand arm and closed his eyes waving the wand in the correct manner. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," he declared. He heard some gasps and sounds of students leaving their seats behind him. He opened one eye.

The entire hard wood table, with everything on it, was off of the floor and floating in the air past his nose. He lost concentration in his shock, and it started to fall. Professor Patil caught it with her own Charm and lowered it gently to the floor.

"Class dismissed, please work on that Charm for our next time together, but keep to small, light objects please." Professor Patil said.

There was a scramble for the door as Albus stowed his wand, red-faced.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Y-yes professor?"

"Make sure you always keep your eyes open at all times when you're casting a spell," she said. "Especially with your wand."

Her eyes were kind as she gave them the go-ahead to leave.

As they left the classroom, he heard a voice come from behind him, "Try not to lose your breakfast this time Potter." He turned to see a couple of Gryffindors laughing as they headed down the hall. Rick Cresswell walked by with Thor Boot, shaking his head in disgust, showing his loyalty.

They didn't have a class until the midnight Astronomy, so the rest of the day was theirs. They walked down to Professor Krum's ship to check on him. While they were there, they were given some wonderful native Romanian lemon bread, called *Prajitura cu lamaie* that his lovely wife baked for them to show her gratitude. Professor Krum complimented Scorpius on his flying, and brusquely thanked Albus and Rose for salvaging the bad situation.

They went back to the castle, picked at their lemon bread-spoiled dinner, ignored some glares and barbs from Gryffindors in the Great Hall, and went down to the Cellar to work on their homework for Potions and Charms.

Later that night after their first Astronomy class with the Slytherins, Albus discovered that not all of the students were ungrateful for his heroics the day before. The pretty Hufflepuff with the perfect blond hair, said hi, and introduced herself. "I'm Summer Sutherland," she said. "Thank you for saving us yesterday, you were very brave." Albus shook her hand not sure what else to do. She smiled, flashing dimples as she walked by, trailing some floral perfume. The small shy girl with glasses that always seemed to trail Summer, passed by in her wake, she paused just

long enough to murmur, "Yes, thank you." Then having exhausted her ability to communicate she scurried off, holding her books, and telescope tight to her chest like a shield.

"Who was that?" Albus asked, as she gave him one last look back before she turned the corner.

Rose snickered, "Wipe the drool off of your chin first."

"Not her, the second one." Albus insisted.

"Iris Ivy. She and Summer hang out a lot. I don't know why. That's the most I've ever heard her say."

They passed Growltooth, on the way back to the Cellar, and the goblin gave Albus a knowing, creepy smile. Albus tried not to acknowledge he had even seen the goblin, but he got a shiver up his spine.

The next day there was no Howler for Scorpius, much to his relief, but they still hadn't heard from Professor Pharrel. They decided to wait and talk to him in *Defence* class, which was scheduled for Friday.

Today all Albus could think about was, *it was time for Professor Longbottom's Herbology Class.*

This was the only class that James had ever commented on, and he called it *brilliant*.

They arrived at the interior entrance to the the Arboretum, same time as the Slytherins, currently sneering as they pulled on the required gloves and protective goggles.

With a hiss of pressurized air, they all entered the Arboretum, and just stopped and stared. The sheer mass of the place wasn't the only thing that was stunning; the variety of plant life was jaw dropping.

They were greeted by four stories of walkways and open air. The green, spelled, outer glass wasn't tinting or taking away from the colours within, but enhancing them.

They saw different eco systems just from their vantage point on the first level. Over to the left were a group of tropical plants being rained on by small contained storm clouds, while just across the path there was some desert flowers and exotic plants growing out of sun blasted rock and sand, a small globe of light hovered over head, obviously giving off heat, but the temperature within the arboretum remained comfortable.

Standing in the middle of the pathway, with his hands behind his back, some goggles forgotten on his head, was Uncle Neville. He looked like an excited kid showing off his creation.

"Welcome to the Sprout Arboretum." he announced.

Not long after they were being led through pathways and stairways, spiralling up to the top. Albus' head felt like it was going to explode from all of the sights he was taking in.

They walked past winter landscapes and tundra with crystalline glass looking plants, they passed what appeared to be a rocky mountainside with plants growing out of the side, there was a gentle wind blowing throughout the place.

"After the battle of Hogwarts several things became apparent," Neville explained. "First, was the significance of Magi-plant life in defensive applications, and secondly the lack of funding and focus on Herbological studies needed to be corrected."

Neville paused as someone from the back of the group chuckled derisively. Far from being put out, he actually smiled. "Ah we have a sceptic in our midst," he said gleefully. "Please step forward."

A smaller dark curly-haired Slytherin boy, boldly stepped to the front.

Neville nodded to himself, "Ah Mr. Kerry, Kian. Son of Krystoph Kerry, I presume?"

Kian sneered, "Yes, and he said this arboretum is the biggest waste of Ministry funds he has ever seen."

Neville nodded, "Well that is one man's opinion. What is your objection, young master Kerry?"

Kian rolled his eyes, "Plants used in defensive applications, I mean, really!"

Neville waved the class over to a particularly spectacular plant with multi-hued blooms that seemed to change with the angle and light. "Mr. Kerry? Did your father teach you any offensive spells? Like, *Stupefy*, for instance?"

Kian shifted nervously, "Of course he did, what has that to do with the subject?"

Neville bent down and plucked one of the blooms gently and pinned it to his lapel like a boutonnière. "Please, if you don't mind, stun me."

Kian backed away, "You're a nutter, I'll get suspended!"

Neville smiled. "Let me assure you. I give you my word, you will not be suspended. Please proceed."

Kian thought about it a moment longer, then whipped out his wand and bellowed, "*Stupefy*!"

A bolt of red light left his wand and shot out at Neville, suddenly it impacted on what looked to be a globe of solid, multi-hued energy surrounding the man, and shot back to Kian. He was bathed in a nimbus of crimson, and began to fall to the floor when Neville's own wand shot out in a blur and he said, "*Rennervate*."

Kerry revived before he fell, but shock was etched on his face, "W-what was that?"

Neville smiled proudly, "That, is a Bastille Rose. It is the only known plant that can protect itself from spells. We are working on an application to create personal force fields for wizards, but as of yet, the protection doesn't last longer than the blooms, which are a just a few minutes.

That, class, is just one of the applications we are working on. Let's head over to the classroom."

They followed him to a glass enclosure on the first floor that turned out to contain a classroom with tables complete with their own sinks. The rest of the class went quickly, with Neville assigning them some reading, and answering any questions related to curriculum.

As he dismissed them, he made one last statement, "Just so you know, class, I don't believe in belittling, or humiliating students as a way to educate them. Mr. Kerry I apologize for using you as a demonstration, but I believe I made my point?"

Kian's face was flushed in anger, but he nodded, his eyes narrowing.

"Class dismissed."

As they filed by Albus and Rose paused, to "give Uncle Neville their love."

"Uncle Neville, is professor Hemophilius a vampire?" Albus asked.

Neville chuckled. "Well, let's just say that, falling asleep in History of Magic is a little bit more precarious this year than in years past."

With that vague but dire statement ringing in their ears they made it to History of Magic.

The classroom was lit only with lamps in the walls, the windows heavily curtained. It was furnished like an 18th century salon with panels of opulent fabric recessed in the walls ringed by intricately carved woods, the student's desks were missing in their place were antique couches and chairs all in a semi circle around a suspended chalkboard. The floors covered by expensive oriental rugs. Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs were situating themselves staring at the surrounding decadence, confusion apparent.

A portrait of a dour looking older man, looking slightly out of place on the wall, was overseeing the students getting settled in. He spoke with a high and reedy voice, "There are some rules to this class you will be required to observe, no one is to look the professor in the eye for longer than a few seconds, no one is to remove the curtains at anytime for any reason. And lastly, there will be no fraternizing with the professor between classes...ever. So ask your questions during the class.

Those ominous words being spoken, Albus expected someone frightening to pop out. But the man who walked out of the back office was one of the least terrifying persons that Albus had ever seen.

He looked like a turn of the century dandy. barely eighteen years old, with skin so pale as to almost be transparent. His dark hair was tight to his head, and he wore old-fashioned blue velvet garb with an ascot.

He smiled and Albus couldn't detect long incisors, he was beginning to think this was all a joke.

"Hello class, I am Professor Hemophilias, if you will kindly shut up and listen, we can make this as quick and painless as possible."

His tone was pleasant and bored as he began to talk about events occurring in wizard history.

His perspectives on the Historical facts were fascinating, giving insights and details from a first person perspective. *But how could a guy that looks like a teenager, possibly be referring to things two hundred years ago like he was there?* Albus wondered.

Albus also heard some strange oddities in the way he was teaching them.

"The goblins rebelled, and who can blame them, really, there was blood everywhere. Wonderful, coppery, sweet red blood." Hemophilius said this with a strange shudder.

He prowled and lounged and posed, his mannerisms seemed effeminate but the girls in the room couldn't take their eyes off of him. Every time his bright blue eyes would lock onto one of the female students, the painting cleared his voice and the professor moved on. Albus was finally at enough of an angle that he saw a bit of fang when the professor smiled.

Hemophilias never walked beyond a line in the floor talking to the students without really interacting with them.

They were dismissed and everyone left the classroom quickly feeling like they had just escaped something, they weren't sure what.

Rose tried to put a positive spin on it, "Looks like History of Magic is going to be interesting this year."

Albus snickered, "You mean it's going to be a pain in the neck."

When that Friday came, Albus' got a visit from Nox. The dark bird swooped down, catching some stares with his long elegant wings, he dropped some parchment and acted aloof to Albus until he got some toast. After which, he nibbled his finger and lifted off.

The parchment was from Hagrid.

Just wanted to remind you, that you and Rose are supposed to have dinner with me tonight. See if your new friend wants to come. He's welcome as well. See you at seven o'clock. Got a surprise for you, but I won't tell you. So don't try to pry.

Love,

Hagrid

He gave it to Rose to read, and asked Scorpius if he wanted to come. Scorpius looked around at all the glares he was getting and nodded.

"A surprise for us? Hagrid can never keep anything secret." Rose commented.

Albus grinned. "Well, we'll have fun not prying it out of him."

They shared a chuckle.

Their first class, Transfiguration with the Ravenclaws, went smoothly.

As they arrived in Professor Bast's bright sunlight room, she assigned them into groups of three, at smaller individual tables not as close to one another as other classes, giving some privacy to the students as they practiced.

She was a talented teacher, who was very vibrant and interesting. And when the time came to turn pine needles into pins, she came over to Albus, Rose and Scorpius.

"Albus I want you to work on this," she said as she placed a block of ice on the table. She winked at him, "Work on turning that into a block of wood."

Albus saw Scorpius turning red trying not to laugh, Rose had her head down, but her shoulders were shaking. Albus glared at them, then tried to transfigure the block of ice.

It wasn't long before Scorpius and Rose were brushing bits of slush out of their hair. Professor Bast never commented, just replaced the block of ice every time, giving him some pointers.

Rose managed to get her pine needle hard enough to stick into the table top, earning her some praise. Scorpius however couldn't get his to harden at all. Rose leaned over. "Your wrist is too loose, sweetie," she said. She batted her eyes at him cutely, he just glowered.

By the end of class, Albus' block of ice was actually showing some wood grain.

Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Slytherins, was a bit of a let down. After seeing all of those trophies in Professor Pharrel's office, Albus expected a lot of first hand knowledge to be imparted. The genial man spent most of the class going over the book, *Defending Your Life*, that was the listed course text. Any questions that he was asked, was referred to the syllabus. They never even pulled out their wands for practice. With a last reading assignment, the class was dismissed.

Professor Pharrel waved them over as the students filed out.

I've acquired a broom for Scorpius, I'm putting some charms on it now, legal of course, but I should have it to him by Monday. Albus clapped Scorpius on the back, "Great!"

Atticus nodded them toward the door without another word.

They speculated as to the type of broom Pharrel was giving Scorpius the rest of the afternoon, Rose not contributing, but rolling her eyes on occasion that she couldn't believe they were still talking about it.

Hagrid received them warmly when they reached the cosy little cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Fang IV astonished Scorpius at first when he let out a ground shaking bark, but soon he was licking the boy to death, barely being restrained by his master.

Hagrid beamed as he tugged the dog off, "He likes ya, good thing he's just a puppy." Scorpius went pale, "T-that monster is a puppy?" "Sure!" Hagrid told him, "He'll grow a bit more yet." Scorpius tried to be polite, "Oh. That's good to hear."

Albus and Rose spent the next hour gnawing on Rock Cakes, fending off Fang, and watching Scorpius try to choke down dandelion juice for the first time.

Hagrid was uncharacteristically vague about his surprise, all they could get him to say was, you'll see when he gets here."

"So the surprise is a he!" Rose goaded.

Hagrid clammed up, and glared at them for getting that much out of him.

Soon after, there was a booming knock on the door. Hagrid crossed the room remarkably fast for such a large man.

The person he let through the door had a ruddy outdoorsman complexion under his freckles, crew cut red hair with a claw scar across one cheek. He was well into middle age, with grey showing in his thick ginger moustache, and goatee. His attire was strange as well, wearing a dragon hide overcoat with a fang earring. He grinned at the shocked expressions on Albus and Rose's face. "Did someone here order a flying instructor?" he growled.

Albus could only say, "Uncle Charlie?"

Chapter 11: Flying Like a Dragon's After You

The rest of the evening went fast after that point, with Albus introducing Scorpius to the coolest man in the Weasley family, by most of the grandchildren's reckoning.

Uncle Charlie wasn't one to visit often, mostly holidays, but when he was around his relatives usually made an effort to be accommodating. Albus' mum once said it was like "some wild beast visiting your yard. You want to keep seeing it, so you don't crowd it, hoping it will feel comfortable enough to comeback more often."

He answered all of Hagrid's questions about dragons with boyish enthusiasm. Scorpius forgot to be cool and aloof as he peppered the older man with questions, almost as many as Hagrid.

In a way, Albus was not surprised it was Uncle Charlie who was going to teach him to fly.

A few Christmases back, the Weasley men got into the eggnog a little heavy and Uncle Bill, Uncle Percy and Granddad got into an argument with Uncle Ron, Uncle George and Teddy over whether the best flyer in the family was, Albus's dad or Uncle Charlie. The argument ended with some bets exchanged and a "Snitch Catch" scheduled for the next day.

The two competitors were outfitted with old Comet 290's and flew after the Snitch best three out of five.

Albus knew his dad could fly, and he knew his Uncle Charlie escorted dragons on his broom stick, but the swirling, diving, rolling contest that followed, was by far, in his mind, the best exhibition of flying he had ever seen. He wasn't alone in that regard as all of his relatives still talked about that day. The contest ended when, at two each, Charlie out-stretched Harry and took the Snitch.

That became yet another example of the legend that was Uncle Charlie.

Assuring Albus that he needed to get some sleep, Uncle Charlie said his goodbye and headed back to Victor Krum's ship where he was staying. But not before telling Albus that he expected him at the old Dragon Pavilion bright and early. The instructions were clear, don't tell anyone he was visiting, and for Albus to bring a change of clothes with him.

Charlie gave Rose a hug and ruffled Albus' hair before shaking hands with Scorpius and Hagrid, and then was gone.

They headed back to Hogwarts.

"That's your uncle?" Scorpius said, awe clear in his voice.

Rose beamed. "Absolutely!"

As she told Scorpius her favourite Charlie story, Albus felt his stomach clench, when he contemplated what he was in store for the next day. The only encouragement he had, was his dad's statement about what would befall Uncle Charlie if anything happened to Albus. What was the problem with that? Between, *scarring you for life*, and *don't worry, he won't hurt you*, there was a lot of room for error. Add in the fact that Uncle Charlie had been dealing with a clientele with fangs and claws for most of his adult life, "Not good," Albus murmured.

That morning, Albus made his way across the grounds, with a small travel case, and his wand in his pocket. He was guided by some instructions scribbled on a piece of parchment by Roderick Yates. The older boy raised an eyebrow when he was asked where the Dragon Pavilion was, but when Albus told him he wanted an out of way place to practice flying so he would be ready for the Quidditch try-outs, Roderick gave him the directions with no further question.

It was a long walk, past Hagrid's cottage, around the edge of the forbidden forest, until Hogwarts was out of sight completely. Albus made good time arriving outside of the massive enclosure in a little under an hour.

It was shaped like an amphitheatre butted up against a cliff side; it didn't look used very often.

Rose had told him about it before they left the common room the night before.

Built for the first Tri-Wizard task, in his dad's fourth year, the ministry never tore it down afterwards. They stated it was because of the possibility of the tournament being held at Hogwart's in the future. But more likely, it was a lot of money to build and the ministry skinflints couldn't see spending that much money on a structure that was going to be disposable.

Albus saw a tent with smoke coming out of its chimney in a field off to the side. He headed over and pushed through the flap into a spacious living room and dining area where his Uncle Charlie was eating breakfast. He had an extra plate of food set out on the table. Albus sat down and tucked in; no words were exchanged until Albus had started on his second kipper.

"You ready to do some flying, son?" Uncle Charlie said as he leaned back with his coffee.

Albus nodded without meeting his eyes. He didn't want his Uncle to see the terror that was there. No boy wanted to show weakness in front of an adult he respected, and truth be known, Albus wasn't sure he was going to keep his breakfast down with his nerves.

"Well as soon as you finish, we can get started."

They finished breakfast and Charlie led him over to the pavilion. They walked through a tunnel into the interior.

The place was huge, bigger than the Hogwart's Quidditch Pitch, with row upon row of stands surrounding a large arena area with heat-blackened rock. There, looking tiny and solitary, was a broom leaning against a large crate.

"I remember the day your dad faced that Hungarian Horntail. She was gorgeous, but nasty. He really won my respect that day!"

"How so?" Albus asked, hoping to delay the inevitable.

Uncle Charlie smiled at the memory. "Out of all of the contestants he was the only one to realize he was dealing with a dangerous, but intelligent creature that he needed to outsmart. The rest tried to disable, or trick their dragon. Krum hit his Chinese Fireball in the eye with a curse, he's a friend now, but I still bring that one up! Harry was the only one who used the dragon's instincts, instead of working against them. In a way, that is what I am going to do today with you. I am going to work with your instincts. You've got too much flyer blood in you to not know how to fly deep down. We've just got to get your brain out of the way."

Albus thought those were the most ominous words he had ever heard.

They walked over to the crate, and Uncle Charlie grabbed the broom and tossed it to Albus. Albus caught it and studied it. "This is a Nimbus Millennium!" he exclaimed.

Charlie looked amused. "For a bloke, who's terrified of flying, you know your brooms."

Albus traced the lines with his finger, "I never said I didn't like brooms, just flying them."

Charlie grinned. "Well what are you waiting for, mount it!"

Albus held the broom gingerly as he mounted it and waited for further instructions. He had no intention of making this easier on his uncle.

"Try to dismount, I need to check something," his uncle said offhandedly.

Albus tried to dismount but he couldn't get loose. "Uncle Charlie, why is there a sticking charm on this broom?" he asked, his voice quavering.

"We need to get through to your instinct. Albus, I'm sorry, there isn't another way."

Albus just then glanced at the brushes. "Why are the twigs scorched?"

Uncle Charlie smirked. "Well one of the biggest instincts a fellow has, is self-preservation."

He walked over to the crate, smacked it with his hand. "Trezeste-te leneş Dragon!" he bellowed. The contents of the crate growled in response.

Terror gripped Albus' heart. "W-what's that?" he managed to squeak.

Charlie smiled, but if it was supposed to be reassuring it failed. "This, my dear boy, is Ringo. He's not much of a morning person, even for a dragon."

Albus felt his eyes widen almost painfully. "A dragon!"

"Yeah he's a little Chinese Fireball I've been raising. You happen to be stuck to his favourite toy."

Albus was speechless in terror; he felt his chest hitch and his stomach lurch. The beginnings of a first rate panic attack began to cloud his mind.

Charlie's smile faded and his face shut down, becoming as cold as a Romanian winter. "In ten seconds, I am going to let my friend here out to play. I wouldn't be on the ground when he gets out, if I were you."

"B-but Uncle Charlie!"

"One!"

"Don't do this!"

"Two!"

"My mum's going to kill you!"

"I'm not your mum or dad Albus, you've been coddled enough! Oh, and that's three by the way."

Albus felt tears sliding down his cheeks. He had no words because he was losing his breath.

Charlie showed no sign of mercy. "You can stay here and have a panic attack and meet the dragon, or you can kick off and try to out fly it. Those are your only two options. Oh, in case you can't count, Albus, that's four.

Albus didn't even remember kicking off, but the wind was blowing his hair back, except his cowlick, which was fighting it. The tears dried on his cheek as he headed to the closest side of the pavilion. He pulled up short when he felt the Aversion Charm. He was trapped.

"Ten! Play nice!" Charlie called, as he kicked the bolt on the side of the crate door, it fell with a thud, and a red and gold comet, trailing smoke shot out, straight for Albus.

He wasn't as large as Albus had first thought. *But Merlin, who cared, it was a bloody dragon!*

Albus spun and launched off toward the other side of the pavilion as fast as he could get the broom to go. He felt the heat of the dragon's breath right behind him, there was smoke blowing around, and he expected to be torched any second.

Then suddenly something deep within Albus stirred. What came to the surface was primeval, and dark. It was pure unfettered rage, and it felt like a long lost friend.

He slowed down until the dragon was right on his heels, and suddenly he yanked the broom stick into a roll to the side, simultaneously braking, the dragon shot by, and he rolled back and kicked the broom after it. Round and round they went, with the dragon trailing smoke, and Albus hard on its tail. Suddenly the dragon dived for the ground and into its crate. Albus landed on the ground running a few steps.

He didn't remember extending his wand, but it was there, in his hand, shaking with his fury, pointed at his Uncle Charlie's chin.

The rugged man was laughing so hard he was wiping tears, he didn't seem to realize, he was the one in peril now.

Albus aimed at a partially melted rock.

Reducto!

The disintegrated rock showered his uncle with pebbles as he covered his eyes. Seeing that he had the man's full attention, "Take this sticking charm off of me now!" Albus shouted.

Charlie nodded and removed it with a spoken word. Albus dismounted, dropped the broom and started to storm off. Before he got more than a couple of steps he heard:

Petrificus Totalus!

All at once he couldn't move a muscle.

His Uncle moved into his line of sight. "I want to talk to you, without being hexed." He plucked the wand out of Albus hand.

The first thing Albus did, when he could move again, was take a swing, but his Uncle, anticipating such a move, ducked it and soon had him in some kind of arm lock. He was behind him with his mouth at his nephew's ear. "I am going to release you, but know, if you take another swing at me, I won't hesitate to stun you. Am I understood?"

Albus managed to nod, and his uncle let go of him.

Albus turned slowly, glaring. "I hate you," he said slowly, with as much venom as he could muster.

"I know. But, can I point out, you flew."

Albus twitched. *I flew?*

Charlie seemed to read his thoughts. "Yes you flew, and quite well! I think you scared poor Ringo though." He walked over to the crate and waved Albus over.

Albus shook his head. "I don't feel like being torched, thank you very much."

Charlie gave him an impatient look. "Come over here, you're safe. Trust me."

"You're not on my list of trustworthy people at the moment."

Even as he said it, Albus walked forward. Through the slats he saw beautiful iridescent red scales sparkled in the morning light-and then the dragon vanished.

Charlie grinned proudly. "It was an illusion based on a hatchling I saw blowing smoke rings, hence the name Ringo."

The truth sank into Albus. "I was never in danger, was I?"

"You thought you were," his uncle said quietly, "and like your father, you won my respect today." He pulled Albus into a dragon sized hug.

The rest of the day was spent with Albus learning how better to control the broom, how to throw a Quaffle using the broom's momentum. Uncle Charlie even mounted his own broom and raced

Albus around the Pavilion with the illusionary Ringo joining in the fun. As the sun faded in the west behind the Forbidden Forest, they went back to the tent.

Albus had something bothering him; he wasn't sure how to broach the subject. As they ate a dinner of bangers and mash, he finally tried.

"Uncle Charlie?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry I threatened you."

A low rumbling chuckle filled the tent. "You had every right to be chapped. No need to apologise. Besides, you've got some Weasley in you. I'm lucky you went for the rock!"

They both laughed, Albus immediately felt better.

Chapter 12: The Choice

That night, Albus had a dream.

He had earlier left Uncle Charlie packing up and made it to the gates before they were shut. As soon as he got back to the Cellar, weariness hit. He said goodnight and went straight to bed.

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In his dream he was camping out with Uncle Charlie in his tent at the pavilion and having trouble sleeping. It wasn't that the bed was uncomfortable; it was one of the nicest beds Albus had ever slept in.

Charlie's tent was his permanent home out on the preserve, so it had all of the features a home would have. The bedroom Albus slept in was one of several, except this one smelled faintly like the Jasmine blossoms Aunt Audrey kept for healing potions. He had found Dragon Keeper identification with the name, N. Tedescu, but mysteriously, there was no identifying photo in the nightstand drawer when he put his wand away earlier.

Uncle George always joked that Uncle Charlie never brought home his girlfriend because she was a vampire. Maybe it's true.

Albus thought about it for a minute before shaking his head. Nah, his uncle probably liked dragons more than girls. He turned onto his side and tried to sleep, but it was no use. Finally, he gave up.

He put on a robe over his sleepwear, some trainers, and stowed his wand in his robe pocket, and walked out of warm tent, into the chilly night.

He wasn't sure where he was headed until he was halfway through the tunnel, into the interior of the pavilion.

In the arena, which was lit by the three quarter moon, he walked over to the crate. Uncle Charlie's spell was centred inside it, but he wasn't going to look at the illusionary dragon, he just wanted to think.

What am I?

That question tore itself out of the dark recesses of his mind. As he recalled that morning, that anger surfaced again.

It felt so familiar, but he couldn't remember ever being that angry before.

Or at least acting on it.

That was it! That was where he knew it. Years of pranks, years of teasing and disrespect, years of his property being destroyed, years of having older cousins pick on him, and uncles joke around with him.

It came from years of being the victim.

What upset him wasn't that Uncle Charlie sent a dragon after him; he understood the reasoning behind that.

What upsets me is that he thought he could.

Albus had always got along so he could get along, he had always let things happen, and then didn't retaliate, because he just didn't have the heart to keep going with it. He just wanted to be left alone.

Why won't they leave me alone?

Now he was among the Hufflepuffs. He was in the House at the bottom of the order. He was in a House whose best-known member was a martyr. It wasn't an easy path being a Hufflepuff. You were not considered the smartest, the bravest, or the most cunning. You were not perceived as intimidating or dangerous.

You are a Badger.

What was a Badger?

Eagles where high, soaring, spectacular creatures that inspired wonder.

A Lions were powerful and strong, attacking anything with ferocity.

A Snake was a solitary creature, which occupied nightmares, struck in stealth and were universally seen as dangerous.

What was a Badger?

Badgers were peace loving creatures huddling together, working hard digging out a place for themselves, attacking or harming no one. When forced to defend itself, a badger was one of the most tenacious and vicious fighters in the entire animal kingdom. Always the underdog, but never attacked with impunity or without reprisal. If you provoked a badger, and forced it to defend itself or its family, you were in for a bad job!

Albus felt a smile touch his lips. The Sorting Hat was right.

I am a Badger.

He made a decision right there, in the pavilion by the light of the moon. From this night forward, he was going to be a Hufflepuff to the core.

Not what Hufflepuff had become, *but what it could be.*

He was going to be a true Hufflepuff, that loved peace, minded his own business, was loyal to his friends, and worked hard; but one who would be someone you never wanted to cross-ever.

This path would not be an easy one.

But when the time comes, that you are faced with a choice, between what is right, and what is easy...

To hurt others was easy. To take what you want and be cunning, and never think of consequences: that was easy. To be intellectual and never feel emotion, and be untouched by others and their plight, that was easy. To be bold every time, taking all the glory, that was easy.

Being peace loving, gentle, thinking of others, doing the things that others didn't want to do, and taking a back seat when necessary, but making sure no one ever victimises you or your friends and loved ones? That was hard.

It is hard, but it's right.

Albus took out his wand, for once not feeling scared of the power he felt within, or the potential for harm it possessed. He touched his forehead with the tip, and communed. This was a rare Chimera Scale wand, beautifully carved by hands possibly not human, and it was placed in his hand. It had chosen him. At that moment in the darkness, he finally chose it back.

He waited in the darkness until Uncle Charlie woke and went to the fireplace to put the kettle on. Albus said, "I need to talk to you."

Uncle Charlie almost leapt out of his skin. "What are you, daft, boy? Don't scare your poor uncle like that!"

Albus said, "Please. It's important."

After his uncle was seated, he made the gesture for Albus to go ahead and tell him what was on his mind.

"I've decided, Uncle Charlie, that I can't let you get away with what you did to me yesterday."

The older man looked offended. "Well it worked didn't it, and I should think you'd be grateful."

Albus made sure he was making eye contact when he said, "You would have never done that to anyone else."

Charlie snorted derisively. "No one else was afraid of a ruddy broom!"

Albus didn't back down for once. "I was afraid of flying because someone nearly killed me on a broom when I was six! You were there when it happened. You visited me in St. Mungos. You know how long it took me to recover! Still you thought less of me because I was afraid?"

His uncle thought about that for a moment. "You never cried."

Albus felt perplexed at the change in tone. "What?"

Charlie rubbed some sleep out of his eyes, before returning Albus' stare. "I Apparated your broken little body to St. Mungos, and you never cried, not once. I wanted to take James and Fred somewhere private and tan a strip off their hides, but Mum told me that they felt bad enough." Anger made his voice rough. "That's how I knew I should never be a parent. The fact is, if I were their dad, they would've been right beside you drinking Skele-Grow with immobilising charms all over their bodies. Even with all that pain, you never cried. That's why; when you never flew again I was disappointed. You're too tough a kid inside, Albus, down where it counts, to be scared. It has to be a choice you're making. I don't think less of you. I just wanted you to realise you could handle a Dragon being after you. I never expected you to chase the Dragon off and come after me!" Charlie said with a bark of laughter.

Albus didn't join him. "Even so, I can't let you get away with it."

Charlie grinned teasingly. "And what are you going to do to me Ickle Albykins?"

Albus felt a sly smile touch his lips. "I guess I should still send Mum an owl to let her know I'm flying. She'll want details. How many I give her, is up to you."

Uncle Charlie looked positively grim. "You wouldn't do that to me! Your mum would kill me, and then get creative!"

Albus gave him empty eyes. "I wouldn't?"

Uncle Charlie considered Albus for a few minutes. The battle of wills was intense in the silence. "What's your price?" he said finally.

"I need a broom for Quidditch."

"I'll let you have the scorched Millennium."

"The new one you flew on will be fine."

"That's an expensive broom, son."

"I can always send an owl to Grandmum too."

Charlie glowered at Albus, and then he smiled, shaking his head in mock disgust. "You slimy, little, blackmailing git!"

Albus leaned back, placing his hands behind his head. "Anyone who can create an illusionary dragon with that much detail can transfigure a broom into Hufflepuff colours, too."

Charlie grinned. "Anything else, your highness?"

Albus said, "My name spelled out with an indelible charm on the handle will suffice. Gold letters."

"Full name?"

"Why not?"

Charlie smiled fondly at his nephew, but there was a respect that wasn't there before. "You know that manoeuvre you pulled off on that broom, turning the tables on that dragon?"

Albus relaxed after the stress from the confrontation. "Yeah?"

Charlie grinned. "I've only seen another Dragon do that. You fly like a Dragon, son."

Albus met his eyes. "No, sir. I fly like a Badger."

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When Albus awoke in his Hogwarts bed. He stayed there in the darkness, taking stock, thinking about his dream. It had been incredibly vivid and real. Frighteningly so.

Was that the way he really felt? Like a victim who wasn't going to lie down and take it anymore? And that stuff about Hufflepuff. How did he know all that? Had his subconscious listened when he'd tuned out Rose nattering on about the Houses in *Hogwarts, A History*?

His talk with Uncle Charlie was something else to ponder. Could he really stand up to an adult that way? The threats he'd made, the demands—was he actually capable of blackmail?

His heart skipped a beat when Scorpius yanked his bedcurtains back to ask, "You awake?"

"I am now," Albus grumbled. He slid out of bed and went through the motions of dressing and walking to the Great Hall with Scorpius and Rose almost in a daze. As he listened to them merrily squabble, his mind couldn't help but wander,

What did the dream really mean?

Did it mean that he wasn't just the youngest son of Harry Potter, the boy afraid of everything with panic attacks and anxiety? A boy his brother said was doomed to have an ulcer by the time he reached fifteen? Did it mean that he was becoming something else?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the owls.

Celestina dropped a package at Rose then fled, fearing reprisal. Scorpius sighed in relief as there seemed to be no Howler coming for him. Albus went back to his porridge, and his thoughts, secretly relieved for some strange reason.

Suddenly there was an increase in comments. As Albus looked up, he felt like he was going in slow motion. He somehow knew what he would see.

He was the only one in the Great Hall not shocked when a owl, looking bone weary, dropped a long broom shaped object in front of him.

Waving Scorpius and Rose off, he picked up the card attached.

Albus,

I made it, safe back home in Romania. I realized before I left the country last night, if I ever want to come home again, I need for you to NOT tell your mother and grandmother how I got you flying. So accept this as a bribe, and good luck!

Yours,

Uncle Charlie

P.S. I made some alterations I somehow knew you'd appreciate.

Tearing open the package and finding a brand new Nimbus Millennium, spelled black with Hufflepuff yellow twigs, his full name in gold under the badge on the handle, Albus thought:

What is happening to me?

Chapter 13: Perspective Gained

Albus spent the rest of the day with Scorpius, down at the Quidditch pitch trying out his broom. He was enjoying flying so much; he was beginning to wonder what he had ever done without it.

While Albus was decent, by his own reckoning, when Scorpius took over his broom, the way he flew was breathtaking!

The boy just soared.

Albus wasn't sure what the difference was between what he could do, and what Scorpius had innately, but it was there.

They were interrupted, when Professor Pharrel showed up in the stands with a broom in his hand. They tried not to show eagerness by walking toward him, but soon they were racing each other.

Pharrel beamed, as he held the stick out to Scorpius.

It was a *Twigger 99*.

Albus' heart fell.

Twiggers were sub par at best. They finally fixed their warping problems a few years back, and made some amazing strides in manoeuvrability, but they were still too slow for a Quidditch pitch.

Pharrel didn't notice the disappointed looks he was getting, as he handed the stick over. "My friend who flies with the Worchester Wizards Synchronised Flying Brigade, said it was the best broom he had ever flown." he said with a big smile.

Scorpius was diplomatic, "Thanks professor, I'm sure it will be great."

Pharrel nodded jovially and bustled off.

Albus hissed, "Worchester Wizards Synchronised Flying Brigade? Is he mental?"

He turned to Scorpius, "You'll have to use my broom, that's all there is too it. I'll take the Twigger."

Scorpius, who had been studying the broom shot Albus a look so scathing, he was sure he had a burn mark in his robes.

"I'll make this work, Potter, I do not need your charity!"

Albus got heated. "Fine you arrogant, snobby git, good luck!"

He stormed off, his broom clutched in his hand, blasting by Rose who had been reading a book in the stands. He took his life in his hands as he held a hand rudely up to her face to stop her queries walking out

Heading back to Hogwarts, he just couldn't calm down. The rage that had been unleashed by that Dragon chase was still with him; he didn't realize he had wandered over to Hagrid's hut until he wound up at the edge of his Pumpkin patch. With a roar he kicked one of the Pumpkins.

"Hold on!"

Albus suddenly came to himself as Hagrid strolled over.

"Alby, what do ya think yer doin?" He growled.

Albus was immediately ashamed.

"I'm so sorry Hagrid, I didn't mean to," he murmured.

Hagrid patted him on the back so hard Albus saw white stars a moment or two.

"S'ok Alby, but yer need to get better control than that ah'right?"

Albus nodded.

He walked up to the Hogwarts common, feeling confused about the rage he had just felt. It wasn't justified by the situation. He needed to get this Hippogriff back in its pen before he hurt somebody.

He suddenly remembered how he had felt the day of the *great bludger catastrophe*, after Rose gave him that Calming Draught.

He wondered if he could brew himself some more.

He went back to the Cellar to stow his broom, and pick up his potions book and kit of basic ingredients, added his pewter cauldron and went back to the kitchen. The house elves were more than happy to let him borrow a burner on one of the bigger stoves, away from the line of sight of any stray Hufflepuffs passing through. He felt guilty for lying, when he told them it was for homework.

He flipped through the book and found another Calming Draught recipe; this one had longer-term affects but was more complicated to brew, still not out of his limited ability though.

He added ingredients, stirred counter clockwise, add another with a half stir back clockwise. It was so comforting, the adding of the ingredients and the stirring, he was actually enjoying himself every time he looked his potion was the right shade. Finally he reached the end and took a look. According to the book illustration, it was perfect. He poured it into several phials and secreted them in his potion case.

Back in the bunkroom, he had just put his ingredients up in his locker, and took his first sip when Scorpius came through the door looking sweaty but triumphant. He walked over to his bed and grabbed some clean robes and began passing by, when he paused, not even looking at Albus, ears flushed. "Sorry if I snapped at you Albus."

Albus was feeling the calming effects already. "It's ok, and the offer's still open."

Scorpius turned just enough to show Albus that cold, aristocratic Malfoy face, "You just don't get it, do you?"

Albus shook his head. "Tell me."

Scorpius sighed. "I don't have much left of a family right now, but I am still a Malfoy. A Malfoy finds his own way."

Albus considered that. "It must be lonely being a Malfoy then."

Scorpius left without another word.

The next day was a blur, with Quidditch try-outs on the immediate horizon.

Albus had no more outbreaks of anger, as a matter of fact when James and Fred spelled his hair Slytherin green and wrote "The Next Dark Lord" on his back while at breakfast in the Great Hall, he barely noticed. Rose eyed him indignantly, but he couldn't be bothered.

For the first time in his life, he wasn't a mess of nerves, it felt wonderful.

Double Potions with Ravenclaws was a breeze. Albus, who left his hair green, was now adding the potion ingredients while Scorpius stirred. Albus' sleeve caught on fire, and he almost didn't notice until Scorpius put it out.

"What's wrong with you today Potter?" he murmured.

Albus gave him innocent eyes. "Why do you ask?"

Scorpius looked flabbergasted.

The flying class, now moved inside the Hogwarts Courtyard, went off without a hitch that afternoon.

Rose and Scorpius were giving him strange looks the rest of the day, but he just didn't care.

The next morning, he was surprised to see Scorpius awake before him; sitting on his own bed, arms crossed, staring right at Albus.

Albus wiped the sleep out of his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Scorpius waited until their bunkmates had cleared out, then held out vials of potion to Albus, they were his Calming Draught.

"You went through my stuff?" Albus shouted.

Scorpius looked unrepentant, "Rose was right. She said you looked like you did before the Bludgers went mad. One day you're snapping at me and storming off, and was rude to Rose, then suddenly the very next day, you start acting like a mindless *Inferi*!"

Albus glared at him, the anger was stirring. "And that gives you the right to rummage in my locker?"

Scorpius for once dropped the cold arrogance. He looked scared. "You're my only friend. Something's really wrong with you. I wanted to know what."

Albus sighed. He tried to stop being angry, but he just couldn't seem to. "I need that potion, Scorpius." His hands started clenching of their own accord.

Scorpius wasn't budging. "Rose is out in the Common Room right now waiting for us. She's just as worried as I am, maybe more so."

"Why!" Albus snapped.

"Because we want our Albus back you git!" Scorpius shot back.

Albus' emotions started to pour out of him in a rush; he started crying. It felt like a panic attack but worse. He lay back on the bed and curled into a ball, paralysed. He didn't know what was wrong with him.

Scorpius looked alarmed, "I'll get Rose, hang on!"

It seemed just a second later when Rose was there, she had a rag she had wet in the refilling wash basin, held to his forehead. Scorpius was hovering nearby.

The events of the last few days came gushing out of Albus in sporadic, broken sentences.

The Dragon chasing him, his reaction, threatening Uncle Charlie, taking a swing at Uncle Charlie, his anger, the dream, what he could remember of it. And finally, like sprinkles on the tart, what happened with the broom.

In the aftermath, Scorpius and Rose sat in shocked silence. Neither knew what to say. Albus didn't blame them, it was all so crazy.

Rose, as was typical, broke the tension, "Give me a swig of that Calming Draught Scorpius, I think I need it."

Albus started giggling, the other two followed suit until the laughter was almost hysterical. Between sniggers and relapses, Albus managed to apologize.

They both looked at each other, and rolled their eyes like he needn't have bothered. In that moment Albus knew he would do anything for these two.

They tested that, by making him pour out all of his Calming Draught in a lavatory sink.

After he came back out Rose placed her hands on his shoulders and looked Albus in the eye. "If I ever find out you're abusing Calming Draught again, I will tell your parents. You can hate me the rest of your life, but I love my Albus, nerves and all. We'll be your Calming Draught, Okay?"

She glared at Scorpius. He looked back confused, until she mouthed something to him.

"Erm, yes. Stay out of the Calming Draught, Albus, you're a mental little git, and we like you that way."

Rose glared at him, he shrugged, confused. "What?"

Violence might have ensued, but Dominique rushing up interrupted them.

"Where have you two been? I checked you classes. This wasn't the right day to skive off!"

Dom wasn't one to lecture, so this outburst made Albus nervous, his hand immediately sought out the pocket where he had secreted the last Calming Draught. But his hand fell away at Dom's next words.

"It's Granddad Weasley, they rushed him to St. Mungos with chest pain this morning! Professor Shacklebolt's given us the day, to sort it out. Everybody else has already flooded from the Headmaster's Office. "

Scorpius urged them to leave immediately; his face had a strange expression.

Albus and Rose ran all the way up to the Headmaster's, Felix and Felicis didn't even bicker as they let them by.

Less than an hour later Albus was sitting with his parents, his head on his mother's lap, she was running her hand comfortingly through his hair, James on his other side with Fred, looking pale. It seemed that something like this could unite even two bickering brothers, like he and James. This was the longest he and his brother had been together in the same room without a conflict, in recent memory.

Albus was watching one of his favourite sources of entertainment. It was the *Lily, Hugo, and Louis Show*.

The threesome were different, to say the least, apart, but when you put them together, it was pure hilarity.

Over by where Uncle Ron, Aunt Hermoine and Rose were quietly catching up, Lily was brushing her thick red hair and chatting cheerfully about how she was sure Granddad was fine, flighty and bomb proof as usual. Her equally red-haired cousin Hugo was grim, no surprise there, wondering if there was a family plot to bury him in, and would he suffer before the inevitable. Their strawberry-blond cousin Louis, the best-looking boy out of all the Weasley grandkids and he knew it, was speculating about how he would look in black.

The rest of the uncles and aunts were arrayed all over the waiting room. The St. Mungos staff had gone through enough Weasley family emergencies to know, yes, people did have these many children, so they didn't check ID's this time.

Albus noticed among his Uncles, between Bill and Percy, was Uncle Charlie, staring at him strangely.

The silence was broken when Aunt Audrey, a Head Healer at Mungos, breezed in. Percy's wife had short curly brown hair above twinkling blue eyes, behind fashionable wire rim frames. She was very attractive, which led to speculation about Percy's love potion brewing abilities at every family gathering, showing her ever-present smile.

Waiting until all eyes were on her she quipped, "Does anyone here know where your Granddad got a hold of Haggis?"

Percy let out a sigh, which was followed by a burst of jubilation.

"It was just heart burn." Audrey said anticlimactically.

Suddenly there was a very loud voice from down the hallway.

"YOU SAW A MUGGLE VENDOR ON THE STREET SELLING IT, AND JUST HAD TO TRY SOME?"

Audrey winked, "Since the kids are here, and we don't know the next time we'll see Charlie, I think we all should adjourn to The Burrow and visit, have some lunch. Molly and Arthur will be along in a little while."

They all nodded and began to file toward the St. Mungos visitor's floo. Waiting his turn in the fireplace, Albus saw Uncle Percy making arrangements with the insurance wizard. That was his uncle, always working behind the scenes, unnoticed, taking care of his family. Just one of the reasons Albus admired him so much.

Grandma Molly and a very chastened Granddad arrived after he was discharged with Aunt Audrey and Uncle Percy in tow. By that time it was nearly lunch.

It wasn't long before the grandchildren were being fussed over by Grandma Weasley.

She especially grilled Albus and Rose about what happened last Tuesday. She then shook her head in disgust at how dangerous that school was getting, and then bustled off to over-see the cooking.

His Aunt Audrey grabbed Albus in a bone-crushing hug like she hadn't seen him for years, but that was her way. Uncle Percy, however, just nodded solemnly, shook his hand and informed Albus that the ministry was indeed looking closely into bludger safety. Audrey comically rolled her eyes behind his back, causing Albus to almost lose it.

Aunt Angelina arrived last with Uncle George, having stopped by the shop first, accompanied with the usual fanfare in which he was accustomed. He had a brand-new fake ear to show off.

After that the luncheon began.

Uncle Charlie was, of course, the star. All conversation seemed to centre on him, and then suddenly the tide of conversation took an abrupt turn.

The question seemed harmless. Uncle Bill asked, "Surprised to be back in England before Christmas, Charlie?"

Charlie looked right at Albus.

Albus' blood ran cold.

"Oh this is my second time in less than a week. I heard my nephew was playing Quidditch in his first year. First time that's happened since his dad. So I came up to make sure he's up to it."

They all stared at Charlie in shock, all except Albus' mum and dad, who looked like Albus felt.

Grandma Weasley was staring daggers at them.

An hour later after the dust settled, with Grandma Weasley banging around the kitchen fixing dessert, and loudly mumbling to under her breath, but loud enough for the entire family to hear, about that "Quidditch Madness" she would never understand, James' made the declaration that his brother couldn't play Quidditch, because that would require him to actually touch a broom.

Aunt Angelina responded by kicking James' shin under the table, she had had plenty of practice over the years. She simultaneously sent her son, Fred, a warning glare.

Charlie, who had evidentially been waiting for such an opportunity, dropped a bomb. "Not only can Albus fly, but I am willing to wager six galleons, against all takers, that he can out fly any student in this room."

They all gaped at him.

Albus tried to send Uncle Charlie a look, but his uncle was staring at the one most likely to take that wager. Uncle Percy.

It was well known in the family that Percy doted on his daughters. At almost every family get-together, in the last three years, he had managed to bring up that they were the best scoring Chaser duo that Hogwarts had seen in quite a while. They were every bit as good as he said they were, but with his gambler's streak, he was ripe for such a bet.

Uncle Percy's eyes rested on Albus, "Sorry Albie, but I've got to take these odds, but only if you feel up to it."

Albus stowed his hand to his pocket feeling for the last potion. The pocket was empty. Rose, who was suddenly beside him, looked guilty. "You can do it Albus, you don't need a potion, just believe in yourself, you dumb prat!" she whispered.

They were all looking at Albus, his stomach gave a lurch, and his hands were trembling, but he thought, *A Badger may never make a challenge, but they will do their best to meet it. Besides it's only one of the sisters after all.*

Albus nodded.

That was how Albus wound up on the edge of the orchard with an old Comet 290 beside both Molly and Lucy. He was glaring at his Uncle Charlie, silently repenting having ever apologizing for sticking a wand in his face. His uncle just looked back with a wry smile on his face.

It was his idea to double the bet to include both sisters, after all.

Albus' dad had refused James' request for money to bet against Albus, and he and Albus' mum were nodding their encouragement, knuckles white, as they held each other.

His little sister Lily, standing with Granddad and Uncle Ron, chipper as always, called out, "Don't die Albus, I'd miss you something awful!" Hugo not to be out done yelled, "And don't hit any birds, it's their orchard too!" Louis joined in the fun, "If you die, don't hit your face, you want to look good for ze funeral!"

"Thanks, guys," Albus responded.

His Granddad Arthur, whose baldhead was safely under a straw hat, gave Albus a wink of encouragement. Albus thought about what could have happened today. What he could be doing right now, instead. That thought put this race into perspective. There were bigger stakes in this world than pride and money.

He stared ahead and focused.

Uncle Bill pulled out his wand, and with a flick, sent sparks into the air.

Albus kicked off, a split second behind the sisters, both with *Impervius* charms in front of their mouths, so they could blow bubbles in the wind with their ever-present gum.

Their long flowing red hair trailed behind them, as they took the lead.

Albus' brain went into top gear, as the trees whirled by on both sides. The possibilities were flooding through his faculties.

Molly and Lucy were fast, definitely faster than him, so he wasn't going to outrun them. They worked together like only twins can, so trying to fake them out wasn't going to help him get by. They were also fanatically competitive, so Albus couldn't imagine either of them taking pity on him. To add insult to injury they had momentum.

Competitive. Sisters. Momentum.

Those words rang in his ear, as an idea suddenly took root.

Albus slowed down.

They were close to the end of the orchard and the turning around point, and they were expanding their lead. As they spun around and headed past him on the way back and saw how far back he was they grinned at each other. Albus waited until they had passed, then suddenly kicked his broom into high gear, using his newfound ability to make tight turns to gain speed on the way back.

His plan relied on two things happening, them forgetting about him, and that they would act like sisters.

Sure enough, as he began to close on them, they began to attempt to get ahead. They bumped each other for position and were so focused on each other that they didn't realize that they were losing momentum. Albus closed faster than he would have thought possible, suddenly they realised he was closing, and moved to block him. If they managed to do that he would lose. If he went high he would lose, there was no room below, and if he tried to go around he would lose momentum as well. So he lowered his head called for every bit of speed he could muster and aimed for the middle. They didn't expect him to try to split and he managed to get his stick in between, soon it became a battle of nerve and, tenacity. *I don't have the nerve, but nobody is more tenacious than a Badger!* Albus thought. He lowered himself onto the broom and put all the will he had into it, managing to get the tip of his broom out front, just as they crossed the line.

His relatives were cheering; especially Uncle Percy, who had yet to notice how steamed Aunt Audrey was that he lost yet another bet. Uncle Charlie gave him thumbs up.

Later on, Albus was sitting outside in a circle of chairs in the newly de-gnomed garden with the rest, as they reminisced about old times.

His attention was peaked when Charlie said, "I remember carrying Albus out of that very orchard, the day of the broom accident. The boy has come quite a ways, hasn't he now."

Albus looked across the circle at his uncle. Their eyes met. Albus suddenly realized that maybe there were two persons in his dream, and his uncle didn't realize it.

His uncle winked, and Albus smiled, feeling better somehow. The dream was still strange, but it helped to know it was actually Uncle Charlie he was talking to that night. Questions still remained but at least he knew that much.

Later before they headed back to Hogwarts Uncle Charlie gave him a big hug, and said into his ear, "I had to get the price of that broom back somehow. I'm proud of you, boy."

"Could you be, a little less proud from now on?" Albus said slyly.

Charlie barked out a loud laugh and ruffled Albus' recently re-combed hair, much to his chagrin.

Albus gave his Granddad a big hug. His whiskers were rough against Albus' cheek. "Watch out for those street vendors, Granddad," he said with a chuckle. His Granddad's blue eyes twinkled as he said under his breath, "Well, don't tell your Grand mum, but there is this nice fellow, down by the Thames, doing some marvellous things with Halibut and Chips."

Albus rolled his eyes, and hugged him even harder, thinking about how he almost lost his sweet, bumbling, lovable Granddad today.

There are worse things that can happen to me in this world, than having a strange prophetic dream.

Chapter 14: Quidditch Tryouts and Other Tragedies

On the day of tryouts, Albus was both nervous and excited.

He and his cousins had returned the night before in time for the evening session. He and Rose had missed double Charms earlier, but Professor Patil met with them in her office and gave them a run down of the lesson, looked at their progress, and assigned some extra work to catch up. When they caught up with Scorpius at dinnertime, he asked after their Grandfather, and then was quiet the rest of the night. Albus noted the behaviour, but he was learning to let his new friend have his space.

That morning, Diana Delaney, a dark skinned girl with hair up in elaborate plaits, had been stationed in the Common Room to oversee the sign up for prospective players. In a slight Scottish Brogue, she instructed everyone wanting to try out to come down to the Quidditch Pitch that evening at five o'clock.

When Scorpius and Albus signed on, she did not look impressed.

As the owls arrived, Nox dropped off a package from home. Inside were some brand-new black Hungarian Horntail hide Chaser gloves, with a good luck note from his dad and mum.

To their surprise, the same mature tawny owl dropped off a package instead of a Howler for Scorpius.

Albus tried not to look curious but failed miserably. Rose even perked up as they watched Scorpius open the package carefully, as if it had a bomb inside.

"Go ahead, it's not going to bite," Rose said impatiently.

Scorpius sighed and went ahead and tore into it, opening the box and staring at the contents. He pulled out two gloves; they were less padded than Chaser gloves, and had a different sort of hide. He stared at them and read the attached note. Then handed them over to Albus. "We both know who was behind this. Why don't you wear them?" he said with venom. Without another word, he took his things in hand and walked out.

Albus and Rose exchanged a look.

Albus pulled the package over to them, and read the note.

Dear Scorpius,

I wanted to wish you luck in your tryout today. Some Seekers prefer to catch the Snitch barehanded, but I've always found that a good pair of gloves improves your chances dramatically. I know your grandfather has forbidden anyone connected to the Potters from helping you directly, but seeing as I am not connected to the Potters, and your family owns stock in my professional team, consider this a perk of ownership. These gloves are Norwegian Ridgeback hide, which is more articulated and flexible than other dragon hides, I wouldn't use anything else. I'm sure you'll agree.

Ridley Bartlesby

Seeker for Puddlemere United

Rose perused the note. "Is this Bartlesby fellow any good?"

Albus gave her a look like she was daft. "Only the best professional seeker flying right now. He caught the snitch for eight straight matches this past year!"

Rose looked unimpressed but she looked at the gloves with interest. "These are really nice, I wonder why Scorpius stormed off?"

Albus had a hunch, but he didn't feel free to tell Rose. After a moment's thought he waved Nox over, who was still there munching some toast. He jotted a quick note to his dad on the back of Scorpius' note and sent the owl off.

He ran both boxes back down to the Cellar, and left Scorpius' box on his bed with a drowsy Kublai, who gave him a tolerant stare but allowed his ears to be scratched.

He made it to double Herbology with the Slytherins a little late and was surprised to see that Scorpius wasn't sitting beside Rose. He was over near some Slytherins who didn't look friendly. Cormac, who was seated at the same table, took offence to something being said, spun around and lit them up under his breath, most likely with some epithets he had learned from his 600 year old Great Great Grandda, whatever he said the larger boys backed off abruptly.

Uncle Neville's lesson and the creepy History of Magic class sped by with Scorpius still keeping his distance. Rose had tried to confront him about it between the two classes, but he kept his head down and refused to be baited.

She was quite upset when dinner rolled around and they got the same treatment.

Albus just ate some of his potato soup and watched for Nox. He was rewarded when the elegant bird swept in and dropped off a letter. All in for breath, the bird nibbled some of Albus' crackers before nipping his finger affectionately, and headed back to the owlery for a well-deserved rest.

Albus read the letter, and nodded to himself. Rose was glaring at him, not liking to be left out. He gave her an apologetic look before he took the letter down to where his friend was eating by himself, brooding.

Albus sat beside him and slid the letter over. He knew what was on it, but he let Scorpius read it in silence.

Dear Albus,

While I am glad that someone has taken an interest in encouraging Scorpius, you are right, it wasn't me, or your mum. I don't have the time to follow up on the letter's origin but just from reading, I can deduce a couple of things.

Firstly, whoever informed Bartlesby of the situation, knew that we have been forbidden to offer Scorpius any aid.

Secondly, the gloves were a very nice gift. Norwegian Ridgeback hide gloves are prized, and expensive. With all the young man has gone through in recent days, I hope you will encourage him to take the gift and use them. He will need all the advantage he can get.

Yours, anytime you need me,

Dad

Albus said, "As you can see, that gift wasn't from my parents. Your Malfoy pride will still be intact, if you choose to use them."

Scorpius slid the letter back over to Albus. He wouldn't look him in the face. "Do you ever get tired of always being right?" he said finally.

Albus grinned. "Not yet."

Scorpius favoured him with a tolerant smile. They walked back over to Rose together.

She was angrily ignoring them both. After they waited her out in silence, she broke. "Is everything all jolly well and good now?"

Albus looked at her innocently. "Whatever are you going on about?"

Scorpius joined in the fun. "I think Weasley's going mental."

She gave them a scathing look and left in a huff.

They immediately followed, catching up to her at the huge double door.

"Yes, everything's good now," Albus said.

Rose turned to Scorpius expectantly.

"Good, but not jolly good," Scorpius said. "Malfoys don't do jolly."

Her lips twitched. "Not even on Christmas?"

The trio sniggered.

When Albus and Scorpius arrived at the Pitch less than an hour later, Scorpius was curling his fingers in the new gloves.

There were a lot more Hufflepuffs flying around than Albus thought there would be. Most of the students were tossing a Quaffle back and forth loosening up, candidates for Chaser. Albus' heart fell. He saw from Diana's face this morning he was already fighting an uphill battle.

Scorpius was one of only four trying out for Seeker. Albus noticed there didn't seem to be very many Beaters and no Keepers. From what Teddy told him, Roderick Yates had Keeper sewn up, but he wondered whom the starting Beaters were.

Diana was in her yellow Quidditch robes, she blew the whistle to get everyone's attention. "Alright, I am Diana Delaney, the Team Captain, for those of you who are attempting to make the team as Chaser for the first time, we have a very simple system." She pointed up at the rings. Roderick Yates was already up there doing some warm ups, he looked calm and confident. "If you want to make starter, you've got to score on Roderick." She waited for the groans and murmurs of dissent to die down. "As you know, we have one starting Chaser slot available and one Seeker. I am one of the Chasers. The other Chaser was our Seeker last year, Cornelius Hamilton. I would like to introduce you but evidentially he couldn't be bothered to show up today." She let out a sigh of resignation before continuing. We have yet to find a Seeker so since there are fewer candidates, we will try those out first.

She walked over to where Scorpius was standing with three other older students, two boys and a girl. She sent all four after the Snitch. It wasn't long before the whole group knew who the Seeker was going to be. Even on a slower *Twigger*, Scorpius was faster to the Snitch. Albus was surprised at that broom, it seemed to faster than he would have thought. Scorpius found a way to use the superior manoeuvrability to his advantage pulling off a brilliant inverse loop catching the Snitch at the apex. Diana forgot to blow her whistle as the students broke out in applause. Scorpius landed and walked over to Diana, handing her the Snitch with one of the few genuine smiles Albus had seen from him. The other Seeker candidates all walked over and sat on the bleachers dejectedly, not even waiting for the official word.

"Right," Diana said breathlessly, "That leaves us with one spot to fill."

Scorpius gave Albus thumbs up as he walked by on his way to the bleachers. Albus tried to look confident, but he was fairly sure he looked ghastly.

Diana lined them up and blew her whistle sending them at Roderick one by one. The tall boy focused in on each Chaser with such intensity that he immediately intimidated them, causing more than one errant toss just from his glare. Albus tried to evaluate Roderick's Keeping, looking for any weakness, only to find that he was every bit as good as Teddy claimed.

Soon it was his turn. Diana gave him a dismissive look. "Go ahead Potter, and I still have to assign the reserves."

That white-hot anger started boiling to the surface as Albus grabbed the Quaffle from her hands and started into the air. He was heading into striking range, but he suddenly braked his broom and swept it sideways, using the momentum as it spun around, like Uncle Charlie showed him, his arm whipped out in a blur. The Quaffle rocketed toward the leftmost ring, Roderick was caught flat-footed and almost guessed wrong, but at the last second his hand deflected Albus' toss with a loud pop.

Albus sat on his broom, feeling letdown. He had taken his best shot, but it just wasn't good enough. Roderick beat him down, said something to Diana, and walked by nodding to the other students as he left.

When Albus made it to the ground, she was giving him a bemused look. "Nice shot, Potter."

Albus shrugged. "It didn't go in."

Diana chuckled. "Well, seeing as Roderick is now heading to the Hospital Wing because you broke his hand, I think we can make an exception. Welcome to the team."

Albus' elation was tempered by his guilt. "I'm sorry. Is his hand going to be alright?"

Diana nodded. "Pomfrey will have him sorted, don't worry. Why don't you go sit with your friend? I'll introduce you to the rest of the starters after I get the reserve assigned."

He walked over and Scorpius clapped him on the back. Shortly afterwards, Diana walked over to them. "Let me introduce you to the rest of the team."

Albus recognized the two blond haired girls with the muscles from the night of the sorting as he joined them. They were seated with a crew-cut boy with a slight build and a dent in his chin. He stared at Scorpius and Albus with a disdainful sneer.

"Glad you could make it, Corny." Diana called as she arrived.

He glowered at her. "It's Cornelius, and have we scraped the bottom of the lake or what? First years?"

Diana's expression was unrepentant. "They are the best for the job. If you had arrived early enough you would have seen that."

He shrugged. "I don't know why I can't play Seeker again this year. I at least have a decent broom."

Diana's tone became icy. "I am hoping that I will have a Seeker this year who will catch the Snitch deliberately rather than get it caught in his robes while ducking a Bludger, then roll around on the Pitch floor screaming like a little girl to get it out!"

His face turned red at the sniggers. "That happened only once!"

Diana smiled wickedly. "Because that's the closest you came to the Snitch in two years."

Cornelius shut his mouth. She turned to Albus and Scorpius apologetically. "He's maybe the best flyer we've got in Hufflepuff, even if he is a royal berk most of the time and afraid of Bludgers."

Even though it was Diana that had put him in his place, Cornelius glared at Scorpius and Albus as if they were the cause.

Diana indicated the other two girls. "This is Violet and Valencia Chertov."

The two girls smiled warmly.

Diana chuckled. "Don't let them fool you, they are known at Hogwarts as 'The Violence Sisters.' In just two years, they have been penalised more often than any Beaters in School History. I know. I looked."

The girls looked proud.

"We are going to cut down on our penalties this year. Right, girls?"

The one Diana called Violet, with the purple ribbons in her hair, nodded emphatically. "Yes ve vill change our vays."

Diana explained, "They are from Belarus, Krum brought them here after they were banned from the Quidditch Pitches all over Eastern Europe. I think they are related to him. Violet speaks better English, but Valencia is more vicious with a Beater bat."

She turned to the sisters. "This is Albus and Scorpius. You are not to harm them, they are your team-mates."

Much to Albus' chagrin, when Violet translated that to Valencia the girl with the pink ribbons actually looked disappointed.

Diana gave them their first practice time, which was going to be next Tuesday, and dismissed everyone. Cornelius glared at them as he passed. It was going to be an interesting year.

Albus and Scorpius were walking toward the tunnel when he saw Rose frantically waving them over. They traded worried glances before joining her.

Free flying time had started; several students were taking advantage zooming around overhead.

When they came into range, Rose started speaking so fast Albus had to slow her down.

"It's awful! I don't know how he and Fred did it. You know they're not innocent. They must have found a way to sneak around."

"Wait. Rose, what are you talking about."

"It's James. Your parents told him if he made it to the end of last year with no more detentions. They'd get him a broom if he made Quidditch."

Albus knew about this, so he shrugged. "So?"

At that precise moment, they all had to dive flat as someone with a broom buzzed them from overhead. Albus glared at what he knew must be his brother, but then he realized that the older boy was flying on a bright red broom, unlike any he had seen before, at least in person.

It was a SkyBolt.

Rose was livid. "He's the new Gryffindor Seeker. The company Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny got the broom from isn't even on the market yet. They wanted Uncle Harry to try it out and give them an endorsement. He gave it to James. I don't know what they're called."

Scorpius was staring at the distant boy flying circles around anyone else in the air. "SkyBolt."

She snapped her fingers. "Yes. That's what Dom told me it was called, how did you know?"

Scorpius smiled bitterly. "Just a good guess."

Albus said emphatically, "Not good."

Chapter 15: Duelling Before You Know How

Once Quidditch tryouts were concluded, things settled into a groove for Albus, finally.

Going to classes, doing homework in the Cellar common room, Quidditch practice on Friday evenings after Slytherin. To Albus' chagrin, Roq MacNast turned out to be the captain of Slytherin. MacNast tapped his beater bat against his palm as he informed Albus that Teddy wouldn't be on the Quidditch pitch to protect him this time.

Violet and Valencia strolled up. "You are recovered from da Bludger to da head last year, da? No more double vision?" Violet asked sweetly.

Roq left without a word.

Albus later found out that Valencia carved the skull like faces of anyone she had ever knocked off their broom into her beater bat with astonishing skill. He was able to pick out Roq's shaved head and goatee out of the disturbing collection. There was also one that looked very much like his cousin Fred.

Diana turned out to be quite the strategist, and was very thorough in her scouting reports, which Albus and Scorpius were required to memorise. The document wasn't very encouraging!

Ravenclaw Quidditch Team:

Ravenclaw was the winner of the Quidditch cup the previous year. They have a deep veteran squad with good teamwork and clever formations. They are in the running this year because of over all team balance.

Defence:

The Keeper and Captain is Eleanor Ferraro. She is success driven, and has solid skills. The Beaters are Ashton Gully and Isla Petit. Ashton is a bit henpecked for such a big guy, and does whatever Eleanor or Isla tell him to do, which causes him to be indecisive. Isla is the backbone of the Ravenclaw team calling a lot of the formations. Due to her smaller size she is accurate but not hard hitting.

Offence:

The Chasers are Elliot Durnin, Jay Usher, and Holly Ware. Jay may be odd looking with his goggles and spiky hair, but he is the highest scoring Chaser. Jay is very aggressive and is not above body blocking, he acts more like another defensive agent. Holly is deceptive, she seems totally out of the game, but then she shows up with the Quaffle and scores three in a row.

Seeker:

Lilith LeBlanc is the Seeker. She rarely talks, and seems to float rather than walk, her pulse has been checked more than once. When she views the snitch she'll let out a piercing shriek as she dives. It's unsettling but listen for it. You'll have seconds to get to the snitch before her. Her nickname is "The Banshee"

Slytherin Quidditch Team:

Team Synergy: Fourth place for the last three years and not seeming to care this team is vicious, physical and violent. When you play them you are in for a war. The only team that was able to match them blow for blow the previous year was us, Hufflepuff. When we met, it was combat and it was the most penalized game in Hogwarts history. They are still not sure how two little blond-haired girls knocked out their entire starting chaser line, but having added some scoring this year, they are looking to get revenge.

Defence:

The Keeper is Max Gates. He is very large and has long arms, blocks the Quaffle from sheer menace; he has been known to clothesline in-coming chasers. The Beaters are Roq McNast, and Aiden Gallo. Roq is the Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team and as nasty as they come. Aiden is deadly accurate, and moves like a vulture; out of the two beaters he is the more deadly.

Offence:

The Chasers are Paige Hawkins, Jakob Ackerman and Oliver Huer. Paige is the entire reason that Slytherin thinks they can move up in the standings this year. When the Chertovs knocked out the starting Chaser line in that blood soaked last game, she came in from the reserve and scored three times. Jakob likes to run into things. Almost to the exclusion of the game sometimes, the favourite Slytherin manoeuvre is for him to run full bore into the opposing teams beater line, and sometimes keeper, with the other chasers coming in behind him. Oliver doesn't really care too much for scoring, he wants to knock somebody off of their broom, has little recollection of the game the previous year after Violet and Valencia nailed him with a rare double Bludger hit to the head.

Seeker:

Leon Sloan is the Slytherin Seeker and the smallest member of the Slytherin team. In spite of his slight build he has muscles packed on. Not willing to do the snitch searching for himself, he will track the other seeker relentlessly looking to block them and get their first, has been known to grab a fistful of robes.

Gryffindor Quidditch Team:

A Weasley heavy squad who were dominate the last few years with the previous year being the only exception. With a Potter as Seeker, three Weasley Chasers and a living Bludger as one of the Beaters, they are balanced and poised and ready to claw their way back to the top of the heap. Not sure who can stop them!

Defence:

The new Keeper is Grayson Wood. Keeper was Gryffindors only weakness the past few years. Grayson's father is one of the best professional Keepers in recent memory. I am surprised they got him to play; he wasn't particularly keen on Quidditch for his first three years.

The Beaters are Fred Weasley, and Fergus Finnegan. Fred is the team captain. He is absolutely dangerous with a beater bat; he got knocked off his broom last year, early on in our match with Gryffindor, but got back on and finished. He is the only other Beater I have ever known the sisters to respect. Fergus is hyperactive and very accurate. Fred is more likely to make you wish you were never born, but Fergus can knock your head off from half the pitch away.

Offence:

The Chasers are Molly and Lucy Weasley, and Dominique Weasley. Molly and Lucy I put together because they are one unit. I have never seen two Chasers work together the way these girls do, the passes are pinpoint and sometimes one will pass to the spot where the other one will be! They are our biggest Chaser headache this year. Dominique is an unknown. I'm not sure how good she is. But she is a Weasley. I'll have to see if there was some nepotism involved in Fred picking her.

Seeker:

James Potter, is another unknown, but Merlin, who cares if he's good? He's got a ruddy SkyBolt!

When Albus read the report at breakfast, Rose was aghast. "Dominique is playing Chaser? But she can't stand Fred and James!"

Albus saw his cousin across the hall sitting with Molly and Lucy; she looked up and met his eyes, then turned away quickly.

"In her defence, she doesn't look proud of herself," he replied.

As the weeks progressed and September led into early October, the castle got positively drafty. In several of the classes they saw their breath escape in plumes of steam: with two exceptions.

Herbology was climate-controlled, and History of Magic with its oil lamps and covered windows was almost stifling. The warmth of that room, coupled with the soft couches caused more than one head to nod. When that person woke up, they would find Professor Hemophilius staring at them. That normally ended any thought of a nap.

Some daft upperclassmen girls had taken a shine to the vampire, and were circulating a petition to give him more freedom. They called themselves *Hemophiliacs*.

Albus took one amused look at the petition and then said to the eager girl who had asked him to sign, "Are you all mental? He would drain the lot of you like a case of Butterbeer!"

She got a dreamy look in her eyes. "Do you really think so?"

As she wandered off, Scorpius stared at her retreating form. "That was disturbing."

Rose smiled. "Well, I don't know. Hemophilius is kind of a romantic figure."

Albus and Scorpius gaped at her.

"For a blood sucking fiend of the night, I mean," she amended.

It wasn't long before the trio settled into a comfortable routine with their homework. Albus was the Potions man, Rose was the queen of Transfiguration, and Scorpius caused Rose to mime gagging more than once when he pointed out that he was the "Charming" one.

All three loved Herbology.

Albus never knew what he was in for when he walked into the Arboretum, all he could be certain of was that it would be interesting. The Slytherins sneered at everything and Kian Kerry still glared, but they were just as wide-eyed as everyone else when Professor Longbottom pulled out a new specimen, or took them into a new environment.

Cormac Collins seemed to be Longbottom's student favourite after a little while, with a natural grasp of the subject. Soon his bedside table in the bunkroom was covered with rare flora for extra credit.

Albus still struggled in Transfiguration and Charms, but he was showing steady progress. When he accepted his wand in his dream, he was making a choice that affected him in the real world. He no longer feared his wand, no longer felt frightened of the tingle he felt in his wand arm. He had actually begun to polish it everyday; with all of the carvings it was a job. While doing so he realised that around the base, there were some tiny characters. Rose told him they were Runes, but even after scouring the library with Scorpius, she never could find out what kind.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was becoming the class to dread. Professor Pharrel never seemed to stray too far from the syllabus and they never touched their wands. They learned about some defensive spells, but it was mostly dry theory. Because of this, Friday afternoons seemed to drag on.

Things did not improve between Albus and the Gryffindors. He was still hearing a lot of snarky comments, and endured a couple of pranks. Slytherins were, of course Slytherins, as a point they didn't get along with anybody. The Ravenclaws, however, were a polite bunch and they got along pretty well with the Hufflepuffs.

Albus even got some fashion advice from one of the French girls, Aimee Couture, who was aiming to design dress robes when she left Hogwarts.

"You know Hufflepuff uses yellow as the primary Quidditch uniform colour, but black would be so very much better, no?"

Albus mentioned that fact to Diana Delaney at practice. She nodded absently, and told him to get back to the Quaffle-pass drill.

The three friends visited Hagrid a couple more times, and got a chance to have dinner at the Longbottoms one Friday in their private quarters at school, getting better acquainted with Olivia Abbot there. She was a sweet girl, but a bit shy. Rose began to show up at the breakfast table with her, but she rarely contributed anything to the conversation. Gas usually made up the difference.

The Howlers for Scorpius were more infrequent, and a couple of times he received packages from his mum. He still had yet to hear from his father, and he tried not to show it, but every time Albus and Rose received letters from home, he got a bit broody.

They arrived at DADA one Friday to find a notice on the board.

"Duelling Club season begins tonight, sign up now!"

Professor Pharrel made mention of it in his class, before launching into yet another dry monologue about the seven uses for Shield spells.

"I was brought to Hogwarts for my duelling expertise. I am the Master of the Duelling Club. If you want some more practical knowledge of these spells we have been learning about. Feel free to sign up. Even if you don't know very much, I will pair you with someone near your competence level."

Albus, Rose and Scorpius exchanged excited looks. Their names were the first ones on the list.

They arrived that night promptly at seven. The large open hall on the forth-level east-wing was already full. There were a lot of upperclassmen, but not as many as Albus anticipated. He saw several students his own year, however. The Gryffindors-including the two blond-haired boys that had become his chief tormentors, Allen Baldwin and Callum Weigand were staring at him menacingly, wands already out.

Albus remembered his father's last words on the platform at King's Cross. *Don't duel anyone till you've learned how.* He wondered if he was going to be able to obey his father's admonishment.

Professor Pharrel arrived late, as usual, and began to pair up the first years. The upperclassmen already paired off and began to practice wand movements.

Rose and Scorpius paired off immediately, since they were so far ahead of Albus in wand work. Cormac and Gas stood together. In spite of his earlier fears, Albus was left standing by himself. It seemed the rumours of his wand's potential for destruction had made the rounds. Professor Pharrel was about to send him to the side for the duration of the lesson when a voice called out, "I'll pair up with Potter."

Albus turned and his stomach gave a lurch. Strolling confidently toward him and the professor was Liam Donovan.

"Um. Professor, I don't mind sitting this one out," Albus mumbled.

Professor Pharrel beamed. "Nonsense, my boy. You two will work out just fine."

The lesson was quick as the Professor gave a demonstration of *Expelliarmus*. They all practiced the wand movement accompanied by the sounds of the upperclassmen duelling.

Albus looked straight ahead as he mumbled the incantation to himself, making the wand motion. He felt a little self-conscious trying to cast his father's signature spell. Liam Donovan just stared straight ahead not even bothering with the practice. His arms were crossed, as he seemed to be waiting for something.

Professor Pharrel blew a whistle for attention.

"Now you students practice disarming each other. I don't expect anyone to duel just yet. But if you so happen to be successful, then by all means see if you can disarm your partner first. That is the first step in learning to duel. If anyone needs me I'll be over here, evaluating. Good luck."

He bustled off to the other side of the hall.

Since Liam showed no interest in beginning, Albus just watched as the other students began trying to disarm each other. Gas managed it rather quickly, but he held his wand out for Cormac, giving encouragement. Rose and Scorpius managed to get each other's wands to wiggle, but not much beyond that. The other students seemed to be experiencing various stages of success.

Albus waited in silence for Liam to begin. He wasn't going to antagonize the boy if it could be helped. Suddenly, Liam turned his head, his creepy silver eyes studied Albus like an insect to be swatted.

"Are you ready, Potter?"

"Albus."

"What?"

"My name is Albus."

"I know that."

"Why call me Potter?"

"We're not friends."

"Do you want to be?"

"No."

Liam turned to him; his simple black-wood wand was in his hand. "Prepare to duel, Potter."

Albus' jaw dropped in shock. "We're supposed to be trying to disarm each other."

His opponent gave a scary smile. "This is a Duelling Club, Potter, and I am here to duel."

Albus shook his head adamantly. "No. I don't know how. We could get hurt."

Liam's face went cold. "You might get hurt. Defend yourself."

Liam got into a duelling position similar to the one Albus had seen the older students use. Albus was about to call for the professor, but he knew it would be too late. His mind quested for any defensive spell that he could use. He thought of Rose and her *Protego*. He remembered how she had moved her hand in a clockwise motion before flicking it when she was showing it to Gas that day with the Bludgers. He only had one shot at it.

"*Impedimenta!*" Liam bellowed.

Albus squeaked, "*Protego*"

The jet of green light hit his shield and splintered.

Rather than being mollified Liam seemed to be enraged. Albus didn't catch the stream of hexes and jinxes being hurled at his shield; it was all he could do to keep it up.

The students had gathered around in a circle, cheering them on.

Rose and Scorpius were trying to help Albus but they couldn't get close, with all of the rebounding spells.

He heard Professor Pharrel's whistle from all the way across the hall. He was calling out something as he tried to get through the students but Albus was too focused on holding his shield.

The volcanic rage that seemed to be a constant companion to Albus these days roared up from the depths of his soul. He readied himself to drop his shield and blast Liam back with a *Reducto* at the floor in front of him. He could see himself disarming him with *Expelliarmus*. He would stalk through the rubble, point both wands in Liam's face, and demanded he yield. He smiled fiercely as he prepared to make Liam wish he had never messed with Albus Potter!

Liam's wand shot out of his hand.

Professor Pharrel moved into their line of sight, holding Liam's wand. "I think we have done enough for this evening. Class dismissed, except for Misters Potter and Donovan." The red-faced man was unusually pale. "I need a word with you, boys."

Albus didn't see Rose and Scorpius leave. He stared at the wand, in his trembling hand, a single question reverberating in his mind.

If Professor Pharrel hadn't stopped Liam, what would I have done?

They were seated in the Headmaster's office.

All of the portraits were awake and gossiping with each other, except Albus Dumbledore and Snape who were studying the two boys. He got the feeling that Snape never participated unless he was talking to Dumbledore.

Albus sunk down in his chair as he watched Professor Pharrel wander around the office nervously humming to himself. He wished the man would stop, it was getting rather annoying.

He glanced to the side at Liam. The other boy was seated in his chair, stock-still, his hands on the arms staring straight ahead with a contented smile on his face. *He even sits creepy!*

The thing that frightened Albus the most wasn't that Liam attacked him, it was that he almost retaliated. He didn't think the other boy knew how close he came to being mopped up off of the floor by Growltooth. The question he posed to himself in that strange dream, crept into his mind.

What am I becoming?

This time, however, it was accompanied by another question.

Do I like what I am becoming?

"Thank you gentlemen for waiting."

They all turned as Professor Shacklebolt swept in. In his wake were all of the first year professors. Professor Bast glanced at Albus with kind eyes. Uncle Neville just looked conflicted.

Shacklebolt returned all of the portrait greetings, as he waited for everyone to get settled in.

His deep resonating voice broke into the silence. "What we have here, is a serious problem. We have two students who are a danger to themselves and other students, whether they mean to be or not. We need to address this now before some upperclassman, or another first year decides to try their luck."

The other professors nodded in agreement.

Shacklebolt waited a moment. "I am open to suggestions."

Professor Flint was the first to speak. "Well the obvious choice would be to confiscate their wands."

Albus' heart fell. He had just gotten used to his wand, feeling pride in it. It had become a part of him as much as one of his arms.

Liam looked like he was going to be ill.

Professor Bast broke the silence. "I have seen too much progress from Mr. Potter to concur with that. I think it would damage his schooling. After all, he was the one attacked."

Albus glanced over at Liam. He saw that the other boy was staring resignedly at the floor. Albus got one of his "creepy boy" moments. He realized that Liam thought there was no one to defend him.

Albus cleared his throat. The professors turned to him.

"Actually," he squeaked, he cleared his throat again before continuing, "I was thinking that, if professor Pharrel hadn't have interfered, it would have been bad."

Professor Pharrel spoke up, "Bad? How do you mean."

Albus felt his heart up in his throat. "I have been having uncontrolled fits of rage. I had one just before the professor stepped in. I was going to retaliate."

Liam scoffed.

Shacklebolt's eyes bored into Liam's. "When I agreed to accept you at Hogwarts, it was with the understanding that you would blend in, and cause no trouble. Some of those rebounding hexes and jinxes you used, could have hurt someone."

Liam dropped his eyes, staring at his hands.

"How did a first year learn all of that?" Professor Pharrel asked.

Shacklebolt shook his head, saving that discussion for a more private time.

Uncle Neville spoke up for the first time. "I think we have two different problems here, calling for two different solutions."

"Go on."

Neville studied the two boys a moment before continuing. "We have one boy here, who knows too much. And we have another boy here who knows too little, both are now targets for anyone who wants to try them. My suggestion is this. Both of them need to be supervised one-on-one by a professor. Albus needs to learn how to defend himself. Liam needs to learn to resolve his conflicts without pulling out his wand. The professor in question, will keep the wand between classes, and determine if the student has a need in between. At a later time, if that professor decides that the student is in a better place, he may decide to give the wand back. We will let the school know, that since these two students are unable to defend themselves, any attacks on their person will be punished severely.

Shacklebolt leaned back in his chair. He glanced up at the centremost portrait and saw Albus Dumbledore nod. "Very well, who will be the mentors?"

Professor Patil spoke up first. "I would like to mentor Liam, if that is acceptable."

Professor Pharrel was about to speak up for Albus, but Albus was imagining days of boring, dry lessons, reading books and being right where he started.

"I would like Professor Longbottom to mentor me if that's alright," he blurted.

He saw a look of irritation cross Professor Pharrel's face before it settled back into its usual joviality.

Shacklebolt and Neville exchanged a look. Then both nodded.

Shacklebolt sighed wearily. "These two professors will determine your schedule, and take the wands with them tonight. Any failure to follow their instruction will be met with immediate expulsion. I just can't take the risk of you two running loose with your abilities, unchecked. Am I understood?"

Albus and Liam nodded.

The two students rose and handed their wands to their perspective professor, and left.

They walked down the corridor in silence. Albus had to know.

"Why did you attack me?" he demanded.

Liam just favoured him with another unsettling smile. "At the Sorting, you were the only one of the sheep that realized that there was a wolf in their midst. Someday, I might need someone to stop me, I had to know if you were the one."

With that he turned and walked up another hall.

Albus, stunned, watched him go.

Chapter 16: The Badger and the Snake

Albus was trying to remember his way back to the main staircase. He had been in Hogwarts a lot longer this time than when he last made this same trip, but he still got lost when he wasn't with Rose. He also kept watch for a certain Goblin's traps as he picked his way down.

His mind was a swirl of confusion, questions battering it to and fro.

Why did Liam choose me to be his nemesis? I've never done anything to him.

What did he mean "someday I may need someone to stop me", is he mental?

What was with Shacklebolt saying, "When I agreed to let you come to this school" isn't your name put on the roll the day you are born?

"Mr Potter, might I have a word?"

Albus spun around at the voice, shock causing him to reach for a wand he no longer had. He expected to see a creepy, grinning Goblin, but instead, he was looking at a pleasant moonlit-glen landscape portrait with an unpleasant man staring at him arms crossed. His glinting black eyes peering through his greasy-looking bangs.

"Professor Snape?" Albus stammered.

The man sneered, "How very observant. If you don't mind I have a question to ask. I had to endure all manner of niceties with other paintings to get here, including one dreadful ordeal with that awful gaggle of gossiping witches in the "Order of the Scourging Sisters Reunion" painting." He barely stifled a shudder. "So if you will pause a moment, I promise to be brief."

Albus sighed wearily. "What do you want to ask?"

"After our conversation the other day, I have had many hours to ponder the fact that your father named you for me. I really must know what he told you about me. I was rather content with the knowledge that he despised me, a feeling I have always returned with a comfortable level of mutualness. If you don't mind, I really must know."

Albus thought of several things he could say, some mean and malicious, but he decided on the truth.

"Actually he never really talked much about you. I was worried about being in Slytherin, and he told me that I bore the name of two former Headmasters of Hogwarts, one from Slytherin, and he was maybe the bravest man he ever knew. I've asked at other times, but he told me that his reasons were his own, and he would share them some day. He has several portraits in his office at the Aurors; maybe you can go ask him yourself. Good night Professor."

"Good night...Albus."

Albus stopped. Did Snape just call him by his first name? He turned in time to see a swirl of black robes, and the man was gone.

Albus was so discomfited by his exchange with Snape, that he completely forgot about his duel, until he came through the door of the Cellar that is.

He was immediately beset by a group of persons in the common room.

Rose, and Scorpius were waiting with the entire Quidditch team, minus Roderick. Diana began peppering him with questions. It was all his tired mind could do to field them.

Finally encouraged that they wouldn't be looking for a new Chaser, the Quidditch team left.

Rose glared at the closing doors scathingly. "Oh sure, he's fine. He's not hurt or anything! The nerve!"

Albus chuckled. "It's alright Rose."

She rounded on him. "They took your wand, even though you were attacked and you're alright with it?"

Scorpius for once was agreeing with her. He didn't look as outraged; of course he was better at hiding his feelings.

"I brought it up." Albus admitted sheepishly. "I'm getting too dangerous. My wand makes me a target. I need to get better control before I hurt someone."

Rose saw how earnest he was, so she backed off. "Well I am glad you're alright."

Scorpius slapped him on the back. "Yeah, good shield charm Albus!"

Rose grinned cutely. "I wonder who he learned that from." With a wave good night, she strolled to the entrance to the girl's dorm and was gone.

Scorpius chuckled. "You know she's going to hold this over our heads for a month or two, right?"

Albus rolled his eyes.

He had a meeting with Uncle Neville the next morning and agreed to meet for tutoring Friday evenings, during the time that the duelling club was going on.

He missed carrying his wand, but Neville made sure he had it for every class, and his lessons on wand control helped Albus immensely. Albus remembered his dad mentioning that Neville was a very promising Auror before he left to pursue his Herbology professorship. Albus had no trouble believing that, Uncle Neville certainly knew his spell craft.

Liam Donovan and Albus now were on nodding terms; they seemed to have gained a mutual wary respect, at least. Now that he wasn't avoiding the boy, Albus began to notice that he didn't seem to have any friends.

October passed rather quickly. Filch still chased Peeves. Growltooth was still creepy, and from the glares Albus saw the Goblin was receiving from other students, he was evidently expanding his activities. Charms was still challenging, Transfiguration, frustrating but fascinating, Herbology was brilliant, DADA was boring, tedious, and dry, and History of Magic remained interesting but scary. Points were awarded and taken away, and Hufflepuff's bright yellow-topaz's filled their hour glass almost as full as Gryffindor's placing them in a close second, which Albus was told, hadn't happened this late in the year in recent memory.

Quidditch practices were exhausting, and sometimes brutal. Diana was a very driven taskmaster. When she wasn't drilling them on the scouting report, she was letting Violet and Valencia hit

Bludgers at them to simulate game conditions. Albus was fairly sure, after one particularly brutal double hit, that the other House Beaters were going to be cake afterwards!

Halloween at Hogwarts was an amazing time. The castle was decorated spectacularly. There were fake cobwebs in every corner that didn't have a real one, spelled bats swooped down corridors making girls yip. Albus wondered if there was going to be a pumpkin shortage in England when he saw the amount of Jack O'Laterns that lined the alcoves in the Halls. The Ghosts got into the spirit by popping out at students unexpectedly. Nearly Headless Nick almost gave a bubbly first-year Hufflepuff girl, Gertrude Statham hysterics.

Slytherin celebrated the holiday by putting on an actual Haunted Hut in an unused dungeon level classroom, which was evidently so horrible, that it was shut down by complaints from Madam Pomfrey. Evidently she had run through her supply of Doctor Ubbly's Oblivious Unction.

Before it was cancelled, Scorpius, Gas and Cormac went down there on a dare, Albus chickened out. His decision was validated when he saw how pale Gas and Cormac were when they returned to the Cellar common room.

He looked up as they came in from an eight-inch essay for Charms that Rose was helping him write. Gas sat down stiffly on a sofa across from them. "Those nutters talked The Bloody Baron into helping them!" he said with a tremble in his voice. Cormac's hands were shaking as he drank some pumpkin juice he must have skived from the kitchen. Albus noticed that Scorpius was yawning, and looked bored.

"I take it you were not impressed?"

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "When I was eight, I had to stay over at Aunt Daphne and Aunt Mike's for one month while Mum and Dad were travelling in Europe. Three words to describe it. Pink. Ruffles. Pomeranians. After that, even Azkaban wouldn't faze me."

The other three boys blanched in horror.

Gas murmured, "Thanks for putting it in perspective Scorpius."

Rose scoffed and bent back to her work.

It wasn't long before November broke, and the day of the first match against Slytherin came around.

On that Saturday Albus was a wreck. It was the first day since they came to Hogwarts that Scorpius was the one giving encouragement to get up and get dressed.

At breakfast Albus didn't eat, but nervously tore his toast into small pieces trying not to get sick at the rich smell of sausages and kippers. He received two owls. The first owl was a big snowy owl named Roarke. The beautiful bird was the family owl, he had a good luck note from Albus' mum, dad and Lily, along with an encouragement to stop playing with his toast and eat something. They knew him well. He smiled immediately feeling better. He grabbed some bacon and eggs and set to with a will.

The second owl was his brother's wickedly clever Great Spotted Owl, Loki.

He carefully opened the parchment knowing two eyes at the Gryffindor table were watching him.

It turned out to be the Last Will and Testament of Albus Severus Potter. It looked very official.

I, Albus Severus Potter, being not of sound mind, do leave all my meagre possessions to my more handsome and talented older bother James Sirius Potter, and my equally dashing and clever cousin Fred Bilius Weasley, seeing as I am soon to be reduced to unrecognisable paste by a team of rather large Slytherin thugs.

Signed... (The doomed)

Rose read over his shoulder and spun furiously to see her cousins Fred and James innocently eating their breakfasts.

James and Fred did not speak for all of his cousins. Dominique, Molly and Lucy came by to offer their encouragement. The sisters both ruffled Albus' hair and left him a piece of Droobles gum for good luck. Roxanne came by, and offered to send an owl about the prank to Ginny and her mother on Albus' behalf but he turned her down. Victoire swept by making some strange statement about "don't worry I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Scorpius looked confident and calm, even when he saw that big tawny owl coming with a Howler for him. He bore it behind the muffle charm with a resigned look on his face. After the charm dissipated he wiped some ash off of the table. "Grandfather just wanted to wish me luck," he said wryly. They all sniggered.

The arrived in the locker rooms, and saw their uniform robes for the first time. It finally became real when Albus saw his name on the back of his.

Diana stood up.

"I don't like long speeches. You all know what we have to do. I made sure you knew what we are up against. So just three things. Scorpius watch Sloan's hands in your robes when you go for the Snitch, the whole team's got Comet 360's, fast, expensive and flashy, but doesn't turn very well, you can use that."

Scorpius nodded solemnly.

Albus, since you've got the arm, the Beaters will be gunning for you, don't get rattled." Albus gulped loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Violet and Valencia, try not to kill anyone, or do irreparable damage." The sisters nodded, looking disappointed.

With those words, Diana's calm dark brown eyes swept the room one last time, then she turned and walked out, they all filed out behind her.

As soon as they left the tunnel and entered into the sunlight, the Pitch got quiet, as they strolled out in brand new black robes with bright yellow trim.

Albus had to admit they made his team looked intimidating. The Slytherins were larger but their emerald green robes just didn't match the sheer malevolence of the black.

Diana had explained earlier that she checked the rules, and there was nothing to say that Hufflepuff had to wear the traditional yellow, as long as their uniforms were a house colour, which black was, it would be allowed.

The look on the Slytherin faces was worth all of her effort.

The Hufflepuff side of the pitch erupted in cheers, soon followed by all the rest of the students routing against Slytherin. With just a change of uniform colour Hufflepuff had gone from underdog to dangerous.

Violet and Valencia in particular seem to relish the change, they both put on darker than usual eye makeup, looking skeletal, but kept the pink and purple ribbons in their hair.

They smiled and blew kisses at Oliver Huer who went pale, obviously remembering the double Bludger hit to the head he suffered the year before.

Albus blew a bubble, chewing the gum Molly and Lucy gave him, as he studied the stands. He saw Rose with a book to read sitting with Olivia, Gertrude and Iris. Gas was sitting with that big Gryffindor Michael Nedved but Cormac, surprisingly, wasn't with him. He looked glum but determinedly cheered with his housemates. James and Fred were arguing heatedly with Roxanne and Dominique over in the Gryffindor stands. Albus was fairly certain it was over their large banner in the shape of a tombstone that read:

ALBUS POTTER

Rest In Peace

Krum walked between the teams, eyeing the two sisters warily. "I want a clean game. I will penalize or suspend anyone who breaks the rules. There will be no game like last year, I will disqualify both teams. Am I clear?"

They all nodded.

"Captains shake hands."

Roq MacNast smiled evilly as Diana put her smaller hand in his. Soon it became apparent why Albus had seen her squeezing a rubber ball almost constantly since he met her. Roq nearly went to his knees from her crushing grip. She smiled prettily as she released his hand. He glared trying not to show his pain.

Krum called out loud enough for everyone to hear, "Mount your brooms!"

Albus climbed astride his Nimbus Millennium, and stared at the Chaser across from him which he knew was Jakob Ackerman. Huge for a Chaser, and with an unrefined quality like someone carved him from granite, the boy had a chin like a battering ram.

Krum blew his silver whistle and there was immediately a mad swirl of black and green heading up into the air.

Albus almost fell off of his broom as he heard the first words from the student commentator.

"And there they go. I must say Hufflepuffs choice of black is making quite the fashion statement, I've personally always thought the yellow made them look a bit pasty."

"Miss Weasley, less fashion, more Quidditch."

Albus glanced over at the commentators booth and saw Victoire with a glaring Professor Flint, a very odd pairing indeed. Albus was so distracted by them; he nearly got his head taken off by vicious Bludger hit from the direction of Aiden Gallo.

"Oh! And that Slytherin thug Gallo nearly decapitated my little cousin Albus! Oh do be careful!"

"Miss Weasley, try to be less partisan."

"Sorry Professor. But that Gallo bloke resembles a vulture!"

"Victoire!"

"Okay, Okay, back to the game. It seems that Paige Hawkins has the Quaffle, her hair looks like a bird nest, honestly she could do with some conditioner!"

"Victoire, more Quidditch!"

Albus watched as the slender girl with the trailing flyaway brown hair took a shot at Roderick close range. She made a brilliant feint but he kicked a boot out and sent the Quaffle arching back to the Hufflepuff end. Diana plucked it out of the air, and darted through a hole made by a nasty Bludger hit from Valencia, and headed full steam at the colossal Slytherin Keeper Max Gates. He was obviously picked for his size rather than ability because she had to literally go around him to get at the rings. With a backhanded flick the Quaffle slipped through the rings.

"Oh well done Hufflepuff, Delaney scores! I've always thought Diana has such perfect skin tone!"

"Keep your comments to Quidditch only Miss Weasley."

Albus got his chance to take score not long after, when he received a pass from Diana. He cocked his arm back and launched a strike from twelve meters out but following Diana's game plan he didn't really aim; he just threw it with all his might. She wanted him to intimidate Gates, not necessarily score but make him so afraid to get hit by one of Albus' throws they could use fakes and feints later.

His rocketed throw, however ricocheted off of Max's shoulder with a resounding pop and sailed through the right hoop.

"Albus Potter scored? Oh dear me. I mean Albus Potter scored! Twenty to zero, Hufflepuff. I knew he had it in him. Even though he's always been such a sickly boy, to be honest."

"Miss Weasley, less family history, more Quidditch!"

"Sorry."

Albus stared at the hoop. That was a bit lucky.

He somehow knew that something was amiss. For the next bit he watched the game, and saw some peculiarities. Roq MacNast was aiming for Cornelius, who was flying a bit low away from the action, and he miss-hit the Bludger hitting Oliver Huer in the back of the head. Violet and Diana collided almost knocking each other off of the broom as the both tried to block Ackerman at the same time. Roderick caught his sleeve on the end of his broom and let Paige Hawkins score. Good luck and bad luck at the same time. Probabilities run amok. Albus nearly got hit as he ruminated, but the Bludger sharply hit by Gallo, nailed Roq instead.

Albus' eyes scanned the stand looking for bright orange hair.

He picked Cormac out, he was standing just inside the tunnel staring up at the players, and his lips were moving. Albus could have sworn he saw a dark robed figure just behind him in the shadows. But the next blink and the shape was gone. Suddenly Cormac collapsed. An older Ravenclaw saw him, and several students went down to help.

After that, the game went more conventionally.

Ackerman tried to bull his way through the Beater line but was nearly knocked off of his broom twice, taking some brutal shots from the Sisters before deciding to change tactics.

Scorpius dove twice, only to suddenly lose momentum mysteriously, Sloan just behind him. Sloan almost got to the Snitch both times but Scorpius using his manoeuvrability managed to get around and block.

"And there goes Malfoy again! Is his braking Charm malfunctioning?"

"Less speculation Miss Weasley."

"Well I mean honestly has Krum forgotten his whistle?"

"Less partisanship please."

"Of course you would say that!"

"Miss Weasley!"

"Okay, okay, yet another extremely fortuitous pass made by Leon Sloan, who seems to like the back of Malfoy's robes a bit too much, seeing as he can't keep his hands from grabbing them!"

"MISS WEASLEY!"

Krum was distracted watching the sisters, so he missed the next dive altogether. Scorpius was slower so he couldn't get the separation he needed. His face was flushed and desperate.

Violet and Valencia, who had been behaving, for them, up to this point, made a point to bear down on Sloan with a merciless barrage, earning them the first penalty of the game, which Paige took and missed. Scorpius finally got clear of the dazed Slytherin Seeker and moved to the other end of the pitch.

Albus and Diana, dodging well-hit Bludgers, managed to make Max Gates life misery, he was going to have Quaffle sized bruises all over his body the next day. Cornelius, as always, looked after Cornelius, away from the fray.

Paige Hawkins, after the first goal, managed to fake Roderick and score twice more, but other than that the boy was perfection. By that time Diana had scored twice more and Albus had cannoned one more through, making the score fifty to thirty Hufflepuff.

"I think Malfoy sees the Snitch! There he goes! I must say, that boy does look good in black! Maybe it's a Malfoy thing?"

"Victoire! Focus!"

Albus spun in time to see Scorpius rocket by, with Sloan gaining. Valencia slowed the Slytherin Seeker down with a partial body block but he managed to slip through closing on Scorpius. Just as they started to pass by the left Slytherin ring, Sloan blatantly reached out for robes, obviously deciding to take the penalty. Suddenly, as soon as he grabbed a handful, Scorpius launched himself off of his broom pulling Sloan off of his own. Scorpius' hand flashed in the sun then his off hand grabbed the ring pole as he passed and he slid down following a plummeting Sloan. Sloan landed on his back, knocking the wind out of his lungs. Scorpius landed a few moments later.

With a cool boredom, he walked over to Krum, handed him something and then headed for the tunnel in a slow walk.

Krum stared at his hand. Then held up his fist, turned it out and pulled it down. The universal sign for a caught Snitch. His whistle blow was lost in the roar from the crowd.

Victoire could be heard over the din.

"Oh my! That was simply fabulous! I have got to tell Teddy about that one! Hufflepuff wins! Two-hundred to thirty!"

Albus noticed his friend did not stop or acknowledge the congratulations. He just nodded at the well-wishers as he made his way to the tunnel. Rose came out of the stands, and rushed over to him. They walked off together.

Albus in a sudden burst of jubilation, swept low over the Gryffindor stands, and grabbed a gaping James' tombstone banner and made a circle of the Pitch showing it off. People clapped and cheered. He landed and celebrated with the team, rolling his eyes with Diana as Cornelius made some pronouncements about being a decoy.

When they arrived at the locker room Rose was waiting outside.

"Scorpius is in the Hospital Wing."

Later on Albus was sitting beside his friend reliving the game, as Scorpius tried not to gesture with his heavily bandaged arms, victims of friction from the pole. He didn't want anyone to see how bad he was hurting, which is why he left the field so abruptly. Ironically, his hands were perfectly fine. He was definitely going to send Ridley Bartlesby a thank you owl! Rose thought he was being a git for wanting to hide his injuries from the crowd. Albus and Scorpius exchanged an understanding look past her, which caused her to throw her hands, up exasperated and loudly declare, "men!"

They all three glanced up from time to time and tried not to snigger as Madam Pomphery checked a surly Leon Sloan for injuries. He was glaring at Scorpius non-stop.

After a while Scorpius was inundated with visitors. The entire Quidditch team showed up. Rose had left to bring some homework back for him to do while the Essence of Dittany did its work.

Albus' suddenly remembered Cormac. His eyes swept the large room.

He saw Gas sitting by a bed. Gas caught his eye and waved wanly.

Albus excused himself and walked over.

"Hey Albus."

Gas had a worried look on his face. Albus waved. Cormac was so pale, that behind all those freckles, his skin blended in with the sheets. He had dark rings under his eyes.

"What happened, Gas?"

Gaspar, looked at his friend, confusion etched on his face. "Madam Pomphrey said that someone Imperiused him. He fought it so hard, that he broke through it. Why would anybody do that to him?"

Albus had an idea, but he didn't feel free to say. "I don't know. Is he going to be alright?"

"She said he should be fine, she gave him a sleeping draught, and treated him for some mental spell damage. Who would Imperius a kid?"

They sat in silence.

Suddenly Albus realized that everything was silent. He looked up and people were still around Scorpius' bed being glared at by Madam Pomphrey, who was preparing to shoo them out. But everybody was frozen like statuary.

He caught movement by the bed out of the corner of his eye.

He looked up past Gas and saw an ethereal looking woman, in delicate green robes, gently brushing hair out of Cormac's face. Her hair was a coppery orange just like Cormac's. She looked normal sized, but her ears were oddly pointed, peaking up through thick braids.

"Are ya gonna look all day, or introduce yerself?" she said absently.

"I-I'm Albus."

She looked up and Albus felt his heart skip a beat.

"I know."

"Y-you're Cormac's mum?" he managed to stammer.

She smiled warmly, but didn't say a word.

They sat in silence as she gently traced the dark rings under her son's eyes; they seemed to disappear with her touch. "My brave lil man," She said quietly. "Do ya have anna idea who did this?"

"No."

She looked up and the anger in her bright blue-green eyes felt like a heat against Albus' face.

"Somebody did this ta me boy, for a ruddy Quidditch game. He fought them hard, that's why he's hurt. I wanna know who did this. And I wan your word you'll let me know when ya do."

Albus shot up in his chair. "What makes you think I'll know?"

She looked at him calmly, "Cause I canna see the future clearly, but I know that tha person who did this to me boyo, will cross your path. And when he does, I wan yer word you will let me know who it is. Do I have it?"

Albus was afraid of what would happen if he turned her down, so he nodded.

In between one eye blink and the next she was gone.

Noise came back into the room. Madam Pomphrey was admonishing the Quidditch team to let Mister Malfoy rest.

Cormac opened his eyes.

Gas got excited, and was about to call Madam Pomphrey when Cormac rested a hand on his arm. "Could ya leave me and Albus fer a minute Gas? I hate ta ask but it's important."

Gas looked disappointed, but he nodded and walked a few steps off.

Cormac's eyes bored into Albus'. "Me mum was here, wasn't she?"

Albus nodded.

"I need ta know wha was said."

Albus told him. Cormac managed to somehow look even wearier.

Cold fingers of fear played piano on Albus' spine. "What's wrong?"

Cormac said, "Check yer hand."

Albus looked at his hand and realized he was holding an ancient looking gold coin so hard, it had made an imprint in his palm.

"You accepted a bargain with a Leprechaun, Albus. That coin is the seal on it. It willna leave yer possession until the bargain has been fulfilled."

Albus tried to downplay it. "She just wants to know who did this to you. That's all."

Cormac shook his head, "You don't understand. She wants to know, so she can pay them back."

Albus shrugged. "Well they deserve it."

Cormac's eyes looked haunted. "They hurt a Leprechaun, my people will not let that pass. The sentence is likely death, or worse."

Albus looked at him alarmed. "Worse?"

"Worse."

Albus stared at the coin in his hand. "Well then, I just won't tell her."

Cormac looked grave. "You made that bargain, you gave your word, you break that, the price they would've taken from the person who attacked me, is on your head."

A slow creeping terror settled into Albus' stomach. He was afraid he was going to lose his breakfast.

"Not good," he murmured.

Chapter 17: Simmering Rivalry

The school was still buzzing about the Hufflepuff victory that Sunday.

When the owls came. There was a surprise for Albus.

Nox swooped down and dropped a *Daily Prophet* beside his plate and gave him the *give-me-some-toast-or-face-consequences* glare.

He read the headlines while the bird nibbled a toast corner. He got so engrossed with the article, that he got nipped.

"Ouch!"

Owls are not capable of rolling their eyes, but Nox gave the impression with a circular head bob, then took off gracefully heading back to the owlery. He buzzed a ducking and scowling James at the Gryffindor table on the way. Nox had never forgiven Albus' brother for that fake-owlery-door prank three months ago.

Albus was grateful for the distraction.

After leaving the Hospital Wing the previous night, before attending an impromptu celebration in the Cellar, he strolled out on the grounds and tossed that ancient Leprechaun coin into the lake.

After the party, he had gone back to the bunkroom only to see the coin wetting the top blanket on his bunk, and Kublai eyeing it from Scorpius' bed with a wary interest.

Albus had placed it in the bottom of his trunk, and tried to get some sleep. When he awoke the next morning, it was under his pillow.

"Is that the *Prophet*?" Scorpius asked, settling in beside him, fresh from the Hospital Wing. His arms were still bandaged, but not as thickly dressed.

Rose was on Albus' other side, yawning and beastly, as usual in the morning.

She leaned in to read the paper as Albus spread it out so they all three could see.

Strange Happenings at Hogwarts

By. Nita Skeeter

It has recently come to my attention that there are some strange goings-on at the castle on the hill.

First of all, brace yourself; there is a Malfoy in Hufflepuff.

Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy is not only in the House of the Badger, but is a first year Seeker on the Quidditch Team, and a top student in most of his classes. It is no secret that Lucius Malfoy is not amused.

Secondly, do not read on if you have a heart condition, there is a Potter in Hufflepuff as well!

Albus Severus Potter, the second son of the man some call great, Harry Potter, is also in that most humble of Hogwarts Houses. He is also a first year Chaser. So, count them, two first-years made the Quidditch team. Unprecedented! While he is not one of the top students grade wise, he has been at the centre of some rather interesting incidents.

Third, but you can believe me, no less significant. The Weasley family tradition going back for seven generations has been broken. Rose Caroline Weasley is also in Hufflepuff with her cousin! She, and Mister Malfoy, seems to be at or near the top in every academic category. One does wonder if that is all in which they are close.

Since Hufflepuff decisively beat Slytherin in Quidditch yesterday, primarily because of, by all accounts, a brilliant Snitch catch by Mr Malfoy, one wonders if this is a new day for Hufflepuff?

It certainly is already for the Potter, Weasley, and Malfoy families!

Rose was not amused.

"What a hack! The nerve of trying to start rumours that me and Scorpius are together."

Scorpius looked green. "I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit. Yes that's what that was."

Rose glared at him scathingly. "You don't have to act so disgusted!"

While they bickered Albus' eyes swept the room. As he feared, there were *Daily Prophet* papers on almost every table. The glares and sniggers were already beginning.

"Not good." he murmured.

That week was a nightmare.

It seemed every class with the Gryffindors and Slytherins turned into an endurance contest.

He sent off an owl to his dad to see who leaked the story to the *Prophet*, but any inquiries his father made to the young reporter who posted the story, Nita Skeeter, were prefaced with a request for interviews with the three young students. He declined.

He informed Albus that he had met Nita's mother, and that if the daughter was like her dame, Albus needed to be careful whom he talked to for the next while.

Of course his dad didn't have to listen to the kissing noises, and the requests for autographs that Albus and his two friends were enduring.

James had a different reaction. He seemed to be so livid he wouldn't even look Albus in the eye. Every time Albus tried to talk to him he walked by stiff with anger.

This was confusing to Albus, he and James were not the closest of brothers, granted, but they had never been enemies before.

Rose declared that James was a git, and Albus should just ignore him. Scorpius didn't offer an opinion, because he didn't have siblings, Rose seemed to think he should just go along with her, causing yet another fight.

Albus asked Dominique and Fred about James' behavior, but evidently James had been so surly to them, they were not speaking to him either.

This brotherly angst, the fallout from the article, and the mid term exams looming, had Albus' stomach so torn up, he spent most of that Friday in the Hospital Wing.

He finally felt well enough to leave in time for his lesson with Uncle Neville.

Neville's office was on the forth floor of the Arboretum. It had, like most things in that enclosure, three walls of glass with plants pressing in on both sides. It was spacious with shelves of Herbology texts and reference books covering the walls, and an old beat up desk, in front of the only solid wall. He had pictures in the spaces not covered with books. Aunt Hannah and Neville were waving from most of them, as happy a couple as there is in the world. A severe, serious formidable looking witch was glowering down from a large portrait behind the desk; she had, of all things, a moth-eaten stuffed vulture on her hat. A kind, grey-haired witch with flyaway hair, and heavily patched hat and robes, beamed warmly down from another portrait with a bit of dirt on the end of her nose. There was only one portrait on Neville's desk. It was of a smiling, short, round-faced woman and a tall handsome man; both had Neville's features. Albus had heard of Alice and Frank Longbottom from Rose, but he was told by his mum to never ask his uncle about them.

When Albus arrived, Uncle Neville was pruning a plant very carefully, his spectacles on the end of his nose. The plant wasn't making the task easier, it giggled and moved its branches. "Hold on now, be still, you want some buds this spring don't you?" He said as he grasped one little limb

carefully and snipped. The little plant slapped him in the nose. "Alright now! You want a trip to the Artic Room?" he threatened. The little plant settled down, and he finished his work.

As he set the plant aside and cleaned the clippings off of the desk surface, he said to Albus, "I hear tell that you've been getting draughts for your stomach from Madam Pomfrey? Panic attacks?"

Finished, he stared across his desk at Albus over his spectacles. He looked ridiculous, so Albus couldn't help but smile.

"It's just James, he's acting all mental, and I don't know why. It's really bothering me."

Neville took off his specs and rubbed his eyes a bit. He finally stared at Albus, and asked, "Why is this different from any other time you've not gotten along? You two are usually at each others throats at the get-togethers."

Albus sighed. "I don't know. When he's mad at me I usually have an idea why, or I'm happy about it. I guess it's always been okay to me, because I was sure he didn't hate me, or something."

Neville suddenly looked very grave. "James doesn't hate you, I'd stake my life on that."

"Then what's going on?" Albus said, tears springing to his eyes. He wiped them angrily away. *Throwing up. Crying. Bad stomach. What a hero!*

Neville held out a hanky to him like it was the most normal thing in the world. He waited until Albus composed himself. "Better?"

Albus nodded as he handed the hanky back over. Neville held it gingerly in his middle and index finger like it was sopping wet...then with a flick it lengthened and stiffened into his wand. Like nothing had occurred he placed it on his desktop. He steepled his fingers, patiently studying Albus' blotchy face, as Albus composed himself.

"He's scared, you know."

Albus sniffled wiping his nose on the back of his hand. "Of what?"

Neville's gaze was calm, "Of you."

Albus shot up straight in the chair, "What? He's been pounding on me since we took baths together as kids."

Neville chuckled. "Further back than that. Remember, I was there when you both were in your nappies. I changed them a time or two! Let me tell you, I routinely deal with Troll fertilizer, but your little bums stank!"

"Uncle Neville! Honestly!" Albus admonished, scandalized.

Neville's eyes twinkled. "Have you ever wondered why some of the time your brother is trying to torture you, other times he is trying to get there before you, then yet other times he's trying to make you feel small?"

Albus nodded.

Neville sighed. "He's afraid of you."

He had Albus full attention and he knew it. His eyes rolled to the ceiling as if he could see his memory projected there.

"James was more than the first born. He was the first-born Potter. He was on every major magazine cover in the Isle, and front page of most of the papers. Everywhere your parents went, James was more popular than they were."

Albus was floored. "I didn't know all that."

Neville smiled. "I know. But you see, he was a little over a year old, and starting to walk, when his mum started getting big again. Suddenly she got rushed to St. Mungos in pre-mature labour, in all of the rush, James wound up our place with Hannah and me. He didn't see his dad for four days. He didn't see his mum for a week."

Albus was aghast. "Why? Did they forget him?"

Neville shook his head. "Oh no, they owled everyday. But James cried constantly, he didn't understand what was happening. When finally he was allowed to go to St. Mungos to see his mum, he was shown an incubator with a tiny little boy in it struggling for his life, and was told that, that little boy was the reason mummy was in the Hospital. Do you want to know what his reaction was?"

Albus smiled ruefully. "Knowing him, probably violent."

Neville chuckled. "He smacked the incubator and caused you to cry. They all got upset with him, and he had to leave. That was the first time he picked on you."

Albus sat for a moment in quiet contemplation. "So he hated me from the start."

Neville rolled his eyes. "No. He didn't hate you, he was afraid of you."

Albus was frustrated. "You keep saying that, but I don't believe it."

Neville's eyes bored into Albus' "Your brother's earliest memories were of everybody telling Harry that Albus has his eyes. Of every one calling his little brother, Harry Junior. Of his little brother being an even bigger object of attention than he ever was. If he drew crowds, Albus, you drew mobs. Everybody wanted to see Harry Potter's little green-eyed doppelganger. They seemed to forget there were two boys. James went from centre of attention, to the other Potter boy, in less than a two years.

Albus, think of what's happening now.

He always wanted to be in Gryffindor like his dad, he believed that was expected. You show up and land in Hufflepuff, and happily defy that tradition.

He believed he was to be the families best hope for a Quidditch star, because you were afraid to fly, and hated heights. He knew he was the best Seeker candidate in Gryffindor this year, and didn't even try out last year because first years are too young. Next thing he knows, you

suddenly show up, knowing how to fly, beat Molly and Lucy the best flyers among the grandchildren in a race, and make the Quidditch team in your first year against all odds. Not only that, but you are a decent Chaser to boot.

James believes that all Slytherins are bad, and all of his father's enemies are supposed to be his enemies. You make friends with the son of the man who was his father's biggest foil.

All these things are happening, and he sees your dad accepting them, and respecting you for breaking the mould that James has been using to shape himself.

And now, after he never made front page his entire Hogwarts first year, something his dad managed with regularity, he sees this *Prophet* article, on you. Do you blame him for being afraid of you?"

Albus sat in silence. He didn't know what to say. He managed to nod.

"Is there anything I can do to make it easier on him?" he finally murmured.

Neville shook his head. "He's going to have to deal with this on his own. Just know, he doesn't hate you."

"Why not! I would. After what you've told me, I'm surprised he hasn't tried to murder me in my sleep!" Albus spat out.

Neville looked like he was debating something in his head. Then he nodded to himself. "Are you curious to know, why you haven't been pranked by anyone but James and Fred?"

Albus suddenly realized that he was right. He nodded.

Neville's face was solemn. "He put the word out, that nobody was to touch a hair on your head."

Albus scoffed. "He's just a second year, nobody's going to take him seriously."

Neville laughed. "He and Fred are the Hogwarts representative of Tri-W products. They have a lot more pull than you know."

Albus grinned. "You know about that?"

Neville shook his head exasperated. "I know about it, but they've gotten good at smuggling. I haven't caught them at it for some time. I know they've got a lot of customers, I've confiscated enough of your Uncle George's merchandise, but they always seem to know where I am, and where to hide the contraband."

Albus sighed. He did feel better. "So James doesn't hate me."

Neville grinned. "No he doesn't hate you. He just doesn't know what to think. He will come around, give it time."

Uncle Neville got up and walked over to a bookcase directly behind his desk. He waved his wand, and the shelves slid back revealing an ominous grey safe door.

He reached out and traced one finger in a pattern on the door surface. Albus heard thousands of little clicks and the door popped open. "Some Gringotts Goblins installed this door. Of course, I immediately changed the combination."

Neville walked into the vault enclosure, which was surprisingly spacious with shelves of expensive looking equipment and magical devices of every shape and size. Albus walked to the entrance as his Uncle walked down a short flight of stairs, and retrieved Albus's wand off of a shelf. Albus' eye was drawn to something reflecting bright red in the vault's overhead lighting.

It was James' SkyBolt gleaming and shiny, on a wall rack. Albus was so entranced tracing the lines that he didn't hear Neville walk up.

"Hands off. You're the enemy, remember."

Albus' hand snapped guiltily to his side like he was caught red-handed, "Shouldn't it be in the broom shed?" he stammered.

Neville ushered Albus out, and closed the door before responding.

"That's the prototype. Your dad had to promise to keep it safe before they'd give it to him to try out. Besides, down in the broom shed, the whole student body would be rubbing their grubby little paws all over it." He looked over spectacles at Albus for emphasis.

Albus' face flushed, even though he knew he was being put on.

Uncle Neville handed his wand to him. Albus felt the joy of the reunion of hand and wand running up his arm. Neville watched him with an amused look on his face.

"Actually, you've worn me out with all this talking, take the blasted thing, and get out."

Albus felt such excitement he was barely able to contain it. "You really mean it?"

Uncle Neville nodded toward the door. "Try not to upset any more Bludgers, or Dark Lords please."

Albus almost skipped back to the Cellar.

The next day was Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor and it was everything Albus had feared.

It was a slaughter.

Ravenclaw's tight formations and pin point accuracy was blasted to shreds by his cousin Fred and Fergus Finnigan, and when they did get through, Grayson Wood showed he was a chip off of the old block. Molly and Lucy were a swirling Quaffle assault on Elanor Ferraro, with Dominique blending in seamlessly, as they dodged Isla Pettit and Ashton Gully's Bludgers effortlessly. Lilith LeBlanc was outclassed on her Nimbus Millennium, James literally toyed with her, letting her dive for the Snitch and beating her to it and blocking. It was obvious that the strategy was to run up the score, then catch the Snitch when the season was out of sight for the other teams. "The Banshee" had other plans. She executed a perfect Wronski Feint and James was almost to the other ring before he heard her trademark wail. She was closing in on the Snitch, causing everyone to flinch from her unearthly howl. James spun on a knut and tore back, showing the

SkyBolt's astonishing speed. Albus thought he saw the air boil in the brooms wake as it rocketed by. Lilith had nearly grasped the Snitch when James' hand shot out.

Krum signalled the end of the game. Fred was livid. The score was just 300-20. He glared at James, all through the chaos of the red and gold crowd carrying the younger boy out of the Pitch.

Albus saw James' smile; his brother didn't realize that his team was disgusted with him yet. Their eyes met as James was being carried by. Albus nodded at him and smiled. James grinned happily and winked.

The Pitch cleared out. Six people sat in the stands glumly listening to the happy Gryffindors heading back to the castle. Diana sighed and stood and walked out, the Sisters and Corny followed suit leaving Albus, Roderick and Scorpius.

Scorpius beat Albus to the punch. "Not good."

Chapter 18: A Threefold Cord

The mids came and went with Scorpius and Rose getting straight O's. Rose flipped when she saw the scores though. It turned out that she wasn't going to be able to fulfil her father's wish to "beat him at every test Rosie" after all. She eventually took it in stride, but she stuck her tongue out at him every time he brought it up, which was often. It was something new to bicker about.

Albus was happy to see he got a lot of E's but an O in Potions, Herbology and most surprisingly, Transfiguration. Uncle Neville's tutoring really paid off.

November was almost over when the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff match came around.

The game the previous year had been a travesty, since the Sisters were suspended for the duration. Diana, who held a grudge against Ravenclaw for taking advantage and running up the score against the Sisterless Hufflepuff, was especially intense.

She suggested a Muggle technique during one of the practices. It was called visualization. They never even touched a broom. They just sat in the stands, supposedly imagining their actions during the game. She walked them through it.

"Chasers imagine the many ways you can get the Quaffle through the hoops, remember those formations I have been showing you. Roderick, imagine what kind of offence you're going to see, and how you can block it. Sisters, you are hitting the Bludgers at the Ravenclaw Chaser line, imagine their faces, and make sure you follow through. Scorpius, Lilith is the best at Hogwarts, imagine ways of faking her out and getting to the Snitch first.

It all broke up after a few minutes of awkward silence, when Albus' stomach growled. They started to snigger. Diana's glares couldn't stop the chain reaction. Corny spoke up, "That's not a Quaffle you're imagining, Potter, that's a dinner roll!" That was it. They all were laughing. Diana

left in a huff, throwing her hands in the air. They exchanged a nod through mirth-filled eyes and followed her stiff, retreating form back up to the castle, and dinner.

The next few practices, she made them all pay for it.

She had Albus play Lilith Leblanc in some simulations, since he had the same broom.

The Nimbus Millennium, in spite of being slower than the SkyBolt really was the best well-rounded broom on the market. It had no weak spots.

Scorpius still managed to grab the Snitch before Albus, but that had more to do with Albus not being a true Seeker, than the broom. Every time Albus spotted the Snitch first, he got there first. The results of the simulation were not promising. From Scorpius' dejected demeanour, he knew it as well.

Lilith was not like Sloan. She was not lazy. She was not incompetent. She was a Snitch catching machine, with a guaranteed place on the Holyhead Harpies after she left Hogwarts in a year. Scorpius was not going to defeat her with cheap tricks, he was simply going to have to hope he saw the Snitch first, and was closer to it.

The match rolled around that Saturday, the last day of November.

In the Great Hall that morning, Albus ate a good breakfast, managing somehow to calm his nerves enough.

It helped that James and Fred were not presently on speaking terms, so they hadn't collaborated on a game day prank.

Roarke swept in, causing some oo's from female students at his perfect white plumage, he dropped a letter from home, and aristocratically stared at Albus, until he remembered to feed the arrogant bird a bit of sausage off of his plate. No toast for Roarke, mind you, that bird was spoilt!

After Roarke nipped his finger affectionately and took off, Albus tore into the letter eagerly.

Dear Albus,

Good luck on your game today! Your dad and I are proud of you. (Me especially. My boy is finally taking after me in something!) Lils and Kreacher say hi.

James sent Loki with a note about what happened during the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw match. His teammates aren't too pleased with him, so if you get a chance, remind your brother that his family will always stand behind him. (Don't make that face!)

Albus guiltily stopped crinkling his nose in disgust. That woman was scary sometimes! Honestly!

Again, good luck on your game! Beat Ravenclaw. Know your dad and I are thinking of you.

You're still my little boy. (Don't roll your eyes!)

Mum

P.S. Lils wants you to know she misses you very, very much, and wants to be sure you don't get killed today. But if you do, she wants you to know your room will be in good hands, as a haven for her dollies.

Albus smiled.

He turned to the Gryffindor table and saw James down at the end, eating by himself. Oh how the mighty have fallen.

For you mum, he said to himself.

He left the letter, picked up his food, explained what he was doing to Scorpius and Rose, got up and crossed the aisle seating himself down beside his brother.

James looked up from his kippers with a sullen look on his face. "What do you want?"

Albus gave him calm eyes. "Some of that Red Currant jam for my toast will do for starters. He said indicating the jar on the other side of James.

James brusquely slid it over.

Albus slathered the jam on a piece of toast for himself and one for James, but he added some butter just like his brother liked it. He put it on a napkin and slid it over.

James didn't acknowledge it at first. Then he grabbed it and jammed half of it in his mouth. Giving Albus a crusty smile dripping jam.

Albus sniggered and they ate in silence. Fred slid in with his plate. "It's the end of the world, look at it, dogs and cats!" he murmured with a smile. The rest of the cousins followed suit, even a rumped, morning/evil Rose.

Not a word was spoken, but wounds were closed in the companionable silence.

As he and Scorpius changed into their black Quidditch robes later, Scorpius remarked, "All better?"

Albus nodded.

Scorpius was thoughtful for a moment. "Your brother seems like he would be a good guy if he would quit trying so hard."

Albus shrugged. "You're right, he is a good guy, when he's not being a Centaur's arse. Don't tell Rose I said that, she'd jinx me for being racist toward Centaurs!"

They sniggered and followed Diana out.

The game turned into a bigger blood bath than the one against Slytherin.

Ravenclaw showed a determination to not lose like the last game, and Hufflepuff was sent reeling from the onslaught.

Isla and Ashton were vicious with their Bludger hits. Eliot, Jay and Holly were using more formations than Albus had ever thought possible, actually scoring on Roderick several times.

Victoire's commentary was spotty as usual, interspersed with Flint's growl for her to stop manicuring her nails, but when she called, Ravenclaw 80-Hufflepuff 20, there was a collective groan from the crowd.

Albus' heart sank, the thought was yammering in his mind; *we're going to lose, badly!*

That was when he heard some familiar voices cheering.

His eyes scanned the crowd, and he was so shocked to see James leading his cousins, he nearly fell off of his broom.

A new determination gripped him. He saw in the eyes of his older teammates that they were falling back into the old bottom-of-the-heap mentality.

Albus suddenly remembered that day with the illusionary dragon, how he had turned the tables. He only needed a spark to get him mad enough.

He looked up at the Ravenclaw captain and Keeper, Elanor Ferraro, and saw her smirk derisively like Hufflepuff wasn't even there and they were going to run up the score again. That was all he needed, rage filled him, but he didn't fight it this time, he embraced it. He was going to wipe that smirk off of her face!

He called for the Quaffle, and Diana got it to him.

He kicked his broom into high gear and blasted through the Beater line, he took stinging shots from Isla, but they weren't very hard compared to the shots he took in practice from the Sisters. Ashton, however, didn't react, glancing over at Isla; indecisive, just like the scouting report.

Albus came into range, for him, and with a roar he unleashed the hardest Quaffle throw he had in him, Elanor was so cowed by the velocity, she didn't even attempt to block it, she dived out of the way.

He missed the centre ring, but the point was made. He swung back around, and saw that the team, which had been desperate and demoralized a few moments before, now looked determined.

Years of losing sloughed off like a snakeskin. Diana called out a formation, and Corny swept up, taking the left wing.

It wasn't long before Victoire had to put down her nail file, and call some scores.

"Oh dear! Look at those black Badgers go! I must say that colour is certainly intimidating!"

"Miss Weasley, this is not a fashion show!"

"Sorry! Another score by Diana Delaney! Oh my! The Sisters absolutely tattooed Elliot Durnin, literally! I think he's going to have an impression of that Bludger for a year! I don't condone tattoos, but I have often thought of getting a wolf on my..."

"Miss Weasley!"

"I was going to say ankle, honestly! Hufflepuff 90 Ravenclaw 80!"

Albus and Diana shrugged off accurate Bludger hits and rained Quaffles on Elanor, with Corny decoying the Beaters, and taking some hits as well. The team seem transformed; Ravenclaw was the one on their heels.

It was then that Scorpius saw the Snitch, and dived.

A thrill went through Albus when he realized that Scorpius was closer than Lilith, who was on the opposite side of the pitch!

She let out an ear-splitting cry and dived as well. Scorpius realizing that she was faster, adjusted his dive to a suicidal angle to gain speed, so much that Albus was terrified for him. The Twigger 99 might have been a slow broom but it showed its manoeuvrability when Scorpius managed to pull it up at last second; he was going to have grass stains on his robes. They both closed in on the Snitch, Lilith showing she had ice water in her veins as she was still diving.

Suddenly at the last second, two things happened. Albus saw a quick flash of red and Lilith smacked into the ground hard, at the same time Scorpius caught the Snitch. He was past her so he didn't see her hit.

Krum signalled the end of the game, and then he saw Lilith on the ground with her broomstick sticking out of the earth.

Albus swept down, as Scorpius realized why everyone was so quiet and turned and flew back.

Lilith wasn't moving, her long white hair was over her face like a shroud. Her teammates swirled around her calling her name.

Albus had seen that flash of red before. It was a stunning spell. His eyes swept the stands, but everyone was on their feet, so he couldn't see if anyone was stowing a wand away. Professor Pharrel was animatedly discussing something with Professor Bast, and Professor Flint was actually comforting Victoire who hadn't even announced the final score in her concern. Shackbolt looked grave.

Madam Pomfrey was rushing out on the field. But no one else was moving or leaving the stands. Most of the crowd were holding their breath.

Suddenly with no other sign of stirring, Lilith just sat up. She blithely asked stunned people around her, if she caught the Snitch. They stammered no. She shrugged and wandered off in the direction of the tunnel with Madam Pomfrey scolding her to head straight to the Hospital Wing.

The breath everyone seemed to be holding was let out in a cheer, as much for Hufflepuff as for Lilith being ok. He didn't see any sign that anyone else had seen that flash of red; everyone else must have been watching Scorpius.

Victoire announced joyously, "Lilith is okay! Hufflepuff wins! 240-80, look out Gryffindor I must say!"

As Albus and Scorpius were being mobbed, Albus saw Madam Pomfrey pause at the professor's grandstand to give Headmaster Shacklebolt a piece of her mind. She was really letting him have it.

Albus accepted his cousin's, and his brother's congratulations as he made his way to the tunnel, trying to pass within earshot of the livid Madam Pomfrey.

She was loud enough he had no trouble hearing their discussion.

"You need to shut down the entire Quidditch program, I don't care how long this school has had one! If Lilith's grandmother hadn't been a Banshee, I'd be notifying her parents right now! No, I don't have any idea why she passed out."

The rest of her words were lost as Albus entered the tunnel.

If she knew that about Lilith's special background, she must know about Cormac being part Leprechaun! He thought as he changed his robes. As he hung up his kit, another thought made him freeze.

All of the staff must know. They would have to be informed for medical reasons!

On the heels of that thought, he had to sit down on the bench when a big puzzle piece fell into place.

The person that Imperiused Cormac, has to be a staff member!

Albus hurriedly dressed and rushed up to the castle, managing to catch up to Professor Pharrel.

"Professor." Albus called.

The smiling older man paused and waited for him to catch up.

"Albus! How is my star Chaser doing?"

Albus was a little in for breath by the time he got to the professor. But he managed to gasp, "I know what happened to Lilith."

Professor Pharrel immediately looked alarmed. "What are you babbling about young man?"

"She was stunned! I saw the red flash!" he insisted.

Pharrel smiled benevolently. "She had a nasty fall, that's all, Albus. If she were stunned, the whole stadium would have seen it. Now go, enjoy your victory. If it will make you feel better, I'll tell the Headmaster your theory. We don't want to start a panic do we?"

Albus nodded glumly, and watched as the professor walked through the gate and out of sight.

Albus got the message. He was on his own.

He reached into his pocket; sure enough the coin was there again. The person who he was supposed to confront had nearly killed Lilith. What could possibly be the reason? It didn't make any sense. What was for sure, whoever it was, they were playing for keeps. And Albus was in

way over his head. He trudged the rest of the way to the castle in the cheering throng, but he didn't join them.

When Albus woke up that Sunday stiff, in pain with Quaffle bruises all over his chest and back, after tossing and turning all night, he felt like a bit of a morning walk to clear his head. His heart was still heavy from the revelations of the night before. When he had finally reached The Cellar last night, he had been the last to arrive at the celebration, and the first to leave it.

He bundled up quietly so as to not disturb his bunkmates or Kublai, and slipped out into the Common Room

It was warm and toasty in The Cellar as usual. At class he had noticed that Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Slytherins all complained about the drafts in their towers and the darkness of the dungeon. They usually showed up shivering and eyeing the Hufflepuffs suspiciously, as they always came in looking comfortable.

Water and air doesn't insulate, earth does. Add in the fact that the painting that served as the entrance to the corridor to The Cellar came out into the kitchen, the Hufflepuffs always stayed toasty until they got into the rest of the castle.

The one drawback to the comfort, was the lack of outside windows. This caused the Badgers to be a bit out of touch with the outside of the castle.

Albus was in for a surprise. He waved at the happily busy little elves as he walked through the kitchen and up the staircase into the cavernous entrance hall. He saw that the early morning light drifting in from the windows several stories up had a strange bright quality that he knew immediately.

He dashed across the massive hallway and out into the west wing breezeway, his eyeballs were nearly blasted out of his head by the whiteness.

As far as the eye could see it was a crystalline, pristine snowscape. The Forbidden Forest didn't even seem that forbidden in the soft early morning glow.

Albus sighed contentedly as he took in the monochromatic beauty.

He was so far over his head, and he felt so alone with this knowledge, that blasted coin was cold in his pocket, even though he knew he had left it under his pillow. What was he going to do?

"It won't last you know."

Albus started from the unexpected voice. He turned to see Professor Flint leaning against one of the columns, contentedly puffing a pipe.

"Good morning professor, you gave me a fright."

Flint's dark eyes dissected him in silence for a moment or two. "I was already here Mr. Potter, your lack of awareness of your surroundings is what gave you the fright."

Albus was always wary of the professor, he always felt like there was more going on in that mind than just potions. Even though the man never was unpleasant without purpose, it was still hard for Albus to not feel the constant scrutiny.

"You're right, I'm sorry professor."

Flint shrugged, "I was just out gathering some of the very first snow of the year, that happens to be a valuable potion ingredient, and enjoying the crisp air. Might I inquire as to why you are up this early on a Sunday?"

Albus shrugged, "Just couldn't sleep, and fancied a walk, that's all."

Flint studied him for a few moments more. "Have you ever thought to ask your father about Lily Evans, and her Potions ability?"

Albus suddenly remembered that conversation the first day of school. "I'm sorry professor, I forgot."

Flint nodded as if this was expected. "Well, Mr. Potter, if you were to, perhaps, take your walk down this corridor, and were to, perchance, take the next two lefts, you might find yourself in a massive trophy room. I believe the answer you seek is in the fifth case to your right as you enter, third shelf from the top. Have a good morning Mr. Potter; enjoy the snow before the rest of the students find it. I, however, will be brewing Pepper-up potion for the remainder of the day."

With a swirl of black robes Professor Flint swept by, leaving a cloud of cherry scented tobacco in his wake.

Albus had resolved not to follow the professor's instruction, but desperate for a distraction, his curiosity got the best of him. Soon he was walking down the indicated hallway.

He was usually terrified of getting lost and winding up in one of Growltooth's nightly corridor traps, but he managed to find the massive oak-panelled Trophy room in due course.

A quick sweep of the dark oak shelving in the trophy case in question revealed that it was filled with awards from the year 1978. It seemed that Gryffindor won the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup both that year.

"James Potter, Chaser," he murmured. He immediately felt a connection to his grandfather. "Just like me," Albus said to himself with a small smile. His eyes kept scanning, resting on a plaque listing three students cited for Potions excellence, for successfully brewing Felix Felicis for N.E.W.T. extra credit. A Professor Horace Slughorn gave the plaque. Albus traced the names through the glass.

Severus Snape

Cyrus Dillinger

Lily Evans

"Severus Snape?" Albus murmured. His eyes kept roaming until they rested on the plaque bearing the names of the Head Boy and Girl.

James Potter

Lily Evans

There it was. The information Professor Flint wanted him to have. His grandmother had to have been Lily Evans, before she was Lily Potter. It was right there in front of him, waiting all this time.

She was good in potions. I am good in potions. Grandfather was a Chaser. I am a Chaser.

"Maybe I'm not an accident," Albus said to himself in awed tones.

He had heard about his Grandfather being a Chaser and a Quidditch star before, and stories about how his Grandmum couldn't stand him, but how he came around eventually, (usually when Dad was trying to get Mum to not abandon James at the nearest orphanage!) but that his Grandmum's maiden name was Evans, and she was tops in Potions, that was new. He reread the Potions plaque again, *Why didn't dad tell me my name sake and my Grandmum knew each other? And why does Professor Flint want me to know about it?*

The questions Albus had for his dad were beginning to pile up!

He traced the names through the case with his finger with reverence for the next half hour before he heard some students talking excitedly echoing up the corridors. The spell was broken; he retraced his steps heading to the Great Hall.

A silvery form happily bounced out of the wall ahead of him, it was the rotund House Ghost of Hufflepuff.

"Why hello young Master Potter!" he called out joyfully.

"Hello, er, Mister Friar." Albus ventured carefully.

The ghost chuckled. "Oh you can call me Fat Friar, I've had a few years to get used to my shape you know!"

Albus couldn't help but smile. "I'm sorry sir, it just sounds rude to me."

The Friar glanced around comically, and then waved Albus over. "Just between us early risers, you may call me Father Thomas if you like."

Albus grinned. "Sure, Father Thomas." He answered a stage wink by the Friar with one of his own.

"So what's disturbing you Master Potter? No student would be wandering these halls on a Sunday morning that is sleeping well. You can trust me. I have been keeping secrets since before I died."

Albus considered the offer for a second. "Thanks for the offer, but I've got to work this out on my own. No offence."

The ghostly friar looked appalled. "Of course not! You can't offend me."

Albus smiled and started past, the Friar stopped him with a gentle spectral hand that made his shoulder tingle like it was dipped in the snow out on the grounds. "If I may, can I offer one word of advice?"

Albus nodded.

Father Thomas sunk through the floor until his eyes were even with Albus. "I have watched your family for a few generations now. Your father, and his father before him, took great comfort from his friends. I have seen you with yours; you seem stronger when you're with them. Tell them. Let them help you with this problem." He seem to be deep in thought for a moment then quoted, "There is a verse in a great muggle book, that I think an awful lot of, that might help. *And if one prevails against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4:12.* You are not a Gryffindor, you're a Hufflepuff. You can always ask for help. I'll always be around if you need to talk."

He waved over his shoulder as he drifted off, greeting another early rising student as he faded into the wall further down the corridor.

What is an Ecclesiastes? Albus wondered. Those words did seem powerful, like they were spoken with some great authority. *A threefold cord is not quickly broken.* He, Rose and Scorpius were three.

He's right, I'm a Hufflepuff, it's time I stopped acting like a Gryffindor.

Albus had to ask one person's permission first.

He found Cormac eating breakfast listening to Gas prattle on about Harry Potter in the Tri-Wizard tournament; they were evidently up to the rescue under the lake.

"Cormac, can I have a word?"

They walked away a few steps out of earshot. Cormac would not budge on telling Rose and Scorpius about his heritage.

"It's na that I don wan to," he explained, "It's tha I can't unless they've figured it out for themselves, like you did. I have an onus on me that prevents it, it's on you as well, you canna tell them either, unless they already suspect."

Albus glanced at Scorpius and Rose. They were eating breakfast, happily arguing in low tones.

Cormac looked apologetic. "I know I got ya inta this, if they know, the onus is abated and you can tell them everything, but na before. They are the smartest in our class, they might surprise ya. " He nodded and walked back to Gas. Gas started right back with the explanation of Gillyweed.

Albus sat down between Rose and Scorpius, who were debating whether or not to go out into the snow later.

Albus decided to get it over with. "I have to ask you two something."

They looked at each other, and then Rose said, "So you've decided to stop playing martyr already? I thought you'd milk it at least another day or so!" She and Scorpius rolled their eyes comically.

Albus glared at them, then began. "What do you know about Cormac, or at least what do you suspect."

They exchanged another glance. Rose said, "Oh do you mean about how he's really way undersized to be eleven?"

Scorpius chimed in, "Or that he has the reddest hair I have ever seen on a bloke, almost orange?"

Rose answered, "Or that his ears have a bit of a point on them, and he has the thickest Irish accent I have ever heard, nearly Gaelic?"

Scorpius added, "Or that he is stronger and faster than a boy his size and age should be?"

Rose crinkled her nose cutely. "It's obvious, he's part Leprechaun, Albus, we figured it out ages ago. How many times have I told you that you should read Aunt Looney and Uncle Rolf's revised, *Magical Creatures and Where to Find Them*, seriously."

Albus smiled, relieved. Cormac was right, he had underestimated them.

To introduce the topic he pulled the coin out and placed it in front of Scorpius.

Scorpius took one look, "That's Leprechaun gold, mate. It will be gone by sundown. I'm a Malfoy, I know my gold!"

Albus sighed. "I wish it would, but I'm pretty sure it won't."

They stared at him concerned, but eager.

So it begins, one becomes three, Albus thought.

Chapter 19: Curiouser and Curiouser

The speculation as to the identity of the "mystery wizard" began immediately.

Albus thought there would at least be a stunned silence, maybe expressed doubts that he was imagining things-he even had his arguments lined up in his head, but Rose and Scorpius took to the conundrum like they had any school assignment.

Scorpius said, "Professor Pharrrel? He's a strange one, and Hufflepuff doing well makes him look good."

"No," said Rose. "First of all, he's too lazy and unmotivated. Secondly, I saw him in the professor's grandstand when Cormac got *Imperiused*, you can't see into the tunnel from there.

"Flint? He's a nutter if I ever saw one."

"He was commentating with Victoire, that's a full time job!"

Neither Scorpius nor Albus disagreed.

"Why don't we tell a professor?" Rose asked finally.

Scorpius gave her the smirk that usually set her off. "We know that the person behind all of this has to be on staff, how can we be sure that there is not more than one involved?"

Rose bit her lip. "We are in a spot aren't we?"

Albus couldn't believe how much warmth he felt from that remark. *She said we are in a spot, not you are in a spot. She didn't even have to think about it. Why didn't I tell them sooner?*

Scorpius was silent for a minute, as if he was making a decision of his own. "Since Albus is coming clean, there is something I've been keeping from you two." He reached into his satchel and pulled out a folded and refolded piece of parchment, opened it and slid it over to them. Then he started into his eggs and bacon with a will.

Albus and Rose exchanged a look. Albus held the parchment so they could both read:

My precious boy Scorpius,

I was looking forward to seeing you over the holidays, but upon talking to your father, we have decided that to keep your grandfather's stress level down, it would be best if you spend the holiday at Hogwarts.

You father wants you to know that this does not mean you are unwanted and that Professor Flint has assured him you will find Hogwarts at Christmas very pleasant. It will be more pleasant than Malfoy Manor, I'm afraid.

I know you don't understand what is going on right now, but know that your father and I have your best interest at heart. There will be other holidays to spend together. Please be a Malfoy about this and make the best of the situation.

We will send your presents on Christmas morning, and you will be in our hearts.

We do insist that you stay at Hogwarts, and that you do not accept any offers to leave. Doing so will complicate matters beyond what they already are if your grandfather finds out. You know he has his ways of doing so.

*All my love,
Mother*

Albus reread the letter, glancing at Scorpius to see how he was taking it. His friend had that cool, aristocratic bearing in place, which made him impossible to read.

Scorpius took the parchment and folded it. "Back to what we were talking about," he said, in a tone that implied the subject was closed to conversation.

Albus nudged Rose under the table, hoping that for once she would take the hint.

She stared at Scorpius, and then seemed to get her bearings. "Well, what we know is that whomever spelled the Bludgers probably *Imperiused* Cormac and stunned Lilith. What we don't know is why. Why wouldn't your parents want you home for the holidays? I mean really!"

Albus groaned and lowered his head to bang the wood in frustration.

"Albus, sweetie, stop that. You're going to splinter the wood," he heard Rose say.

He couldn't help but snigger. He looked up. Rose and Scorpius were laughing as well.

For the rest of the day, Rose had outbursts coming up with arguments about how Scorpius could convince his parents he should go home anyway.

Scorpius just rolled his eyes.

They went down to the frozen lake where older students had *Imperviused* their shoe soles and were skating, while Hagrid broke up the far side of the lake near Krum's ship with a huge hammer so the giant squid could come to the surface. The Weasley Twins, Molly and Lucy were speed skating around some slower skaters blowing bubbles with their gum, and racing each other.

Dominique finally gave them a clue as to why she was suddenly interested in Quidditch this year when she skated by with Grayson Wood, arm in arm, deliriously happy from her expression. She saw them and waved.

Suddenly snowballs were pelting Albus, Rose and Scorpius. A quick glance up confirmed that it was James and Fred with Fergus Finnigan along with some older Gryffindors they didn't know. Rose and Albus exchanged a look, and then began returning fire. Scorpius, using those Seeker reflexes, managed to catch a snowball or two out of the air and send them back. More often, he made snowballs and tossed them to Albus, who whipped the missiles at the distant assailants with a nasty, accurate velocity, which caused some of the fringe attackers to retreat. They were outnumbered, and it wasn't going well, when suddenly a gigantic snowball whizzed by on its way up the hill. Fred, George and Fergus' eyes were as big as saucers when they saw the snow-boulder heading their way, narrowly escaping, laughing as they re-armed. Albus turned to see Cormac and Gas had entered the fray. Gas and Cormac had been making a snow wizard just before, and had just finished the base, that was what Cormac had flung up the hill.

How strong is he? Albus wondered.

The barrage lasted for a while, then a ceasefire was declared and they all headed back inside freezing. Albus invited the Gryffindors back to The Cellar, and they spent the afternoon drinking Hot Chocolate and munching snacks brought to them by happy house elves, as Albus showed everyone, not in the family, why only Uncle Ron still played Wizard Chess with him.

His little ivory soldiers rampaged across the board at his command, laying waste to the opposing army with precision and discipline. Scorpius came closest to dethroning Albus when his Knight swept in from the side and threatened Albus' King. However, that was just before Albus brought his severe, angry looking Queen, all the way from the opposite side of the board and viciously bashed his little head in.

Everyone who had been rooting Scorpius on groaned with dismay, his family did so with a knowing look exchanged.

They switched to Exploding Snap, a game at which Albus was more vulnerable.

Fred, who up until that time had never been in Hufflepuff's common room, couldn't get over how cosy everything was. "You blokes have it good down here!"

"I don't know. We could use a window or two," Rose said.

The Gryffindors, who had plenty of glass panes, exchanged looks.

"Trust me," Fergus said, "you're not missing anything during the winter!"

Fred picked up the chain, and laid down a Wizard card. "And in the summer all of those windows let in the sun, so The Tower gets pretty hot. Most of those windows are older than Hagrid, they don't open, and somebody brilliant placed the tower where it would receive the most sun year round."

James sniggered. "I think that bloke's name was, Godric? Yeah, I'm pretty sure that was his name." He laughed when Fergus threw a black and yellow pillow at him.

The next day at breakfast, while Rose and Scorpius took turns offering theories as to the origin of the "Mystery Wizard" behind the attacks. After they ran out of ideas, they argued about Scorpius' plans for the upcoming Holiday until they received another *Daily Prophet* courtesy of Roarke.

Albus opened it. There was a note from his dad.

Tell Scorpius, I am looking into this leak.

The trio huddled together to read the article that accompanied the note.

More News From the Badger Hole
By. Nita Skeeter

It has come to my attention that Hufflepuff beat the favoured Ravenclaw at Quidditch Saturday, with Scorpius Malfoy catching the Snitch from future Holyhead Harpies prospect Lilith LeBlanc. This young man is turning out to be one of the shining stars of the Hogwarts pitch this season! One wonders if he is better than the previous first-year Seeker, Harry Potter himself. Sources confirm that all Scorpius has to do is show up for his next game and he will have a better first year record, since *the-boy-who-lived* was in hospital wing, for the first of many stints, for the last game his first year.

I'm sure all my readers join me in saying bravo to Scorpius, and will keep the talented boy in their thoughts as he spends a lonely holiday at school.

Albus and Rose looked at each other and then at the "talented boy."

Scorpius looked positively ill. "I never said a word to anyone else! How did she find out? Grandfather is not going to be pleased."

Albus glanced up to see an elderly, tawny owl making its way to Scorpius with a bright red Howler in his claws.

As Albus watched Scorpius endure yet another bellowing-out from his grandfather from behind a *Muffliato*, he couldn't help but wonder, Is the mystery wizard behind this leak too?

Chapter 20: The Last Straw and the First Detention

Christmas season had arrived at Hogwarts.

Hagrid's nephew Hagger brought in a couple of trees. Hagrid assured everyone Hagger was just eight years old, but it was hard to tell. He had a huge fir in each hand and wasn't struggling to carry them, his large sparsely haired head brushed the suspended candles lighting the Great Hall. He stayed around to help hang the decorations.

Albus had heard that Hagrid's brother Grawp had started a human friendly clan of giants up in the mountainous hills above Hogsmeade, but he wasn't aware that any children had been born until now. In spite of his size, Hagger, smiling his crooked tooth grin, seemed a good sort.

Professor Patil, made some multi-colour bubbles with her wand. They were of bronze, sapphire blue, crimson red, gold, silvery-black, bright-yellow, emerald green, and silver, floating them up into place while Professor Bast transfigured some sparkles and icicles from the top down with hers. Professor Flint puffed on his pipe contentedly as he was raised in the palm of Hagger's hand to the top of the two trees. He shook up a potion to mix it and then poured over each tree. A white substance drifted down and clung to the branches. Albus touched it later and it felt like cold snow, but it was dry to the touch and didn't seem to be melting. The boy giant hung some garland and streamers looking even larger beside the animated little elves that were helping with the decorating with amazing feats of pinpoint levitation. It wasn't long before the main hall was festooned with the sights and evergreen smells of the Yuletide holiday.

Albus and Rose cheerfully discussed holiday plans, sending off some owls that morning; they were working on a surprise for their friend. It wasn't hard to hide it from Scorpius though, because he hadn't been around enough lately to make it that difficult.

In these last few days, Albus couldn't help but wonder if his friend had finally caved under all the pressure.

The once active Scorpius, had become listless, and withdrawn.

He had been fine with not going home for the holidays when it was just his circle of friends that knew, but having the majority of the school, and the Wizarding world for that matter, informed of something so personal was intolerable to him.

Albus who once had a massive picture of himself picking his nose in Diagon Alley on the front page of the *Prophet* could empathize.

Scorpius was last up in the morning, wouldn't come to breakfast, ate his lunch by himself in The Cellar, and picked at his food when Albus finally got him to come to dinner.

However, Albus really got concerned when Scorpius refused to argue with Rose.

They were in Astronomy class, and were working on a star chart for the Northwest quadrant for their dreamy saucer-eyed professor, Astra Peeks, when Rose got a constellation out of place.

Albus knew it, and he knew Scorpius knew it, and from the sly look Albus got from her, she was aware of it as well. She slid it over to Scorpius and asked him to proofread before she turned it in. He glanced at it, declared it fine and slid it back.

She exchanged a shocked look with Albus; the constellation she had deliberately misplaced was Scorpio.

When class was over Scorpius packed his telescope and spare charts and dropped his rolled up work in Professor Peeks' arms, returned her creepy-eyed nod, and left without saying a word.

Albus and Rose hurried to catch up, but lost him at the next branch. Suddenly they heard some voices from the hallway to their left.

The Slytherins had been particularly rough on Scorpius in the previous week. It seemed that they carried around some sort of offence that he rejected them by getting Sorted into Hufflepuff, and hearing of his shaky ties with his own family was just the goad they needed. It didn't help that their chief Slytherin tormentor, Kian Kerry, had found some henchmen.

The two boys were like opposite bookends. Conner Janski was broad-shouldered and medium height, with simian features and large big knuckled hands with hairy knuckles. He had henchman written all over him, but his blond hair was carefully styled and his mannerisms effeminate. Cameron Zabala was large boned, and taller than Conner, with a head nearly shaved bald for some reason, his eyes were too close together, and he had a sycophantic laugh that came out as a giggle.

At present they were accosting Scorpius as the pale boy tried to walk away, his face flushed in anger.

Scorpius suddenly froze, spun, and leapt on Kian.

Albus stood there in his surprise as the other two henchmen began closing in cracking their knuckles.

Scorpius had gotten angry before, but it showed itself as brooding and swift retreat to be alone, he had never resorted to violence, or engaged in aggression. Cool, self-possession had been his trademark up to now. Recent events, however, had taken their toll. He was brawling now, and doing a decent job of it.

Conner and Cameron had just about closed in when Albus realized he had to help. He took off at a run.

"Don't! Rose called after him. "You'll get us into trouble!"

As Albus closed in on the two large boys, his mind kicked into high gear. He had been in class with the two boys for several months now, and he knew that Conner was the first to complain if he had to get his hands dirty in Herbology, so he might dish out punishment, but he was the most likely to not take it well. He angled toward the broader boy, and jumped on his back. He got in as many punches as he could before the larger boy could realize he was being attacked.

"Unhand me!" Conner bleated. "Get him off!"

Cameron was reaching Albus, and then he was levitated into the air and smacked his head against the ceiling.

From around where he was still clinging to Conner, Albus saw Rose standing, with her wand out.

"If we're going to get into trouble, I want it to be worth it!" she declared.

Seeing the wand, Conner stopped reaching for Albus, and Albus slid down.

"What is going on here?" came an authoritarian voice echoing down the hall. Albus didn't recognize it as Uncle Neville's until the tall man strode up. Conner walked over and stood with a dazed Cameron, "Scorpius started it!" he whined.

"Oh grow up!" Rose shouted.

Neville shot her a look, which cowed her immediately, then strolled up to where Scorpius was still pounding on Kian, tears streaking his face, a bruise forming on his cheek. He had bloodied Kian's nose and the boy was simply protecting himself, not even attempting to fight back at this point.

Neville gently, but forcefully pulled Scorpius off of him. Scorpius was so intent on doing damage that he tried to kick the curled up Kian before Neville pulled him out of range.

"Never talk about my family! Do you hear!" Scorpius yelled. He began to struggle against the arms holding him but Neville held him firm. Not being able to move Scorpius finally collapsed, sobbing miserably. Neville held him while he wept.

Neville glanced up at the other students. "You two, get Kian to the Hospital Wing, and you two, go back to The Cellar, detention with me Friday night, no arguments. Twenty points from both Hufflepuff and Slytherin for fighting, I don't care who started it. Now go!"

Rose and Albus left in the opposite direction from the Slytherins, headed back to the Hufflepuff common room in silence.

"You know," Rose commented, "he was right."

Albus sent a confused look her way, "what?"

"Scorpius."

Albus was even more amazed; he had to hear what Rose was admitting Scorpius was right about. "Go on."

"*Wingardium Leviosa*, my wrist really was too stiff."

Albus rolled his eyes.

They waited in The Cellar for Scorpius for almost an hour before he came through the round door looking better than he had in days.

He gave them a wan smile. "I got us in a bit of a spot, didn't I?"

Albus and Rose sighed in relief. "Are you feeling better?" Rose called.

Scorpius actually smiled, it was tiny but it was there. "Evidently, beating on that pure-blooded git was good therapy."

"You are a pure-blooded git." Rose shot back playfully.

Rose and Scorpius had a nice argument before they all went off to bed, it was nearly two in the morning at that point, but the restoration of Scorpius to them made Albus feel buoyant.

Before they turned out the light, Albus' curiosity got the better of him.

"Scorpius?"

"Yeah?"

"What did you and Professor Longbottom talk about? If I'm not being too nosy."

In the lamplight, Scorpius' smile had a sadness too it, "I've been looking at my situation all wrong, there are worse things that can happen to a family."

Albus thought that was cryptic. "Such as?"

Scorpius held up a hand to close the subject. "If he wants to tell you, he will. It's not my place to repeat it."

Albus was a bit miffed, but he was too happy his friend was back on solid footing for it to last, they said goodnight.

The next day they got some dirty looks from the Hufflepuffs, when everyone saw the missing Topaz's out of the hourglass, but the bruised and battered Kian Kerry and his sidekicks looked worse. Hufflepuff was basically a peace-loving house, but Slytherin had its share of bullies, some larger than the two C's. It was not a good morning to be a snake for those boys!

James and Fred sauntered by with breakfast rolls in their hands. "Finally! I knew he was our kin. Right Fred?"

Fred agreed with mock disgust, "A detention...tsk! The younger generation is going down hill."

"Come off it!" Rose growled. "Like Aunt Ginny and Angel didn't get a flock of owls from Hogwarts on you two the last couple of years."

Fred looked affronted. "I'll have you know, we have not had a detention for the last year and a half!"

James took up the thread effortlessly. "Unlike you violent blokes, we've been good!"

They managed to look innocent, and yet somehow devious at the same time.

Albus grinned, "It's not like we're going to have a hard time of it! It's Uncle Neville we're serving it with! How scary is he? He talks to potted plants."

To his consternation, Albus saw Fred and James exchange a look, one of a shared bad memory.

"What?" Albus demanded.

Fred smirked. "Say hello to Umbridge for us." Then they walked off.

Rose watched them go. "Dolores Jane Umbridge is still in Azkaban, what are they going on about?"

Albus and Scorpius exchanged a worried look.

"I guess we'll find out Friday night," Scorpius concluded.

They arrived at the Arboretum on time Friday evening. They were a little disconcerted when they were told to bring Dragon hide gloves earlier. That feeling grew when Professor Longbottom informed them that they were to wear the Dragon hide aprons and goggles as well.

As they walked up to the fourth tier past his office, he began to explain the task.

"A few years back now, Azkaban needed more security. Since the Dementors were driven off, we had to find a way to make Azkaban just as much of a threat as it used to be. Professor Sprout and I worked on a solution, which was to build a moat around it. You're about to meet the first specimen we produced to populate it."

They arrived in a barren part of the Arboretum, there where no plants growing in this magical enclosure except this one near the back.

It looked like an Herbologist's worst nightmare.

It had tentacles and swirling vines that were black and blue mottled and powerful, there were nasty spined barbs nearly seven inches long all over it, and it moved with laziness of a coiled serpent.

Neville smiled as if looking at a favoured child. "Lady and gentlemen meet, The Umbridge Weed."

They were all aghast. Conner spoke up first. "You seriously cannot be contemplating sending us in there with that monster!"

Neville looked insulted. "Umbridge is not a monster, she's really quite sweet, for a hybrid between a Venomous Tentacula and Devil's Snare." Suddenly there was a smack as one of the vines slapped against enclosure glass. Neville snapped his finger. "Oh yes, thanks Dolores, she has a bit of Whomping Willow as well. Can't believe I forgot that. Sorry!"

They all exchanged white-faced looks, as Neville cooed and called to the plant, it seemed to respond to his voice, and calmed somewhat.

"Right!" he said. He pointed to a rack of broad swords over on the wall inside the enclosure. "She needs to be pruned on occasion, at least twice a month, the trick is for one person to distract her, another to cut the tips, then another to rescue that one afterwards, every vine needs to be cut to the same length, it should take you an hour or two. Slytherins, take the left side, Hufflepuffs on the right. If you get stung, I'll be in my office with some antidote, the amount's not unlimited, and it takes twelve hours to brew, so try dodging. Have fun!"

He turned and left them there.

Two and a half hours later, they wandered back into The Cellar. Gas was learning something called Poker from Cormac by the fireplace, and asking why the cards didn't explode, when they looked up. Noticing the scratched, dazed and dirty state of the three, Gas called out, "So, How was detention?"

Scorpius was the first to reply, "I finally found something more terrible than staying at Aunt Daphne's, and Aunt Mike's"

Rose and Albus shuddered at the memory.

As the three sat at a table with a sigh, an elf named Gerty apparated in from the kitchen, happily plying them with pumpkin juice from the cooler. She had seen them pass through earlier and thought they could use some. They smiled gratefully, pleasing her to no end before she popped out.

They sipped in silence, Albus and Rose exchanged a look.

"We've got some news for you Mal-Boy." Albus began.

"You nutters are staying the Holiday with me instead of going home to your families where you belong, obviously," Scorpius stated resignedly. "I suppose I can't change your mind."

Rose crinkled her nose cutely, "Scorpius, dear, when have you ever changed my mind?"

They sniggered.

The next day, the list for those staying over the holiday was passed around. It had all three of their names on it.

Chapter 21: Regret and Rumination

Albus thought he knew what the repercussions of his decision would be, but in the next few days after he and Rose signed the Hols' list were eventful.

The flock of owls began immediately when Rose got a Howler from her dad courtesy of her family's owl Crooky. After the hastily cast *Muffliato* wore off she was near tears. "Well it seems that dad isn't pleased." They looked up to see an official ministry owl coming, Albus saw Rose flinch probably thinking it was a Howler from her mum, but to their relief it was just a letter. Rose was so happy she fed the lucky owl an entire sausage while she read it and passed it down so Scorpius and Albus could see.

Dearest Rosie,

I apologize for not catching your dad before he sent a Howler; I assume it arrived shortly before this owl. Your Father's temperamental and thoughtless at times, you know this, but passionate people are like that. He loves you Rosie, you know that he would do anything for you, but

because of that he cannot imagine a Holiday without his girl. I could not get through to him, so I appealed to a higher authority to intervene. Grandma Weasley. I know that I'm just not good at Howlers, and having been at ground zero when Ron received one from her in the past, I felt she would be better suited.

His apologies should be arriving shortly.

I am proud of you Rosie for valuing friendship to this extent. I will not say that we won't miss you. The whole family will. You've already heard from your dad, and Hugo is currently planning a protest of Hogwarts Holiday Policy. Do send him an owl please. If he stages another hunger strike at Gram and Grand Weasley's I don't think I could live down the embarrassment.

We will send along your presents, give Albus and Scorpius my love.

Love,

Your Mum

Rosie rolled her eyes at that last bit when Scorpius and Albus sniggered. Scorpius looked at her expectantly, until she snapped, "What?" He gave her a straight face. "Well aren't you going to give us your mum's love?" As Albus and Scorpius laughed, she menacingly pulled out her wand. Another Ministry owl, this one with a sincere and heartfelt "sorry I lost my temper" from her dad, interrupted them.

Albus didn't receive a Howler, but they both received a parade of concerned cousins asking if they were sure they were staying.

James, however, seemed delighted. "What do you think you are doing?" Albus heard his brother ask pleasantly from across the corridor as he Rose and Scorpius headed to Transfiguration.

Albus sighed and turned, "What?" James smiled benevolently, "You know what!" Albus gave him a heated glare. "My deciding to stay at Hogwarts for the holiday, is none of your concern," he declared. James teased, "I guess Ickle Albykins just needs to be special, as usual!" "Shut it!" Albus grumbled.

Dominique walked up from behind, catching the tail end of the conversation. "Now that's out of line James. Albus does his own thing, that's just Albus, he hates attention. You know that." James rolled his eyes, "If baby boy wants to stay the Hols', he'll get no argument from me. It just means I can eat his food and have access to his presents before he gets them. Happy Christmas little brother." He waved happily and slipped off down a side corridor whistling a merry tune. Dominique smiled apologetically. "Sorry about that. He has been less insufferable lately. I can't say I'm not going to miss you guys though." She gave them a hug before she followed James.

When they turned back to Scorpius, was standing there with his cold emotionless barrier back up. "I'm the cause of this," he murmured, "this is all my fault." Albus faked a weary sigh. "Is Mal-Boy being dramatic again?" Rose rolled her eyes comically. "You have to expect the next dark lord to be a bit broody, but still."

Scorpius shot them a dirty look but it was ruined by the small smile.

However as Christmas neared and students began getting restless and making plans, Albus began having second thoughts.

Christmas was a family event for the Potters. He got to see all of his wacky extended family on that day, not just the Weasleys.

Rolf and Luna Scamander were international travellers, with stories of countless countries and searches for once-thought mythical magical creatures, but they kept a secret that only those close to them knew. The secret to their success writing about magical creatures, was that Rolf was one, but between Teddy Lupin's full moon mood swings, and Uncle Bill's taste for extremely rare meat, the tall glasses-wearing rough-hewn Rolf wasn't all that much of a novelty among the Weasleys. In spite of their eccentricities, they were just family. The Scamander's would bring over their two little hellions, to the Burrow from just over the rise through the orchard. Those two little twins made James and Fred look tame! Albus had often wondered if they got a bit of werewolf in them from Rolf. Hogwarts was in for it in four years! In spite of the chaos surrounding them, it was sweet to see Aunt Looney and her husband interact, you could just see that they were gone on each other. Apparent even when one was fishing Lorcan out of the sink of dishwater, and the other was coaxing Lysander down from the lighting fixtures.

Uncle Neville and sweet Aunt Hannah would show up with the best libations she could get her hands on, which considering her business, was impressive. She had proven to be a talented caretaker of The Leaky Cauldron turning the once decrepit entrance to Diagon Alley to a reputable destination in and of itself, written up as a four-cauldron establishment in *The Travelling Warlock*. She had expanded its clientele to families, offering fine dining and top-notch accommodations, with easy access to the most prestigious collection of shops in wizard England. The Longbottoms, who were told they couldn't have children early on in their marriage, had made up for it by being successful in all of their endeavours, and by adopting the Potter/Weasley children as their own.

The settings for these Holiday get-togethers varied between three places.

Number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Albus' home, had a Wing of Requirement and automatic extension charms on every room. The Blacks who built it were paranoid, and believed there was going to be a war between Muggles and Wizards. They were building an abode to accommodate all the purebloods to insure the great families survived. The only thing they accomplished, all these years later, was to allow the biggest blood-traitor family in modern times, to visit and be accommodated in comfort. Only Kreacher knew how many bedrooms and lavatories the disappearing/reappearing wing could create, when he went up there to dust, he was gone a while.

Blackbriar Manor, the Prewett ancestral home, was another gathering place. It was given to Rose's parents, by Albus' grandparents, because of the growing need for space. To her husband's delight, Aunt Hermoine had turned Great-Great Aunt Muriel's bastion of Pure Blooded ideals, into a way station for Elves who had been relieved or left their pure blooded, abusive families and needed help learning to function in a society as equals. There was always a large colony there on the grounds, and plenty of staff for upkeep, well paid of course. The cavernous banquet hall was perfect for when the Weasleys visited, including an elf-sized table for the favoured guests. Albus had some very fond memories of that sprawling estate over the years, which included a large replica of Stonehenge in the centre of a moving hedge maze.

The Burrow was where the family was going to be this Christmas, and Albus and Rose wasn't going to be there for the first time in their lives. He knew staying with Scorpius was the right thing to do, he had no doubt about that, but he was feeling a bit homesick.

It was the day of the last of their classes, and most were inside packing and getting ready. Rose, Albus and Scorpius had little to do so they took a walk on the battlements. It was from there they had first seen a strange shiny black carriage arrive, and two creepy looking men

disembarked and went into Hogwarts. They left later carrying a long slender box quite like a coffin between them. "Looks like even Hemophilias is going home for the holidays," Rose remarked. Albus quipped, "I'd hate to see what those family banquets look like." Scorpius sniggered. "You wouldn't survive the R.S.V.P!"

"What does your Christmas look like Scorpius?" Albus asked.

Scorpius got a distant look on his face. "Well we sleep late, have tea at home, then all go to Malfoy Manor for dinner and sit at a table so long that we have to use *Sonorous* Charms to hear each other. Grandfather makes a snide remark about my mum, and insinuates she is not fit to be a Malfoy, Dad responds with some well-placed snark. We open presents and bicker. Have coffee afterwards and bicker some more. I hug Grandfather and thank him for my expensive but inappropriate presents that I won't be able to use until I'm 50. Then we go home, and Dad talks Mum out of the liquor cabinet long enough for us to sit by the fire and open our presents from Grandmother, then Dad and I have a talk while mum snores and sleeps off the Cognac. I'm going to miss that." Scorpius sighed sadly.

Albus was horrified, but he kept it to himself. Rose was staring off toward the twinkling lights of Hogsmeade red-faced from trying not to comment, Albus was proud of her.

Scorpius turned the tables. "So what's your Christmas' like?"

Rose took the opportunity to say something different from what was running through her head. "Me, and Hugo my brother get woke up by dad in a Father Christmas costume, honestly the man is a child sometimes, and he's way too thin for it and he looks like a candy staff with all that red and white." She smiled fondly at the memory. "Then we go to my Muggle grandparent's first, then Mum and Dad argue over what to bring to the Weasleys, since Mum is an abysmal cook. We usually grab something from a Muggle market and pass it off."

Albus picked up the topic. "I usually get woke up by James doing something horrid to me. I don't know why Mum and Dad don't get suspicious when he volunteers to get me up! Lils usually wants a carry down, three flights of stairs and she's getting heavy now! Kreacher makes his Rainbow Flaming Pudding for lunch along with the traditional sides, between him and the Burrow we get stuffed Christmas Day, I tell you! We can't tell him no-thanks though, he's a dear old elf and we love him like family. James usually passes off some sort of gag gift for one of us, last year it was Lils. We took her to the Burrow looking like a turnip. James gets punished on Christmas so often I don't think he's ever tasted Grandma Molly's Treacle Tart! We all sit around the table, leaving one seat empty between Uncle George and Percy..."

Rose butted in, "Uncle George gives his traditional toast." Albus and Rose recited it together.

For those we love who are still here,

We pledge our love, and give three cheers,

For those we love, who cannot be,

We give a salute to these three,

The Potters, The Lupins and Sirius too,

And to my fine brother Fred,

Ears to you!

As Albus and Rose concluded, they mimed taking off their ear and holding it up. Scorpius was amused. "What on earth does that mean?" They exchanged a look. "Wait until you meet Uncle George, you'll see." Scorpius looked pensive. "Do you think your family would accept a Malfoy visiting?" Albus and Rose gave him incredulous looks. They were saved from commenting when Albus spotted a familiar broad wingspan approaching through the moonlit night. He held out his arm for Nox to perch on. Accepted the letter and sent the tired bird to the Owlery.

It was from his dad.

Dear Albus,

I know you're probably homesick with everyone leaving. You also might even be regretting your decision to stay at Hogwarts.

What I have to say may be a surprise.

I am proud of you for staying. I'll miss my boy, but I stayed most of my Christmases at Hogwarts and I remembered how much it meant to me when Ron, Hermione, and the Weasleys stayed behind with me. I've often thought that Grandma and Grandpa Weasley went on a trip that first Holiday just so I wouldn't be alone.

Don't worry about these happenings that have occurred this year, we are still investigating. I would say stay clear of it, but if you've got my blood, I have a hunch you are probably already in the thick. I really don't want to know how far, I don't think I could sleep at night. I have two presents for you that I will send along with a surprise visitor on Christmas Day that should help. I still don't know who leaked Scorpius' Holiday plans to Nita Skeeter, but I won't let that rest either.

I love you son. Stay as safe as you can.

Love,

Dad

Albus kept that letter to himself reading it and re-reading it to give him strength. He watched his cousins leave for the train, and wished them a Happy Christmas and saw James had already left without a word. It was astounding to Albus how much that hurt.

He, Rose and Scorpius kept to themselves for the most part. The empty castle was eerie, and seemed larger than ever. It was encouraging when they found out that Cormac was staying as well.

As they ate their dinner on Christmas Eve Albus noticed, that not only was Kian Kerry and Cameron Zabala staying, but also down on the end, quietly eating by himself, was Liam Donovan.

Chapter 22: A Christmas Tale

Albus opened his eyes on Christmas morning.

Something had awakened him. There was a sound down at the foot of his bed. It was someone grumbling. He knew that grumble.

"Kreacher?" he inquired as he turned up the lamp beside his bed.

"Yes Master Albus, Kreacher is sorry he has awakened you."

Albus rubbed his eyes, and looked. There was the elderly elf dressed in a red robe with white trim, a fake white beard that matched the tuft of hair sprouting from his bat-like ears, with a red hat perched between them with a white ball on the peak. Albus tried not to laugh, but he had to snigger. The old elf gave him a tolerant stare. "Don't make fun, young master, this was Mistress Lily's idea, Kreacher is just doing as he has been bidden."

Albus smiled, he leaned over and gave the elf a light hug. He knew the old fellow suffered enough tight hugs from his younger sister. He usually heard coming from her bedroom in the morning, "Now Mistress Lily, old Kreacher is an elf, not a teddy."

"I'm glad you're here," Albus said with a smile.

Kreacher gave him a reproachful look. "Now Master Albus, Kreacher has cooked Christmas dinner for you all the years of your life, as long as Kreacher is around, he is going to do so."

"Wha...Whaz dat?" came the mumble from the next bed. Scorpius sat up and looked over on Albus' bed. "Father Christmas?" he said still groggy from sleep.

Albus chuckled, "No, just a friend from home. Kreacher meet Scorpius."

Scorpius waved as he yawned, swung his legs over the side and tried to wake up.

"Kreacher is pleased to meet a member of the Malfoy clan, fine pure-blooded folks they are," Kreacher said bowing to Scorpius. Scorpius shot Albus a curious look. Albus just shrugged, Kreacher had been spouting things like that as long as he remembered. The elf was properly respectful when around muggleborns, but he still acknowledged blood status more often than not. Albus' dad just shrugged and let it go, so Albus followed suit. Kreacher always had a special spot in his heart for Albus, and Albus for him, although sometimes the old fellow got confused and called Albus, Regulus.

Kreacher reached into the sack he had over his bony shoulder and pulled out some presents for Albus. Scorpius already had a pile on his bed but he was ignoring them in favour of watching Albus open his.

The Weasley clan had gotten so large over the years that the Aunts and Uncles would pick families out of a hat, except for the year Uncle George provided the hat and the names vanished. The limit was one family per Uncle and Aunt. This year the Potter kids were picked by Uncle Percy and Audrey.

Albus unwrapped that one first.

It turned out to be a ministry approved Quidditch safety book called, *Don't Use Your Head As A Beater Bat. And Other Quidditch No No's* By Injurdius Head.

Albus and Scorpius smirked, and he tossed the book to the side, and tore into a box from his grandparents, which turned out to have two packets in it. One of them was for Scorpius.

He held it out to his friend. Scorpius took it tentatively like it might bite. Albus knew what was in it, having received an owl from his grandmother about it, but he watched his friend's reaction eagerly. Scorpius tore away the wrapping paper, and held up a black knitted jumper with a silver S on the front. Albus tore his open and pulled out his Emerald green one with the white letter A. "What is this?" Scorpius asked carefully. "My Gram read the article about you being at Hogwarts for the holidays, and she was upset for you, so she owled me and asked what colour it should be. I remembered Victoire commenting that you looked good in black, Rose suggested the silver letter," Albus replied. Scorpius held it in his hands looking at it with an odd expression on his face. "This is hand made?" he ventured. Albus shrugged, "She hand makes all of them, every year. All the grandchildren get one, and so does Teddy, well I guess he might as well be a grandkid." Scorpius' forehead wrinkled as he tried to wrap his brain around the concept. "So your Grandmum sat down and knitted me a jumper from scratch?" Albus sighed, "Yeah! Come on Scorpius, its no big deal." Scorpius face shut down and became as cold as the winter outside. Albus didn't take it personal, but he wondered at what his friend was feeling the need to hide. Scorpius finally said, "No one has ever hand made anything for me before. It just takes some getting used too." Albus gleefully held up a large packet from the same box, "Well you can get used to homemade, by helping me with these cookies later." Scorpius smiled, "That's a deal."

They tore into the rest of the packages. Albus got some socks from his mum, which caused him to roll his eyes and toss them onto the Quidditch safety book. Scorpius got some signed memorabilia from several Quidditch teams, which Albus was impressed by, but he yawned over. He got a gift from his Great Aunt Andromeda, and Teddy, it turned out to be Norwegian Ridgeback bracers for his forearms to match his Seeker gloves. The attached note said:

Dear Scorpius,

If you ever find a need to slide down a ring pole again, these might help make that less painful.

Love,

Aunt Andy and Teddy

Scorpius got another book, this one from Rose. *I'm right, and You're wrong. Learning to Accept this Fact* by Hermione Granger-Weasley. Albus chuckled. "That's one of my Aunt's books." Scorpius grinned, "One of them?" Albus sniggered. "She has published 24 by my last count." Scorpius read a page then put it to the side, "I've actually read her Hogwarts memoir but I wasn't aware she had written anything more."

Albus stared at him trying to detect if he was kidding, but failed to detect any sarcasm. *A Malfoy read Aunt Hermoine's Hogwarts memoir?* He thought. *I wonder how his Grandfather felt about that?*

He suddenly remembered his father's letter. "Kreacher, was there another gift from Dad?" Kreacher smiled warmly, "I was wondering when you'd get to that Master Albus. There is indeed." He pulled one last wrapped box out of his bag. "I brought this in person at his request."

Albus exchanged a look with Scorpius, then unwrapped the box, and pulled off the lid.

Inside was a book, *Paranoia Justified: The Diaries of Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody* by Orion Cody. It was navy blue, with embossed gold lettering. Albus looked inside the cover and saw it was a first edition copy. It had a hand-written note inside.

Dear Harry,

Thanks for letting me put this together. Mad-Eye was an idol of mine. Anytime you find yourself in States in general, Texas, in particular, let me know. I'll introduce you to the wonders of American BBQ.

Your compadre,

Orion

A letter fell out with Albus' name on it. Albus opened it eagerly; Scorpius came over to read it over his shoulder.

Dear Albus,

This book is the most important book in my collection. I never got a chance to learn very much from the real Mad-Eye Moody, so when his estate was settled and all of his personal papers was turned over to the Auror's Office, I was overjoyed. I wanted to use them as a training tool, but I'm not much of a writer, and I knew of a man in America who Moody mentioned in his letters as a protégé' of sorts, so I asked him to assemble these letters into a book form for me. We exchanged quite a few letters before he had a publishable manuscript and I grew to respect him as highly as I do Moody. I now use this book as a reference tool, and in the training of new Auror's. I waited to see which of my children inherited my ability to attract the most unwanted attention. James was my first impulse but then you hit Hogwarts and made up my mind for me. I also included in this box the single most important tool I have ever been given. I was going to give it to James, but then he stole the Marauder's Map out of my desk drawer and decided his own inheritance. This was given to me my first Christmas at Hogwarts, from someone who knew my father. It was given to my father by his father, and now it is yours to pass on when it is time. There is only one in existence; I am pretty much relegated to a desk these days (to your mother's relief) so I no longer have need of it. Teddy turned it down saying it belongs to one of my sons. (You know how I feel about him, but I have to respect his wishes.) I now know he was showing wisdom beyond his years. I am now convinced that it was to be yours all along. I trust you to know its value, and to keep it safe, and to use it to keep you and your friends safe!

Use both of these gifts, son, they are the best I can give you. Trouble will find you, you are my son in that way it seems, there is no need to go seeking it. In this, at least, I am glad you are a Hufflepuff, instead of a Gryffindor.

Love,

Dad

P.S. Don't let your Mum know about this, you are too young to be fatherless!

Albus was hyperventilating. He had to calm down. He felt a little bit sick. *Dad, why did you give it to me?* He thought, desperate that this wasn't happening. Kreacher nodded encouragingly.

Scorpius was in awe, "Is that what I think it is?" Albus didn't trust his voice so he nodded. He reached into the box and pulled out the silvery cloth, smoother than any silk, and impossibly light. He spread it out experimentally over his legs. Sure enough they disappeared.

"Not good," he managed to murmur.

An hour later, Kreacher had already apparated back home, promising to return to make his Rainbow Flaming Pudding for Christmas dinner. Rose was waiting in The Cellar common room wearing her rose colour Weasley jumper with the big red letter R. Albus and Scorpius came out wearing theirs. Albus gave Rose the news about his dad's gift. She had to sit down. "Are you sure it's the Invisibility Cloak?" she squeaked, "the Deathly Hallow Invisibility Cloak?" Albus nodded gravely. He expected her to say, "Why did he give it to you?" Instead she just nodded, and said, "Well at least it's in good hands." Albus' jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me? I'm just eleven!" he managed to say. Rose gave him a tolerant stare, "You are the same age as your dad was when got it, or have you forgotten?" Scorpius nudged Albus' shoulder playfully, "You're currently in trouble with a Goblin, Leprechauns, not to mention a random Dark Wizard to-be-named-later. I'd say your dad's not too far off in thinking you might need to disappear!" Rose sniggered, "Scorpius, you just agreed with me. I see you're already reading the book I gave you." Scorpius snorted, "Purely a coincidence. Don't hold your breath sweetheart!"

And they're off! Albus thought as the bickering began. He didn't mind it took his mind off of what was now stowed in his locker.

Cormac had been awakened by Kreacher apparating out, so he joined them as they went to breakfast. The four large tables were gone, and one long table was left. Liam was already present, eating by himself on the end away from the others. They settled in, but before they could dig in there was a voice interrupting them.

"I see Scorpius is joining the Weasley's since his own family won't have him." Kian Kerry settled in beside them with Cameron looming behind him to back up his threat. "Nice jumper Malfoy."

Albus didn't want a fight so he mumbled to Rose, "Just ignore him and he'll go away, we don't want a fight on Christmas." Scorpius wasn't responding so Kian, bolstered by the absence of older Weasley relatives, turned to the person most likely to respond to his ribbing. "So, Rose, is that mudblood mum of yours visiting the muggles? She might impress some people, but she'll always be a mongrel. It's like my dad says, even a mutt can learn a good trick on occasion."

Rose turned pleading eyes to Albus. Albus was just as furious as she was, so he did the worst he could do to Kian, he turned Rose loose.

Getting the go-ahead she turned and smiled at Kian, causing the arrogant boy to look concerned. "Kian, luv, Albus and I are here voluntarily. Scorpius was asked to stay at Hogwarts to spare him family drama, why are you here, pray tell? The scuttlebutt around the Wizengamot, is that Krystoff Kerry's secretary came back from a long business trip with him, sporting expensive spell enhancements to her figure that would put your eye out. So are you stuck here because dear old dad is working on future ex-Missus Kerry number three as we speak?"

Scorpius and Albus both winced. When Rose Caroline Weasley went for the jugular, she was merciless!

Kian was so furious he was nearly purple. "Cameron here, is going to put you in the Hospital Wing for that!" he spat out his voice quavering.

Albus realized that the situation was getting out of hand. Cameron was very large for a first year, and the smile that was plastered on his face showed that he wasn't opposed to doing Kian's dirty work. The only way to get the big boy to back down was to show him that he wasn't the strongest person at this table. Albus had a moment of inspiration.

"Cormac? Would you mind showing Cameron the proper way to intimidate someone?"

Cormac smiled. He realized what Albus wanted from him. He looked around for a professor. Seeing no one near he reached down under Scorpius' heavy wooden chair, and with one arm raised Scorpius and the chair off of the ground with a ridiculous ease.

Cameron went pale, Kian, was even more shocked. "W-what are you?" he stammered.

Cormac smirked. "I'm wiry," he remarked rolling the r in a bored tone.

Cameron and Kian decided to eat brunch elsewhere. Albus was fairly certain they wouldn't be dealing with any more attempts at intimidation.

"Wiry?" Rose commented with the same accent, as soon as the Slytherins left. They all had a laugh.

They finished brunch and roamed around outside Hogwarts. Albus thought about trying out the cloak but he was still too intimidated by it. They went out on the grounds and visited Hagrid, who was nursing a Unicorn foal back to health. Rose was the only one who was able to pet it, but they all took turns feeding it a carrot.

They visited with the Krums on their ship, and were pleasantly surprised to find that Violet and Valencia were staying with them over the holiday.

They went back out and made a large snow castle just beyond Dumbledore's tomb, and had an impromptu snowball fight near the "Defenders Of Hogwarts" obelisk.

They came back inside with runny noses, nearly snow-blind but happy. Albus had moments of homesickness, but every time he saw the happiness on Scorpius' face he felt the warmth that comes from knowing you've done the best thing you could do. He could see from the way Rose laughed and threw herself into all of the activities, that she felt the same sense of rightness.

They stayed in The Cellar warming by the fire until Gerty the elf popped in and let them know that dinner was ready.

Shacklebolt, Bast, Flint, Peekes, Growltooth, Hagrid, the Krums and the sisters, Madam Pomphrey, seven students from Gryffindor, six from Ravenclaw, four from Slytherin, and five older Hufflepuffs all showed up for the dinner.

The elves dimmed the lights as Kreacher brought in his Flaming Pudding. Even the Slytherins were wide-eyed at the myriad of colours the Pudding was putting off. The Christmas goose was apparated in with all the trimmings. Soon the table was full of food of every size shape and aroma. The elves accepted the thanks and began to head back to the kitchen when Shacklebolt stood.

"Where do you think you are all going?" he asked in his resonating voice.

The elves paused, an older one with a long beard asked. "Is there something we did not provide for sir? Sir has but to ask."

Shacklebolt smiled warmly, "You did not prepare yourselves to join us." The elves all blinked, not sure what he meant. Then Shacklebolt offered them seats at the table. They all came over nervously and found a seat for themselves but they didn't partake at first, then it sank in that they were invited and they began to tuck in along with the students and professors.

Kreacher came and sat with Albus. Albus was in for a pleasant surprise when he saw the two elves that were accompanying him.

One was a sweet little female elf with big blue eyes and long lashes. She had bows on both her ears and wore a pretty little dress. She spoke in a soft voice. The other was wearing a rubber apron, had goggles forgotten on his forehead, and long rubber gloves that reached his elbows. He also looked a bit singed.

"Sweedy and Dinky!" Rose called, delighted.

Sweedy curtsied. "How is young miss? Sweedy has not seen her at the shop for sometime." Sweedy was the top salesman in Uncle George's Diagon Alley shop. Albus knew from experience that the pretty little elf could turn a disgruntled customer returning a product with a complaint to a happy one merrily leaving the shop with two more bags of merchandise.

Dinky smiled and saluted Albus. Albus had never heard the elf speak, he wasn't sure the little guy could. It was ok with Uncle George though, because the elf was a genius when it came to product development. Dinky had a rare condition found among the house elves. It was called EVPS. Elven Voluntary Punishment Syndrome. It occurred when an elf submitted to punishing themselves for a slight, but found that they actually liked it. Most elves with this condition, were cast out of their households and wound up killing themselves after a year or so of self punishment. Dinky, however, was discovered by Aunt Hermione endangering himself on the streets of London, and brought to the WWW shop by Uncle Ron. Soon the little elf was finding fulfilment trying out the entire WWW product line on himself. Albus knew it bothered Aunt Hermione deeply that the elf was doing this, but she couldn't argue that he seemed to be happy and content. Uncle George gave full credit to his two smallest employees as being the secret to his burgeoning empire, and when elves were given full status as citizens a year or so ago, he didn't hesitate to make them full partners in the business.

Albus introduced them and soon Sweedy had Scorpius looking at a WWW catalogue.

They all found Wizard Crackers by their plates and snapped them, soon they were wearing crazy hats, and sword fighting with toy sabres, Albus added a Sneakoscope and a new pair of Omnioculars. He looked around through them, but then he got too close a view of Growltooth's eating habits and decided to put them aside for later.

Shacklebolt rose and raised his hands for silence. When he had it, he made an announcement. "It has come to my attention that the elves love Quidditch, but cannot attend the games because they can't see over the barriers." There was a chorus of agreeing squeaks. Shacklebolt continued. "Because I believe that the needs of all staff members of Hogwarts should be accommodated, I invite you to go down to the Quidditch Pitch to see your Christmas present."

There was an enthusiastic rush to the Pitch. Albus, Rose and Scorpius went over as well racing each other down. There were squeals of delight from the elves as they saw an elf-sized grandstand located beside the staff grandstand. The elves went up to try it out, and found that the

higher bench seats and the lower barriers allowed them to see the Pitch perfectly. Albus had to smile at their enthusiasm.

Shacklebolt sidled up to them. "Rose, your mother was responsible for this. Her law allowed me to get this past the Board of Directors. You should be very proud of her." Rose actually teared up as she watched the happy little creatures hug each other and talk about favourite Quidditch moments they viewed from a distance. "I am proud," she said with a little choke in her voice. Albus put an arm around her shoulders. Scorpius grinned.

Albus was so energized by the events of the evening that when he got back to The Cellar, he took the cloak out, and leaving Scorpius and Rose behind playing Gobstones with Cormac, he went back out into the school to try it out.

He enjoyed the moonlight and torch lit pathways as he strolled unseen down the hallways, he was startled when the ghostly form of Argus Filch slipped out of the wall right in front of him. He stood still and waited. The silvery white form's eyes swept the hallway passing right over were Albus stood several times. The spectral cat he was carrying looked right at Albus, but then a cackle rang out from up the stairway, and Filch rose up through the ceiling heading toward the distance sound of Peeves.

Albus let out the breath he had been holding; he immediately had to stifle a delighted laugh. "That was brilliant!" he said to himself. It sounded ridiculous to say that out loud, after all this was THE cloak.

He whistled as he walked down another pathway. He felt mischievous, and invincible, he was going to find Growltooth and scare that old goblin good!

He thought he heard the goblin's voice as he crossed the wing that led to Gryffindor Tower.

He slipped down the corridor. Suddenly he heard the goblin right around the corner.

"Dear me. Why are you hanging upside down like that? I seem to remember that I'm supposed to do something about it, but it has escaped me as to what that is at the moment."

Albus gave a start. *He doesn't remember that he set these traps?*

Suddenly Albus heard a familiar bored, and annoyed voice say conversationally, "If you don't let me down immediately, I will have to do something. You won't like it."

He's caught Liam Donovan? What's he doing in this part of the castle? The Ravenclaw tower is located the other way.

Albus made a decision.

He slipped the cloak off and folded it up, placed it inside his robes. He walked around the corner.

Liam turned and saw him first, "Oh it's you Potter. Why am I not surprised?" Growltooth studied Albus with no sign of recognition, "You do look familiar, but I can't place you at the moment. Can you tell me why this boy is hanging upside down?"

Albus found the knotted rope, and he lowered Liam to the ground as gently as possible, the boy still got a bit of a knock. Liam sat on the ground rubbing his forehead where a bruise was forming.

"What are you doing in this part of the castle?" Albus asked. He hoped that since he helped Liam, he might get some answers.

Liam stood up, "That's my business Potter. Keep this creature away from me."

He turned and strolled off.

Growltooth watched him go with a confused expression. "I needed something from him, but I just cannot recall what."

It was an hour later, in the Hospital Wing that Albus finally got an inkling of what was going on. Madam Pomphrey was able to tell from Albus' description that someone had *Confunded* Growltooth. She was able to reverse it rather quickly. The Goblin waved off all of Madam Pomfrey's questions, so she shooed both he and Albus out of the Hospital Wing so she could finish getting snoozled on fire-whiskey spiked eggnog.

Albus was about to walk off in the opposite direction but he had to know. "Do you remember anything? Growltooth?" The Goblin smiled that creepy grin, "That information will cost you Mister Potter." Albus started to storm off in frustration, when Growltooth called after him, "Thank you for rescuing me." Albus paused, "You're welcome."

The Goblin winked unpleasantly. "This doesn't make us even, however."

Albus sighed deeply. "Of course not," he mumbled, "that would be too easy."

Chapter 23: The World Changed

The day after Christmas, they got a surprise visit from Kian Kerry to their table at breakfast.

"I just wanted to say that I am sorry Rose. I was way out of line calling your Mum those names. I didn't really mean it," he remarked as he studied the wood grain on the table just beside her. Rose was flabbergasted, but managed to stammer, "I'm sorry for what I said about your dad. It was way out of line, even if it was true." Albus and Scorpius shot her a look. She just couldn't relent, even to make peace. Kian didn't seem to notice. He just nodded and wandered off.

Albus let out a sigh of relief. "What just happened? Did that little pure-blooded git just apologize?" Rose watched the retreating boy as he walked out of the Great Hall without a backward glance. "I think that's what happened," she murmured.

Scorpius shook his head emphatically. "No, he wasn't being sincere." "How do you know?" Albus remarked. Scorpius seemed to debate something in his head, then said, "You forget I was being groomed for Slytherin. My grandfather told me about their culture. There are

three kinds of Slytherins. One of them is a mastermind. That's what Kian is. He manipulates rather than does the work himself." Albus thought about that. "Then the two C's are what, brutes?" he ventured. Scorpius nodded, "Yeah, they do the heavy lifting, the intimidation, and the bullying." "You said there were three types." Rose reminded him. Scorpius nodded solemnly, "The third type is rare. They have the power to be brutes, but the intelligence to manipulate and mastermind." Scorpius seemed reluctant to tell them, so Albus prodded him. "What are they called?" Scorpius let out a sigh.

"They call them dark lords"

The next few days when Albus wasn't out on the grounds with Rose, Scorpius, or visiting the Krums and the Violent Sisters, he was reading the book his dad sent.

He wasn't sure what to expect, but after reading the first chapter he was hooked. Mad-Eye Moody was not a military genius, he was just someone who went to the far extremes of magic and barely made it back. The foreword read like a novel, but since the book was non-fiction, Albus had to assume everything in the brief biography was true. It seemed that from the time he was a fledgling Auror apprentice, to the night Voldemort put an end to him; Mad-Eye had a hand in the apprehension, detention, or death of nearly every major dark wizard that appeared in the world. He didn't win all of those battles; as a matter of fact he lost a lot more than his eye and leg. By the time of his death he was nearly the only surviving member of the original Order of the Phoenix. The suggestions he gave in his papers were from experience, not from conjecture or supposition. Hard earned lessons that he wanted to pass on -so no one else would suffer the damage he did in fight of good against evil. Included were also pitfalls that he had fallen into, ways of thinking that were flawed and made him in some ways as bad as the people he was trying to stop.

Albus didn't have to get too far into the book before he got his first surprise.

The chapter was called:

The Chivalrous Deathtrap.

The biggest danger to any agent of good, when fighting denizens of evil is the urge of chivalry.

Chivalry is simply the desire to be fair, to give the opponent a chance. It is the desire to show the opposition a superior morality. To show that you are the good guy after all. This urge has killed more 'good guys' than any other force I am aware of.

Here are some hard truths. When you are in a fight, morality is a handicap. When you are facing someone who wants to hurt you or those around you, all the restrictions you place upon yourself will make you a danger -both to yourself or those who you are trying to protect. When someone shows you aggression they are saying, "I don't have your best interest at heart. As a matter of fact, I am here to end you in some way if I can. I will not stop until I am stopped. I will not show quarter. I will cross any boundaries to accomplish my aim." In short they are saying, "It's you or me, and I am biased about the outcome."

This is something you should always keep in mind. They are not your friend at that moment, they are not your family, they are the enemy, they have no mercy for you, so show them none.

My trick is very simple, and will give you the greatest chance at living to see another day.

Cheat. If you are evenly matched, cheat. If they are superior to you cheat, a lot. If they are weaker than you, cheat all the more. More great warriors throughout history have been killed by an inferior opponent getting fortunate, than by any "arch enemy."

The first time Albus read that passage, he looked at the cover to verify what he was reading wasn't written by Salazar Slytherin. The book really was giving him a lot to think about!

He read about the Author, and found that fascinating as well.

Orion Cody is a highly decorated former agent of the Federal Bureau of Arcane Investigations. He has also helped establish an Arcane branch of the U.S. Marshall Service to assist in tracking Wizard fugitives across state lines. In 1973, he was instrumental in ending the Shamanic Uprising in the state of South Dakota before it spilled out into the Muggle world. He met Alastor Moody at an International Magical Law Enforcement Symposium in Paris where Moody was the key note speaker. They began a correspondence that continued up unto Moody's death at the hand's of Lord Voldemort, with the only gap being the year Moody spent imprisoned and impersonated by the undercover Death-Eater, Bartemius Crouch Junior. He has written seven books on the subject of the Dark Arts, and considers this compilation the pinnacle of his writing career. He now is retired and researching Comanche magic on the Texas-New Mexico border for an upcoming book project.

Albus definitely wanted to meet this man someday!

Before Albus, Rose and Scorpius knew it, the school was bustling with students and they were all back into the school year. James came and apologized to Albus for leaving without a word, but Albus could tell there was a threat from Mum motivating him, not true sentiment. As James walked away, Nox -who was delivering a new Quill set for Albus- knocked James on the head with it as he swooped by. James glared angrily at the bird as he rubbed his forehead. Nox glared right back, unrepentant.

"Good bird!" Albus cooed. Then he, Rose and Scorpius all gave Nox all the toast corners he could stomach.

Classes came and went; Albus was steadily improving with his wand work. He still blew things up more often than any other students in class, but he made up for it by taking extra instruction, and by working hard. In Transfiguration they were turning beetles into buttons, and Professor Bast put a live insect down in front of Albus with a wink. Rose and Scorpius tried to be supportive but from the way they flinched, he could tell they were waiting to be showered by bug guts. He took a deep breath, remembered his wand movement and made an attempt. Scorpius and Rose slowly opened their eyes and were relieved to see a button with trembling feelers trying to crawl away. They cheered like he had completely succeeded. The Ravensclaws glared at them, reproachfully, but fellow Hufflepuffs gave him thumbs up. With a little extra effort he had a button by the end of class. Well, a segmented button that had a tendency to crawl, but it looked like a button nonetheless.

The snow began to melt and the Whomping Willow decided to unburden itself, showering any student in the immediate vicinity with slush. Madam Pomfrey was ladleling Pepper-up Potion straight out of the kettle before the week was out she had so many patients.

Albus hated to see the snow melt; he always felt that some of the magic left the world somehow, everytime he saw the first hint of green peeking out on the ground.

On January thirteenth, they celebrated Rose's birthday with all the cousins visiting the Hufflepuff table, and the kitchen elves baked her a cake; one of the newly employed elves had come from the Blackbriar Manor colony the year before and had tipped them off. Just a few weeks later -on February twelfth to be exact- they had a small party for Albus as well. Scorpius smirked and remarked that the Potters and the Granger-Weasleys certainly were close, in a lot of ways. Rose blushed and smacked him on the arm.

It wasn't long before the weather improved enough to allow Quidditch practices to resume. Diana was absolutely driven. Even more so than usual, because Hufflepuff only had one last game to go, after a two game lay-off they would play the last game of the year against Gryffindor. As it stood, the next two games were Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, then the snakes faced the lions.

The day came and Scorpius and Albus went down to the Pitch to root for the eagles to beat the snakes. Rose stayed back at the castle; she wanted to make a run on the library.

The game was a blood bath, and heavily penalized. Both teams knew they were vying for third place, so there was an extra motivation. Victoire never got to pick up her nail file, as she had a lot of action to call.

Eleanor Ferraro, having been scored upon with impunity the previous two games, really put forth an effort to stymie the Slytherin effort. She truthfully only had one threat to worry about, that was Paige Hawkins.

The slender girl with the beak-like nose and the bushy fly-away hair was doing her best, but Ravenclaw Beaters -Isla Pettit and Ashton Gully- were keying on her with that in mind. Every time she got the Quaffle, she was absorbing vicious hits. Albus and Scorpius winced every time she got smacked around. "Why aren't her Beaters helping?" Scorpius demanded. "I don't know." Albus replied. When the other two Slytherin Chasers, Jakob Ackerman or Oliver Huer got the Quaffle, Roq MacNast and Aiden Gallo smacked the Bludgers with evil intent, but Paige seemed to be on her own. Even with blood running down her chin and what looked like -at least to Albus- to be tears streaming down her face, she braved the hits and with a slick double move, scored against Ravenclaw. It was the first score of the game in what was starting to look like a defensive match. Suddenly, the Ravenclaw Chaser line had found their stride. All Max Gates, the Slytherin Keeper, seemed to be was a big barrier; he didn't really possess a lot of skill. Holly Ware did her disappearing, reappearing act several times, scoring at will. Elliot Durnin was relentless, his comically spiked hair and goofy goggles became less of a joke after he scored three times in a row. Jay Usher gained three penalties for his body blocks. Each time Paige took the Quaffle and -without the Bludger barrage to hamper her- Eleanor Ferraro didn't stand a chance. Albus kept hoping that the Slytherins would see how good she was and help, but she continued to take shots, yet still find a way to score. Finally, the painful display was over. Leon Sloan caught a bit of luck and grabbed the Snitch before Lilith Leblanc. No amount of ability could compensate for the fact that sometimes the worst Seeker in the world will literally run into the Snitch and win by sheer dumb luck. The score, however, was tied. After the resulting penalty shots, it all came down to one Quaffle toss. Ironically, it was Paige Hawkins swooping in, she had Eleanor beat, then -showing the form that led her team to the top spot the year before, Eleanor managed to kick a foot out and save it.

As the Ravenclaws celebrated and Victoire called the final score, the Slytherins walked back to the tunnels dejected. More than one glare was shot in Paige's direction by her teammates. Albus and Scorpius shook their heads in disgust.

As they made their way back to the castle, they heard a commotion from the group of Slytherins. Curious, they made their way over.

It was one of the worst things Albus had ever seen in his life. Paige had her head down and was walking back to the castle with Roq MacNast literally shouting at her. "I can't believe I ever let you onto my team! You're nothing but half-blood trash!" he growled. Albus was hoping that Paige would defend herself, but she just kept walking.

As it turned out, she didn't have to defend herself after all.

A voice rang out like a whip crack, "Excuse me?"

Everybody stopped and turned, the sight that greeted them was both glorious and frightening. Victoire Weasley had had enough. Both the Weasley and the Veela were coming out in her.

Her beauty in her anger was almost painful to look at. Her bright strawberry-blonde hair was floating in a breeze that was affecting no one else. Her harsh expression looked like it was carved out of a perfect piece of marble by a master. Her bright-blue eyes sparkled with an airy brightness as she advanced upon the hulking Slytherin Captain. He finally showed some intelligence and backed up a few steps in fear. His brutish cronies had deserted him at "Excuse me?"

The cruel goddess that was Albus' cousin closed the distance between them and got right up into Roq's face. Paige's battle-scared visage showed her bewilderment that someone was actually defending her.

Victoire finally spoke.

"I have sat in that announcer's booth for a while now. I have had a good vantage point to watch your team. It is a travesty. You have promoted and played the biggest bunch of inbred fools ever hatched on this Merlin-forsaken isle, and let languish on your bench one of the best Chasers I have ever seen. My Aunt Angel played Chaser for the Magpies for four years, and my Aunt Ginny for the Harpies for three, I am including them in that number. Paige only got a chance last year because the Sisters did us all a favor and knocked those idiots you had playing Chaser out of the game. You still tried to bench her this year and for what? Blood status? Your House has become a laughing stock. While the other houses get better, yours only gets worse. Have you ever rubbed the two brain cells you have in that colossal skull of yours together and asked yourself why? I'll tell you why. The world has changed and left you pedigreed losers behind. What's in a person's heart, what a person can do with determination and perseverance is what's important now, not who their parents are. If you say one more thing to that brave girl over there, that is not thanking her for gracing your horrible excuse of a Quidditch team with her presence, then we will talk. My boyfriend gave you pustules so bad all over your body, that Madam Pomfrey's first thought was that someone had transfigured you into a giant Bubotuber! He fears me. Think about it."

She backed away from him and turned to the Slytherins watching her with awe. She called out, "If you want your House to be great again, try losing the Mountain Trolls you are using for leadership, and instead pick a halfblood like that girl over there. That way you can be sure that they have at least half a brain."

She walked over to Paige and offered her an arm and began escorting her back to the castle. The girl still looked stunned, but she went along willingly. Dominique, glowing with pride for her big sis, took her other arm. The Weasley cousins all followed suit.

Albus looked back over his shoulder and noticed that while some of Slytherins still looked shocked, others actually looked thoughtful.

Albus said to himself, "So that's why they made her Head Girl."

Scorpius nudged him with his elbow, "I think Teddy's the luckiest guy I know." Albus nodded. Scorpius thought for a second before adding, "He might also be the unluckiest too." Albus murmured, "You may have a point there."

Chapter 24: A Shadow of Doubt

Word of Victoire's rampage spread throughout the school, and Slytherins gave her a wide berth. Dominique, who had always chafed under her sister's persistent shadow, was now voluntarily eating her meals with her on a regular basis. It seemed that hearing her gorgeous, seeming self-absorbed sibling defend someone with such passion healed a rift that had been developing for quite a few years. Albus just wished he could see some redeeming quality in his own brother that would help bridge the gap between them the same way. Alas, James remained James, arrogant prankster, bent on making his little brother's life an up hill pull.

The weeks seemed to go by rather quickly. Classes were beginning to review what had been learned, rather than give out new knowledge.

In Potions Albus was still the top student. He, Rose and Scorpius -more often than not- handed in their assignment at just the right shade, with the correct potency. Flint still studied Albus from time to time, but with a look that Albus was beginning to understand. To Professor Flint, Albus was a fascinating specimen, and a living embodiment of his theories. Now that Albus had realized this agenda, he was no longer bothered by the scrutiny.

Charms was a class in which Albus still had his most trouble. Professor Patil was patient, but very demanding and her rapid-fire teaching style didn't leave much room for someone who struggled. Scorpius was still doing better than Rose, but the gap had narrowed. Albus had not done anymore damage to classroom furniture but he had, on one memorable occasion, learned a simple multiplying charm on a thumbtack that got out of control and caused most of the class to experience a great deal of pain. Rose was picking thumbtacks out of her hair for a week afterwards. Scorpius confided in Albus that three days later, he pulled one out of his left bum cheek after sitting on it and he wasn't sure how he had carried it in his robes for so long. Albus was close to despair as finals were looming; it was April and June was coming on fast.

History of Magic was getting more and more fascinating, and disturbing. Hemophilias didn't seem to follow any curriculum; his ramblings were not always linear. Sometimes they would talk about the distant past and then they would talk about things that happened of significance just a few years ago. Hemophilias' washed out blue eyes never showed emotion as he waxed about things both benign and horrible with equal boredom. One exception was when he referred one day to Grindelwald.

He was talking about the middle part of the twentieth century when he suddenly trailed off. He stared above their heads absently, adjusting the lace at his cuffs. Albus realized that he wasn't seeing anyone in the room at that moment.

"In the nineteen forties, the Dark Lord Grindelwald swept through Eastern Europe like a plague; those who joined him were only marginally safer than those who opposed him. His loyalty was only to himself and his cause, the complete subjugation of all Muggle-kind. To accomplish this, he brought up magiks that hadn't been seen on this earth for hundreds of years. Wraiths, Inferii, Golems, nothing was too dangerous for him. My people tried to stay above the fray, but our homeland was attacked alongside everyone else. Grindelwald promised us he would let us remain neutral, but his word changed from day to day as he became more and more consumed by the darkness he was attempting to harness. In the end, only one man could stop him. You are all very fortunate that he did."

With a small shudder he resumed pacing and lecturing. Albus, Rose, and Scorpius exchanged a quick glance. "That wasn't creepy. Not at all," Scorpius murmured before Rose hissed at him to be quiet, as she furiously took notes.

DADA, however, was dry as a piece of old toast. Being quizzed on the proper margin to keep while running away could not compare with Mad-Eye's musings on distraction and misdirection. Albus had come to consider that book his DADA professor.

Day after day went by, but Albus never lost sight that he was a marked boy, that ancient coin never let him. No matter where he left it, it always wound up in his robes. He told Rose and Scorpius about Growltooth's condition and Liam's behavior on Christmas Eve. It fueled their speculations, but they went in circles leading nowhere. His owls to his dad about the investigation only let him know that it was still ongoing.

Rose and Scorpius were researching on their own, but they didn't turn anything up.

Diana had them practicing every spare moment for their match with Gryffindor. She was convinced that they had to score as many Quaffles as possible to win the House Cup. She despaired of Scorpius ever being able to out-fly a SkyBolt. Albus had to admit she had a point. That point was born out a week later when the Gryffindor/Slytherin match came up.

The Slytherins showed a lot more team work than they did the previous game. Paige got all of the Bludger support she needed and she made Grayson Wood's life miserable, though not as miserable as Dominique and the twins made Max Gates.

The Quaffle slipped through the hoops on the Slytherin side from so many angles that Roq MacNast called a time out and had to escort the confused Max to the ground, drenching the big boy with a *Aguamenti* from his wand to snap him out of it. The game was pretty much a lost cause but Slytherin made a show of it. By the time James rocketed by Sloan to make a brilliant spiraling Snitch catch, it was 230 to 120. Victoire, noticing the better teamwork by

the team in green, made a lofty comment, "I'm glad someone talked some sense into that lot." Albus could see Dominique roll her eyes from the other side of the pitch.

The elves were more enthusiastic than the students. They had increased the volume at the last game a little bit, but at this one there were twice as many in the elf-sized grandstand, most rooting for Gryffindor. After all, Slytherins didn't have a very good history with the elves. Though Albus was feeling despair at the precision the Lions were showing, he had to smile seeing at the joy on their little faces by just being able to participate. He made a vow to owl Aunt Hermione to say thanks on their behalf.

The Hufflepuff team was glum as they made their way back to the castle behind the celebrating red and gold mob, Scorpius in particular.

That night Albus had another disturbing dream.

He was walking through a stand of trees, by a babbling stream in a land of rolling green hills he had never seen before. He stopped in a clearing and sat on a rock beside a place where the water pooled. It was just like his dream the night after his flying lesson. He felt that same disconnection. He studied his face in the reflecting surface feeling a breeze touch his face; it all looked and felt so real.

"Greetings."

He looked up, not as surprised as he felt he should have been. There, sitting on a rock was the same beautiful young lady with the pointed ears he had seen by Cormac's bedside. She had a bare foot dangling absently in the water, but her bright blue-green eyes were boring into his with intensity.

"Do ya have a name fer me?" she asked quietly.

Albus felt strangely calm as he shook his head. She nodded to herself, as if she had expected as much. She stared into the pool a moment then said, "The time's drawing nigh, ya need ta prepare fer it."

"How? How do I do that?" Albus asked, his voice quavering.

She looked back up and met his gaze with a small smile. "Trust yerself, yer instincts; you'll know it when ya get there. Just don' ferget yer oath."

Albus awoke with a start, he shot up in bed. He was hyperventilating. He closed his eyes and tried to calm his nerves. He felt something on his bed with him, with a start he turned on his bed lamp. It was Kublai. The little cat was staring at him with an odd curiosity, the same look it gave the coin the night after had thrown it in the lake and it had shown back up again. The little cat walked up and snuggled next to Albus, lying down. It turned and cracked one sleepy eye in his direction, encouraging him to do the same. Albus realized that his breathing had calmed and his heart was no longer beating against the walls of his chest. He took the cat's unspoken advice, turned out the lamp and laid back down. His hand crept out and gave Kub's ears a scratch, then he fell into a dreamless sleep. When he awoke later that morning the cat was back with Scorpius and napping soundly. Albus reached under his pillow and found the coin he had known was probably going to be there, he studied it, Cormac's mum's words echoed in his ears. "Trust yerself, you'll know..."

"I hope so." Albus murmured to himself.

Albus took Cormac to the side before they left The Cellar for breakfast. He told the small boy about his visitor the night before. Cormac shrugged. "She likes ya," he concluded. Albus started. "What do you mean?" Cormac just smiled and walked off to catch up to Gas. *What does she do when she doesn't like someone?* Albus thought.

That week was the week of the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff match for the Cup. Both houses were wound up about it. The classes they shared with the Gryffindors became ordeals. Callum and Allen were especially bad. That Tuesday night, Scorpius was studying texts on Seeking, trying to find a way to nullify James and his seeming insurmountable advantage. Even going so far as to borrow Albus' *Don't Use Your Head As A Beater Bat...* book. "It's impossible!" he growled in frustration one night in The Cellar common room. He knocked all the books into the floor. "The only way to beat that ruddy red broom, is to make sure it doesn't make it to the pitch!" His voice trailed off a bit. Then he started to look at Albus speculatively, "Albus...?" he began. But Albus cut him off, "You're not borrowing the Cloak to go steal it. Besides, it's in Uncle Neville's office safe behind a Goblin made door." Scorpius slumped in disappointment. Rose shot up; knocking the parchment she had been working on to the floor. "What's this about a safe with a Goblin made door?" Albus shrugged. "It's in Uncle Neville's office, forth floor of the Arboretum. He's got all sorts of things in there; I think its storage for all of the Hogwarts valuables. He's the only one with the combination." Rose got a thoughtful look on her face, the next day she sent off an owl.

Celestina, Rose's owl, startled half the Great Hall with her ear-splitting screech as she swooped in with a letter at dinner. Albus, who was still debating whether or not to mention his dream, couldn't help but notice the triumphant look on her sleepy face.

As she slipped Celestina a bite of her roast beef, she read it. Then she turned it around and slid it over to him. "You might find this interesting," she said as she stroked Celestina's head feathers with her finger, the bird luxuriated in the attention.

Albus read the letter, leaning over a bit so Scorpius could see.

Dear Rose,

I was surprised to receive your letter, you haven't written to your poor old Uncle Bill for sometime. That is a hint by the way! You are correct; Growltooth did work at Gringotts in Diagon Alley. He was a door breaker for vaults 36-112. A door breaker is simply a Goblin who specializes in cracking the combination of vault doors in the event that the Goblin who knew the combination leaves our employ, or is involved in an unfortunate downsizing event. Don't ask, Goblin politics would give you nightmares! Growltooth was well positioned to make his way up the ladder when he made a miscalculation about the connectedness of one of his underlings and got out-maneuvered. Among Goblins, a Goblin that fails to notice a usurper and crush the attempt is considered unfit for his position. This is a fire able offense. I am not surprised he landed on his feet. I have to say among the Goblins I worked with, Growltooth was the one that made me the most nervous.

I hope this information is helpful. Don't be a stranger Rosiekins.

Uncle Bill

Rose smiled as she sent Celestina off to the Owlery. "When you told me where you ran into Liam and Growltooth, and then mentioned the Vault door, I realized that not only is Gryffindor Tower over that way, but if you go down the stairs, so is the Arboretum wing!" Scorpius looked confused, "How do you know this?" Albus confided, "She's memorized the floor plan to Hogwarts." Rose wrinkled her nose cutely. Scorpius pointedly ignored her. "So Liam might have *Imperiused* Growltooth so he could break into the Vault?" Rose nodded. "If Albus' wand was kept in there, maybe so was Liam's. He might have been trying to retrieve it." Albus listened to their speculations about the possible motives of Liam Donovan with half an ear, his instinct was that they were on to something, but he also felt for some reason, they were not quite there yet. "I'm going to send an owl to Mum to see if she can find any records on Liam at the Ministry. Since he attacked Albus, I could mention that we are worried about him, and wanted to know more," Rose ventured. Albus gave her an absentminded nod.

That Thursday, she received an owl from her mum stating that there was a student confidentiality seal on Liam's file. Aunt Hermione had speculated that his past must have some element that needed to be kept anonymous for his protection, but that was all she could find out.

"The only way students would have that stamped on their file is if they are wards of the court that have been taken from their parents for some reason," Rose said as they discussed the subject at dinner. Scorpius shot a glance at the Ravenclaw table where Liam was once again eating by himself. "He's an ideal suspect when you think about it. He has the ability. You of all people know that, Albus. Ravenclaw and Slytherin had flying lessons before us the day of the rogue Bludger attack; he could have put the spells on them then. He doesn't attend Quidditch matches, so he could have been in the tunnel to *Imperius* Cormac and stun Lilith." Rose got excited. "He was there when you found Growltooth confounded, and acted all wibbly when you asked him about it. He fits!"

Albus looked over at the silver-haired boy. It all seemed to fit sure enough, but he still wasn't sure. "But, what is his motive?" Albus concluded. Rose jumped in. "Well you said it yourself. He thinks that he's some sort of budding dark lord and you're his nemesis or something like that." Scorpius nodded. "All of these attacks could have been aimed at you, after all. You were at both Quidditch matches and at the flying class too. Lilith was directly below you when she got hit, that's why you saw her get stunned. From the angle she passed right into your line of sight, which would have placed her between you and the tunnel. It all fits mate!" They stared at him as he mulled it over. "But how did he know about Cormac?" They both groaned like he was being thickheaded. Albus felt his cheeks flush from frustration; he just didn't feel right about this. Rose and Scorpius exchanged a meaningful look. "What?" Albus snapped. "We figured it out, you figured it out, Liam is smart enough, he is in Ravenclaw after all," Rose informed, her tone pleading. "It all fits. Let's tell Uncle Harry, all right, before he tries something at the Quidditch match?"

Albus knew he was being stubborn but he shook his head, "I don't know why, but I just don't think it's Liam." "Are you sure you're not stretching this out because you like playing the imperiled hero?" Rose said exasperated. Albus glared at her, but he noticed that Scorpius' face had shut down and gone cold. He only did that when he didn't want to show what he was thinking. "You agree with her?" Albus demanded. Scorpius gave him calm eyes. "It all fits mate, you know it does, you have no good reason to doubt it." Albus felt betrayed, and angry, "So you are agreeing with her now?" Scorpius shrugged. Albus glared at them both. He got up and walked out. He heard Scorpius murmur to Rose to let him go.

As he walked through the corridors, he tried to get a handle on his feelings. He didn't know why he was defending Liam. It was all there, the motive, the opportunity. Rose and Scorpius were the two smartest students in their class, and they had proven time and again they were smarter than Albus. Albus just couldn't get out of his head the sight of Liam slumping in his chair in Shacklebolt's office after the duel. Albus saw a weary resignation in the boy in that moment, the belief that no one was going to defend him. If he had no parents, that would explain it. He had attacked Albus with no provocation just because he saw Albus react to him like he was dangerous. Why would he show himself as a threat if he was scheming behind the scenes, wouldn't he want to play harmless? Wouldn't he try to blend in the scenery. Stepping out of the background and announcing himself as a threat didn't make sense.

That night he was already in his bed with the coverings pulled by the time that Scorpius came in. Albus didn't know why he was angry, but he wasn't ready to talk just yet.

Friday came and went with Albus giving them both the silent treatment. It was irrational, he knew it, but he just couldn't get over it. Rose tried to get him to talk about it, but Scorpius understood his need for space. Albus felt like a git, he and Rose had never stayed angry at each other for longer than a day, but he wouldn't give in. "Fine! Be that way!" she hissed as she pushed by him after Transfiguration in angry tears. He wanted to follow her out and apologize, but he didn't. "You know you are being a nutter, right?" Scorpius murmured, catching up to him in the hall. Albus sighed, "I know." Scorpius stopped him with a hand on his arm, "Then why are you acting like this?" Albus spun on him. "Because I know that Liam's not the one, and you guys think I'm a glory-hounding Prima Donna, just because I don't agree with you!" Albus blurted out angrily. Scorpius smirked, "Glory hounding Prima Donna? That about covers it." Albus tried to stay angry, but he just couldn't. They started laughing, catching some strange looks from passing students, but they didn't care. After a minute or two of trying to gain their composure Albus, finally wiping tears away from his eyes, managed to say, "I'm sorry you're in the middle of this." Scorpius snorted, "This is a new developement?" They exchanged a smile and went to find Rose.

She finally came to dinner, and she was cold to Albus at first, but she couldn't stay mad for long. Scorpius had wound her up about her "Rosiekins" nickname, and she mentioned that Albus' nickname was Albino, given to him by Aunt Luna. Albus was appalled that she would stoop so low. "He *is* a bit pale." Scorpius remarked as he poked Albus on the arm. "If that's not the ghost calling the banshee white, I don't know what is!" Albus shot back. They merrily ragged each other until bed time, carefully avoiding the Liam Donovan subject. Before they parted in the Common Room though, Albus gave Rose a hug. They didn't speak, but volumes of words were exchanged.

Albus was in for a surprise that morning at Breakfast.

He was buttering an English muffin and chatting with Scorpius about the match when there was a commotion in the Great Hall. Professor Shacklebolt came in leading Albus' dad. Ignoring all the hubbub, they walked up to Albus, Rose and Scorpius. "If you don't mind, you three need to come with me." Shacklebolt said in low tones, leaning in so only they could hear. They got up to follow, the procession passed by the Gryffindor table. James shot his dad and Albus a look. Albus' dad, at his son's unspoken request mouthed, *Later*. James appeared mollified but his eyes narrowed as Albus passed.

They came out into the massive entrance hall. Albus' dad hastily cast muffling charms around them then said, "I wanted you to know we concluded our investigation into all that

is going on this year, and we've made an arrest. We've cast a *Priori Incantantum* on the offender's wand and it revealed all of the spells we suspected. He is being taken to the Auror's office, we're going to question him some more using *Veritaserum*." Albus glanced over at Rose, he saw her flush guiltily. "Was it, Liam Donovan Dad?" Albus inquired casually. His dad nodded gravely, "Don't be mad at Rose, he was a prime suspect anyway, the evidence she sent me was just the capper. I wish you had confided in me earlier, son." Albus took the admonishment in silence, and nodded. His dad reached out and squeezed his shoulder, "Me and your mum will be back by this afternoon to see your Match, I don't know who we will be rooting for yet." He chuckled. As he turned to go Albus called out, 'Dad? Can you counterfeit a *Priori Incantantum*?' His dad paused, "You'd have to be a very talented Wizard with access to the wand in question. Liam's wand has been in the vault when it wasn't in his possession, only your Uncle Neville knows the combination. It's not possible son. Go eat your breakfast." He and Shacklebolt turned and left.

Albus' mind was swirling. As he turned and went back into the Great Hall, ignoring requests for information from his cousins and brother, his thoughts were swirling. *The wand was in the vault, when it wasn't in his possession...You'd have to be a very talented Wizard with access to the Wand...Growltooth was a door breaker at Gringotts...only your Uncle Neville knows the combination...The only way to beat that ruddy red broom, is to make sure it doesn't make it to the pitch!*

For the rest of breakfast, he tried to make sense of what he was feeling. He was feeling it wasn't over, but just beginning.

Trust yerself, yer instincts, you'll know it when ya get there. What are my instincts telling me? It wasn't Liam Donovan. In spite of everything I know it wasn't him. It was a talented Wizard who is capable of long distance spells, and had access to the vault, or at least Imperiused Growltooth to break the door combination, then Confounded him to cover it up. Someone who has been playing harmless this whole time...

It all hit Albus like a fist from the dark. He thought his brain was going to explode with the realization. He was drinking orange juice and wound up spraying Summer Sutherland, who glared at him scathingly.

He spun to Rose and Scorpius. "I need to know right now, do you two trust me?"

They looked at each other. Then Rose seemed to make a decision. "Always," she said.

Albus grinned so wide he thought his face would crack, "Then I need to stop at The Cellar and get my cloak, and we need to go see Uncle Neville.

Liam didn't do this, but I know who did."

Chapter 25: Incendio

After Albus came back to the common room with his cloak stashed under his robes, Rose had some questions waiting for him. He didn't expect her to go along with him blindly, she wouldn't be Rose Weasley if she did.

"Why do we need to go now, why can't we wait or find a way to tell your dad?"

Albus got them moving in the direction of the kitchens before he answered. "We don't have time to tell my dad, they might be breaking into the safe in Uncle Neville's office as we speak."

"Why now, and why?" Rose insisted.

Albus restrained himself from snapping at her, but only just. "When the Mystery Wizard struck, what was the target most often?"

"The team opposing Hufflepuff Quidditch team," Scorpius answered. Rose with her brilliant mind was beginning to catch up, "So you think this person is going to interfere with the Quidditch match this afternoon?" Albus nodded eagerly as he tried to get them to speed up. "What gives Gryffindor the biggest advantage in Quidditch right now?" "The Skybolt!" Rose and Scorpius said together, then seemed discomfited by the duality.

Scorpius cleared his throat uncomfortably, then continued, "So why are we going to see Professor Longbottom?" Albus was silent while they waved at the happy little elves and made their way through the kitchen. As soon as they made the stairway he quickly glanced around then answered, "We are going to see Uncle Neville because he is the only person at Hogwarts right now that has Auror training, and he has to see this person actually break into the vault. The evidence is so good against Liam that they won't believe three students, but they will believe a war hero, especially when he detains the wizard after catching him in the act."

Rose's forehead crinkled as they made their way toward the Arboretum wing. "What happens if we can't find Uncle Neville?" Albus almost paused, in his hurry he never considered that possibility. Scorpius answered, "Well we have the best invisibility cloak ever spelled, remember, and you and I practiced Stunning spells in Dueling Club, we'll sneak up on him and knock him out ourselves."

Rose was so alarmed she stopped. "He's got to be a very powerful Wizard to do the things we suspect him of, we're just first years, we wouldn't stand a chance if we missed or they have a shield spell!" she gasped. "We just can't risk it. Let's find another professor first."

Albus placed a hand on her arm before she could pull them in another direction. He made sure she met his eyes. "We don't know who else is involved, and it might be too late by then, if we don't catch them in the act we can't prove that Liam's innocent. If we don't stop them and they get into that vault and spell the Skybolt, it could hurt James, might even kill him."

Rose looked stunned. "O-okay," she stammered and bit her lip, "we better not miss then. I hope we find Uncle Neville first, though."

They didn't have to travel far because Professor Longbottom came around the next bend, distracted and humming a tune to himself.

They ran up to him and began to talk all at once.

"Whoa, hold on!" he said with a chuckle, "one at a time please, I may have two ears but I use them one at a time."

Rose and Scorpius nodded at Albus and he started to tell Uncle Neville what he suspected, but when he got to the part about the vault, the tall man held a hand up. "The Arboretum is closed today. You're not going in there."

They all three exchanged a look. "Why not?" Scorpius ventured. Albus saw a momentary look of confusion cross his uncle's face, then it was erased by a vacuous smile. "It just is. I am the professor here, remember."

Albus was stunned. Uncle Neville rarely invoked his authority unless it was an emergency. Albus always thought he was rather embarrassed to be in charge of anything, it was his most endearing quality to his students. Something was wrong. He could tell from the way that Rose and Scorpius were staring at the teacher they caught the difference as well.

Neville made a impatient shooing gesture back the way they had come. "I sent everybody out and closed it off. It's going to be a beautiful day outside. You two should be getting ready for your match. Now go on now, off you get."

Albus suddenly realized that Uncle Neville had been *Imperiused*. It was becoming the Mystery Wizard's trademark. Uncle Neville was now just another obstacle to get by. They could expect no help from him. That also meant that the assailant was most likely already in the Arboretum and heading to the vault as they stood there. He felt helpless, he hadn't realized how much he was depending on his uncle until that moment.

"Professor?" Scorpius ventured.

Neville looked impatient, but he answered, "Yes?"

"Remember how your parents can't remember you?" Scorpius said quietly.

Uncle Neville suddenly looked very confused, "Yes. Why?"

Scorpius stared intently into the older man's eyes, it looked as if he was willing his next words to penetrate through the spell. "Someone has messed with your mind too, Professor, they want to hurt James Potter by putting a spell on his broom. We have to stop them, we need you to let us by."

Suddenly Neville Longbottom dropped to his knees holding his head, a cry of anguish came out of his mouth like a howl. He looked up his face damp with sweat from fighting the spell, there was a struggle in his pain-filled red-rimmed eyes, "I can't break it completely, I can only hold it off a minute or so. Go!"

They ran by him, and down the stairs toward the Arboretum. Albus glanced back to see Uncle Neville stand up, glance around as if confused, then he strolled off humming.

They all got under the cloak as they entered the glass enclosure. They carefully made their way past the panorama of plant life, past the different environs. Not able to go as fast and stay hidden, they crept carefully upward, they saw no one until they reached the forth floor.

Looking through the glass door into the office interior Albus saw a large cloaked figure checking a paper in it's hand as it traced a pattern carefully on the door. The clicks of the disengaging locks seemingly echoing loudly in Albus' ears as he realized he had seen that figure before on the ramp when they arrived in Hogsmead, and had caught a glimpse of him in the tunnel when Cormac was *Imperiused*.

This was it. He was about to see the face of the person behind it all. He had a hunch it would be familiar.

Rose tugged his sleeve and drew her wand, Scorpius followed suit, Albus prepared to throw the Cloak back. On a whim he drew his wand as well. They both pointed their wands at the broad back of the dark-robed figure.

Rose nodded and Albus tossed the cloak back.

"*Stupify!*" they bellowed in unison as twin jets of red light streaked toward their target.

The figure was bathed in the red glow and Albus had a moment of elation.

We did it!

The figure didn't fall, it simply straightened up and turned, throwing back it's hood.

"Professor Pharrel?" Scorpius murmured, shock coating his voice.

The man smiled as pleasantly as ever. "Yes, and no."

He crossed the room with a speed that was inhuman and sent Rose flying through the air with a casual backhanded swat. She hit the book case, knocking books down upon herself and a portrait of Neville and Hannah. She hit so hard she cracked the glass wall behind the shelving.

Albus was enraged.

"*Reducto!*" he bellowed as a jet of bright orange left his wand and collided with Professor Pharrel. His sudden hunch that he wasn't dealing with a human was borne out when his spell simply blew the man back across the room into the vault in a cloud of smoke that smelled oddly like burnt wood . Scorpius thinking quickly ran and shut the door before it could regain it's feet.

Albus stuffed the cloak into his robe, and he and Scorpius ran over to Rose. Where she had landed was now a pile of fallen books. "Rose!" Albus hollered as they cleared books away from her face. Her eyelids fluttered weakly. Albus didn't know how hurt she was, but the Goblin made door boomed with an ominous sound of a fist hitting it. The fist made a harder noise than it should have.

"W-we need to get ou-out of here, now." Scorpius stammered his eyes glancing at the door.

They lifted Rose up between them and made their way out. Behind them the booming blows stopped, and a more ominous sound emerged, the clicks of someone opening the vault door from the inside.

"He's going to figure out how to reverse the pattern soon." Scorpius gasped. "We need to get Rose out of here. What is that anyway?"

Rose stirred and mumbled something.

Albus leaned down, "What did you say Rose?"

"Golem," she murmured.

Scorpius went pale, "We are in deep trouble."

Albus was exasperated, "Yeah? I hadn't noticed!"

Scorpius redoubled his efforts to get Rose out of there. Nearly dragging Albus as well.

Albus suddenly realized, they weren't going to make it all the way down with Rose between them. Even if they hid under the cloak there was no telling how long the *Imperiused* Neville was going to keep people away. Possibly long enough for them to be found by that creature. If it was capable of altering Neville's memory it was capable of wiping theirs as well, and fixing it's mess. Liam would be taken to Azkaban, James would be hurt by his broom malfunctioning, and Albus would none the wiser.

Albus suddenly had an idea. It was something that Moody had said in his book.

Ambushes are not only for the forces of evil, they can be salvation to an Auror as well. All you need is a bit of misdirection, and a bigger threat to distract them from. Remember what they can't see can hurt them alot.

Albus stopped, Scorpius nearly pitched forward. He turned on Albus furious, "Are you mental? That thing is going to kill us."

Albus shook his head, "I've got a plan. We can kill it, if you'll help me." Scorpius didn't hesitate, he nodded for Albus to go on.

By the time the ominous shriek of the bent Vault door hinges cleaved the silence, they were ready.

Albus watched from under the cloak muffling Rose's mouth as she murmured facts about golems. It rushed out of the office in a eerie speed. What was passing as Professor Pharrel had a huge chunk missing from his chest where Albus' curse had reduced some of its mass to dust. There was scorched marks around the hole, but blood wasn't coming out, something strange like sap was leaking. Even more frightening was that it was filling in, healing itself bit by bit as he watched. Scorpius suddenly stepped out of a magical enclosure further down the forth floor cupola.

He was carrying a sword, which he swung menacingly. "You know if I was going to be made in the likeness of someone, I think I'd pick someone less hideous," he called mockingly. He

pulled the sword back with a grace that Albus admired, then he extended his other hand and waved the golem to come and get him. With a roar the creature obliged.

It charged down the hallway headlong, but Scorpius didn't flinch. He stood his ground and waited for it. Then at the last moment he flung himself to the side, the golem spun to go after him but Albus threw the cloak back. "*Reducto!*" he roared. Power surged through him fueled by his anger and sense of betrayal. It struck the creature dead center lifting it back through the air and through the permeable wall behind it.

It crawled to its feet immediately and tested the one-way charm wall with an angry fist. It didn't realize that it wasn't the only prisoner until five vicious looking thorny vines snaked out and captured its arms and legs. It made an shocked noise then it was catapulted into the middle of the mass that was Dolores the Umbridge Weed.

Scorpius joined him at the enclosure listening to the impotent roars of the Pharrel-creature as the even more monstrous plant began taking it apart. Scorpius was holding his arm and wincing. Albus was smiling but he noticed his friend wasn't. "What's wrong with you? We beat it!" Albus crowed slapping him on the back. Scorpius let out a small cry of pain, and glowered at him.

"It's not over," he managed.

Albus' heart fell, "What do you mean it's not over?"

Scorpius was chewing his bottom lip, "A golem shares the life-force of it's creator. It can't exist unless there is a source of magic powering it."

Albus was just beginning to understand what he was being told, when he heard a voice echoing from below. "Albus? Albus Potter, why don't you and your friends come on down. We need to have a little talk. I want a chance to explain myself."

Albus walked over to the railing that peered down through open air that separated the levels. There, making his way up, wearing yet another voluminous robe and hood, was Albus could only assume, the real Atticus Pharrel. He glanced up at that moment and his smile sent shivers down Albus' spine. "There you are, dear boy. Come on down, let's discuss this. I have a solution I think we can both be happy with."

Scorpius' face was paler than usual, almost ghastly. "I think I broke my wand arm Albus. I can't help you."

Albus realized that all this year was leading up to this moment. He had to decide.

Scorpius' non-injured arm landed on his shoulder, "You can do this. You're the only one with a chance."

Albus shook his head, "I'm the only one left you mean."

Scorpius was adamantly shaking his head, "No Albus, you're the only one smart enough and cunning enough to have a chance to beat Pharrel. Just treat him like a chess opponent."

Albus sighed. *Farewell normal.*

He handed Scorpius the cloak. "Keep her safe. If I don't win, hide, and try to slip by him, somebody needs to remember so they can warn James." Scorpius nodded gravely.

Albus walked over to the walkway and started down.

As he made his way, Moody's words echoed in his ears.

Cheat. If you are evenly matched, cheat. If they are superior to you cheat, a lot.

Albus reached the midway point between them. He waited for the professor impatiently. He had to time this perfectly.

"You are simply magnificent! I knew if from the moment I saw you step off of the Express. When the dreamer finally awakens, you will be a jewel I can offer him, to show my worthiness." Pharrel spoke with a feverish intensity as he approached. "Too bad you won't remember until it is time for you to do so. I will enjoy shaping you as I have so many for his service thus far."

Albus sneered, "Well you're going to have to duel me first, professor."

Atticus was so shocked stopped and gaped. Then he laughed uproariously. "You, duel me? I am the greatest dueler of all time! Why would I duel a child."

Albus crossed his fingers behind his back. He said a silent prayer that he was pushing the right buttons on this unpredictable man. There was a clock unwinding in his head and he didn't have much time. "I think a first-year can beat a washed up has-been like you. You probably bought those trophies at a rummage sale!"

Atticus growled and his hand flashed faster than Albus could blink sending a jet of red light at Albus. Suddenly it rebounded off of a nimbus of multi-hued energy and shot straight back hitting him in the chest with such a force that he was blown off of his feet backwards, skidding across the tarmac unconscious. Albus slumped in relief. He pulled the Bastille Rose bloom he had plucked on his way down out from behind his back and kissed the flower.

Suddenly he was lifted off of his feet by one tattered, supernaturally strong arm. There was a ragged voice in his ear. "You have caused me trouble little one, I think killing you is the best way to serve my master now. This is going to hurt."

Albus had a surge of terror going through him as the monster began to squeeze the life out of him.

"Put him down, now," came a voice so ferocious and angry that Albus didn't recognize it at first.

The creature spun, and Albus saw his Uncle Neville swaying on his feet. He was drenched in sweat but his eyes were blazing with fury. He had defeated the memory spell but it had cost him a lot to do it. He was weary but the wand he held in his hand was steady.

The golem laughed wheezily, "You can't do it Longbottom. All you have accomplished was arriving in time to watch me kill the boy.

Neville lowered his wand, his tired eyes caught Albus'. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

Albus nodded.

If he thought Pharrel was fast with a wand, he didn't even see Uncle Neville move, but he felt the passing of a spell so powerful it made the side of his face tingle for minutes after wards. It passed close enough to sting his ear. The golem dropped Albus and, he spun out of the way. He turned to see the shredded, headless body search for its head, which had been evaporated by the power of the blast.

Neville strolled purposely past Albus. "Cover your eyes Albus," he commanded. "*Incendio*" he roared.

The flames that came from his wand where so bright that Albus could see the after-image when he obeyed. He shaded his eyes and opened after a minute of silence. The roaring of flames and the bleating of the dying creature ceased. He saw his Uncle Neville poking a pile of black dust and ashes with his wand. He glanced up nervously at Albus. "I am so sorry you had to see that. I don't let that side of myself out very often."

Albus heard the apologia in his Uncle's voice, he wanted to let him know that there was nothing to be sorry for. He still respected his Uncle as much as he ever had, maybe even more so.

Uncle Neville finished his prodding and looked up warily. Albus smiled and pointed, "Missed a bit."

Uncle Neville grinned when he saw a small wooden finger trying to crawl away. Albus pointed his wand and with one last *Reducto* the golem was finally gone.

Chapter 26: Mal-Adjusted

Albus and Scorpius waited impatiently outside the Headmaster's office as Albus' story was being discussed.

It had been two hours since his Uncle Neville had arrived to save Albus, and had floored out with the still unconscious dark wizard from Shacklebolt's office. Shortly thereafter, his dad secured Pharrel in an Anti-Apparition holding cell at the Aurors office, and upon Neville Longbottom's testimony, he had released Liam Donovan back to Hogwarts with his sincerest apologies. Albus wasn't sure he read the pale boy right but he was almost sure Liam looked disappointed to be exonerated.

Scorpius had arrived from the hospital wing halfway through and was able to add some details that Albus missed. His arm wasn't broken, just cracked; it only took a wave of Madam Pomfrey's wand to make it as good as new. Rose turned out to not be as bad as they feared, she was saved by the books in the shelves she collided with. The irony wasn't lost on Albus. She was down in the hospital wing, alert and already arguing with her mum and father about how long she should stay.

Albus' mum had arrived with Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron and had insisted that she be included as Albus gave his account. Albus had related everything that had happened during that winter to his Father, Mother and Professor Shacklebolt and a weary-looking Uncle Neville, trying not to notice the we-will-discuss-this-later look his mum was giving his dad. His dad may be the Head of the Aurors, savior of wizard kind, and one of the most influential personages in the magic sub-culture, but he was also the husband of a Weasley woman, and as such he had a higher power to answer to. Albus could see his dad sink lower and lower under her furious gaze as Albus mentioned the Invisibility Cloak and Moody's diary, and how they came to be in his possession.

However after he was finished, Albus' dad asked him and Scorpius to wait outside for a bit. Albus was fidgeting as Scorpius leaned against a pillar and looked bored. Suddenly Albus remembered a little item he had brought with him to Hogwarts. He searched his pockets for something he had put there when he made the mad dash for the cloak earlier. He noticed the ancient coin was missing, then he found what he was looking for and brought out two fleshy little objects that looked like ears attached by an extendable cord. Scorpius eyed him curiously as he placed one end on the door where it was held fast by a sticking charm, and held the other one to his ear.

"What are you doing?" came the demand from behind them, rising up the moving stone stairs. Albus flinched and spun guiltily until he saw Rose's bushy auburn hair. She looked a little worse for wear with a big bruise on her right cheek and her arm in a sling.

"What are you doing up?" Albus shot back. She shrugged, "Mum and Dad are still out in the corridor arguing about where I got my hero streak from. I snuck out while Madam Pomfrey refereed."

Albus snorted and leaned back to his task, trying to find a way to penetrate the thick door. Snape's voice was heard those months ago they first visited this office, but his parents and Shacklebolt were now talking in low tones, and Albus couldn't quite make it out.

Rose came up behind him. "Are those Extendible Ears? They'll never get through that crack under the door!" Albus gave her a patient look before he bent back to his task. "These are the Dinky-made 5.0 model ears. You know him; he always goes to the extreme. These are too strong and loud to listen in directly, but they'll work through solid stone fine. George gave them to me so I can hear James and Fred plotting against me when he visits; it's the only way I get to sleep when they're both at Grimmauld."

She waited a moment as he tried to find a good spot fruitlessly. "Here let me." Rose insisted. Albus moved and let her try.

Scorpius looked amused. "I'm going to get into trouble if I hang around you lot."

Albus sniggered. "Worried about your reputation?"

Scorpius shrugged. "I'm supposed to be the spawn of dark wizards and you guys know more about breaking rules than me!"

Rose gave him a scathing look. "Don't be insulting, now come over here so you can eavesdrop."

The sticking charm kept the listening ear stuck to the weak spot she found while she held the receiving ear between them, the voices came through clear. She smirked at Albus and he stuck out his tongue at her. Scorpius pushed away from the wall and walked over. They all listened in silence.

"Let's try to review here," came Albus' mum's voice, "my eleven year old little boy, my niece and their friend stopped a golem and a dark wizard by themselves?"

"It would appear that your son has inherited his father's inability to be anywhere near a dark wizard without running afoul of them." came Dumbledore's voice with a chuckle.

"Ow!" came his father's voice after a meaty thud, "what was that for?"

"You know!" his mum hissed.

Shacklebolt interrupted his father's come-uppance by clearing his throat. "The thing that intrigues me the most is that your son picked out Atticus Pott's weakness instinctually. Atticus, for all his ability, isn't a battlefield wizard, he was trained to strike first, not to anticipate the first move."

Rose and Scorpius glanced at Albus. He shrugged like he didn't know what Professor Shacklebolt was going on about. He was sure his flushed cheeks gave him away.

"What we need to discuss is what Atticus admitted to in interrogation," Shacklebolt continued, "because if he interfered with the Sorting, then there's something we need to do before the game in two hours."

Albus and Rose shot each other a look, Scorpius went completely emotionless.

"What's that?" Albus' dad asked cautiously.

Shacklebolt sighed. "I'm afraid I am going to give Lucius Malfoy his fondest wish. This has happened once before in 1942, there is a precedent in place that states if a Sorting has been tampered with, the students in question are allowed to choose their House."

Rose stared off into space, Albus slid down to sit on the floor in shock, Scorpius walked away a few steps and turned his back to them.

Sometime later Albus' parents waited patiently with him as he paced. They arrived back at the Headmaster's office before anyone else. It had been an hour and a half since the three groups had set off to tour the other common rooms.

Lucius Malfoy –who had arrived last- was scarier than Albus had thought he would be. He flooded into the Headmaster's office with a flourish of black robes and long silver hair. His face was just as ageless as Albus remembered Narcissa's as being. So they evidently were taking the same anti-aging draughts. His contemptuous icy-blue eyes swept across the gathering until they found Scorpius standing away from everyone else, about as emotional as a block of stone. Albus noticed a tiny moment of softness in the older man's face before he surveyed Shacklebolt imperiously.

"This is official? Scorpius will be allowed to go to the House in which he belongs?"

Shacklebolt nodded gravely. "What ever House that may be, is his choice. You are here to aid in that, not make it for him."

Lucius and Shacklebolt stared at each other as a silent argument took place.

Finally Lucius nodded, grasping his silver-snakeheaded cane as he crossed to his grandson's side. "Very well. Shall we make the decision now?"

Shacklebolt stood and that mien of authority that he seemed to project when he needed it was in full force. He strolled over to the door. "This decision will be an informed one, the students will take a tour of the other three common rooms before they decide. If you all will follow me."

What followed was a whirlwind tour.

With most of the students out on the grounds enjoying the bright spring day, Hogwarts was nearly deserted as they made their way up to Gryffindor's tower, through the portrait of the Fat Lady who cooed over Albus and Rose, and into the common room. Albus enjoyed the openness of the room lined with windows and a view that went for miles. The antique furnishings, upholstered in red and gold, had seen some better days. It was amazing this room was intact with more than one explosion having taken place over the years within its confines. Albus saw his dad and mum look around wistfully as Uncle Ron silently argued with Rose, while Aunt Hermione argued with him. Lucius kept a tight hold on Scorpius and looked like he had just smelled something rotten while his grandson stared into space like he wasn't even in the room. Albus felt comfortable here, he knew more about Gryffindor then he knew about any other house. He felt a sense of history when his Dad showed him some initials carved into a banister 'G/F Wuz Here!'

They next crossed and went up to the Ravenclaw tower.

I crawl, I fly,

I'm in every crack, I'm in the sky,

I'm in the darkest cave, but not in the sea,

You may enter if you can guess who I be...

Was the riddle of the eagle head door knocker.

Shacklebolt turned expectantly for the answer. Albus expected his Aunt Hermione to give the answer but she nudged Rose. She shot Scorpius a look which was not returned before she sighed and said, "You are the air."

Well reasoned, you may enter

Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione and Albus' mum had never been in this one. They stared at all of the bronze and blue opulence along with Albus and Rose. Lucius look unimpressed as Shacklebolt talked about the tower as they stood in front of Rowena Ravenclaw's statue.

Rose's hands crept over the backs of books in the common room shelves, her lips moved as she read the titles. Scorpius just studied his fingernails as if contemplating a manicure. There were even more windows lining walls than over in Gryffindor, and the view was of the other side of the castle, Albus could see Hogsmeade from one of them. It was bright and comfortable and better maintained than Gryffindor, it looked less scraped up and lived in.

The trip down to the dungeons soon followed, Lucius led the way, but Shacklebolt had the combination when they got to a non-descript section of wall. He taped certain stones in sequence and a door swung out. They all entered. Lucius, for the first time since Albus met him, was animated. He pulled Scorpius around the opulent but dungeon-like common room showing him all the sites. Scorpius nodded as if interested, but Albus noticed that when his Grandfather wasn't looking he went back to his fingernails. The dark-woods and green shaded lighting and skull accents was a bit creepy to Albus, but when he looked up and saw a dome glass ceiling with greenish tinged water above it, and realized he was looking up into the bottom of the lake, he tried not to show how neat he thought that was. Lucius droned on about the great legacy of Slytherin House, Albus' parents nodded absently, placating the older man as Ron and Hermione had a low hissing argument in the corner. Rose was the only one really listening to him; she probably looked at it as an unofficial history lesson if nothing else.

When they left there Kingsley led the way back up into the castle, but when they reached the main corridor and headed for the stairs, Albus' dad stopped him. "If you don't mind, I think we need to at least see Hufflepuff," he said calmly. Uncle Ron, shooting a glance to his daughter, put his arm around his wife and said, "Might as well, we're close by." Aunt Hermione gave his hand a squeeze and nodded her agreement. Lucius coldly stared at the assemblage before giving a curt nod.

Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione almost didn't make it out of the kitchen as they were swamped with happy elves greeting them with hugs but they caught up as Shacklebolt reached the round oak door to The Cellar.

As soon as they entered Albus felt it. He had now experienced all of the other common rooms, but none of them felt like this. It was the feeling of home.

He glanced over at Rose as she whispered things in her parents' ears and pointed at various sites. Cormac and Gas were sitting by the fireplace, which wasn't lit for the first time in months, pouring over a Potions essay. They looked up. Gas smiled and waived, then noticed who the visitors were and promptly squeaked and fainted. Cormac smiled apologetically before bending back to the parchment. Albus saw him glance his way furtively, and remembered the missing coin. He was going to have to talk to Cormac about that later.

Albus' Dad and Mum looked around the room as Shacklebolt gave them a quick lesson. Lucius and Scorpius stood off to the side. The older man had his arm around his grandson's shoulder as if to remind him that he was not to be comfortable.

Albus saw his dad and his mum walk over to the plaque on the mantle. They read in silence, their arms around each other. Albus wasn't sure what they were thinking. When they turned back around they gave him a look of speculation that he took to mean that they had been having a conversation.

After they arrived back at the main corridor Shacklebolt had instructed all three parties to go their separate ways and discuss the matter privately. No one was to tell the others their decision. That way each student would be completely unbiased by their friends.

Albus and his parents went out onto the breezeway, they looked out into the grounds where students were milling about, lounging under trees, having a fly on brooms, swimming in the lake. It was a peaceful site. He saw down at the Quidditch pitch some players warming up. He wondered if the game would happen after all.

He turned to his parents who were watching him carefully. "I'm staying in Hufflepuff."

His mum smiled and hugged his dad. "We knew you would." he said.

Albus stared at them his confusion evident, "I thought you wanted me to be a Gryffindor."

His dad chuckled as his mum beamed. "We knew from the moment you walked into that Hufflepuff common room Albus," she said kindly, "I've never seen you so relaxed, ever." His dad walked over and ruffled his hair. Albus glowered at him and tried to slick it back down.

Now they were in the office waiting on the others with Shacklebolt sitting on the edge of his desk, all of the former Headmaster's except Dumbledore and Snape were discussing things silently to one another in poorly hushed tones, the latter and the former just eyed him as he paced.

Albus stomach was torn up his hands were shaking and he couldn't sit still.

Rose, he knew he would always have even if she switched houses, but it was Scorpius he was worried about. He had no idea what the boy was going to do. Scorpius' grandfather was even more formidable than Albus had feared, he just didn't see how anyone could stand up to that man. Especially an eleven year old.

In a way, it explained how Scorpius could dive off of a broom three stories up, or stare down a charging Golem without showing any sign of fear. Once you understood the kind of presence Scorpius had been living his life in the shadow of, a scary wooden monster just didn't see as bad after all.

Rose and her parents arrived next.

She crossed the room and gave Albus a wink. He relaxed somewhat. Rose knew him better than anyone; she knew what his choice would be. He realized he knew what hers would be as well. Why did he doubt?

Scorpius and his Grandfather arrived next. Both looked sullen, their pale cheeks flushed in anger. *To actually show that much emotion, Scorpius must be upset!* Albus thought.

Not good.

Shacklebolt picked up a piece of parchment and looked at Albus and his family expectantly.

"I'm a Hufflepuff." Albus said as calmly as he could.

Rose exchanged a glance with her parents, Uncle Ron actually nodded at her encouragingly. She turned to Shackbolt. "Mark me down as Hufflepuff too," she declared.

Two down. Albus thought.

He turned along with the rest of the room to Scorpius and Lucius Malfoy. The older man had a gloved hand on his grandson's shoulder, but it wasn't a protective gesture.

Suddenly Scorpius rounded on his grandfather, "If you want me in Slytherin so much, you say it! I won't fit there. I won't be happy there! But if that's what it will take to make you happy, for you to love me again, I'll go." Those last words were spoken with a sob. Scorpius hugged his grandfather fiercely, burying his face in the man's chest. Lucius looked like he didn't know how to react. He was wavering between embarrassment, shock, and to Albus' amazement, a pain that looked almost like love. Finally, the older man dropped the cane, and hugged his grandson back.

"Lucius?" Shackbolt said not unkindly, "do you have his answer?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like a word first." came a drawling, bored voice from the doorway.

They all spun to see what would have to be Draco Malfoy as he strolled in, with a luxuriantly dark-haired lady on one arm and Narcissa Malfoy on the other.

Lucius and Scorpius turned as one. "Dad!" came Scorpius' shout. He was across the distance and in his dad's hug before Albus could reflect on how alike they looked. Draco was hugging his son with fierceness as the pretty lady that would have to be his mum stroked her son's hair, dabbling at his eyes with a kerchief. Narcissa and Lucius eyed each other, she nodded stiffly, he gave her a courtly bow but his eyes never left hers.

"Excuse me, but you needed a word?" Shackbolt said, bringing them all back to the present.

Draco carried his son over to the others. He didn't seem to be inclined to set him down.

"There are some things you need to be informed of, father, things you need to know before you undo all that we have been trying to accomplish."

Lucius' face went cold. "What in Salazar's name are you babbling about?"

Draco's eyes swept the room, taking Albus' and Rose's parents. "It's all their fault."

Uncle Ron sputtered at that as Narcissa reached for Scorpius and took him out of his father's arms, so he could be free to move.

The man took command of the room as if he was used to such things. His voice resonated and calmed. "The Malfoy name was in danger of dying out. Malfoy Unlimited was losing its holdings, I had to move our company overseas to Romania where Grindelwald still haunts nightmares and Voldemort is seen as an amateur. Then it all changed when my wife had this beautiful boy here, and as it happened, he wasn't like us."

He walked over and hugged his wife to him. Astoria Malfoy held his hand. He continued. "We first noticed he was different when he was kind to the House-Elves, and actually was able to feed mother's normally ghastly albino peacocks by hand. He loved Quidditch for the love of the sport, not for betting purposes, and when we got him flying lessons, he flew for the fun of it, not for glory or advantage, but just because he loved flying. The professional tutors we got him said he was a natural."

Draco's face suddenly got darker, as if he was reciting something unpleasant. "He began reading all of the time as soon as he knew how, so we made Flourish and Blotts a regular stop in Diagon. Then one day he picked out a book, *To the Left, and Behind. An Insider's Perspective of Golden Trio* by Hermione Granger-Weasley." He paused to glare at Aunt Hermione accusingly, she stared back evenly, but she looked like she was getting an inkling of what was actually transpiring. He continued, "I told him that particular book was unacceptable, but he actually got defiant. Yet another way he was not like us was in the fact that he never argued, and never put his foot down on anything. A more even tempered boy you'll normally not find."

Rose snorted, then realizing she had interrupted, she hid behind her father.

Draco's eyes followed her narrowing suspiciously, then he started back with his monologue. "I was so flabbergasted I let him have it. To my utter and complete horror he loved it, and carried it with him everywhere. I had some unpleasant discussions with him about my behavior I tell you!"

"I bet you did." Uncle Ron blurted. Aunt Hermione said, "Ron, you're not helping. Please continue."

Albus was staring at Scorpius, whose grandmother had finally lowered to the ground. He looked confused, but Albus could almost hear his intelligent mind filling in the blanks as his father spoke.

Draco hugged his wife to him a little tighter for emphasis, "My wife was the first to recognize the opportunity we were being offered."

Astoria, as if waiting on this cue, spoke into the space her husband provided. "I said to him, thanks to Harry Potter," she said indicating Albus' dad dismissively, "this is no longer a Slytherin world, maybe it's time for a different kind of Malfoy. Scorpius will be in the same class as a Potter and a Weasley, and there will be others of that ilk all around him. If he is friendly with them, it can only help his chances of success."

Lucius Malfoy was standing off to the side, taking it all in with no emotion, but Albus eyed him warily.

Draco picked the narrative back up, "So with my Mother's help, we have been reluctantly raising our son to fit in with Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. Hufflepuff never even entered our mind. We let him read what he wanted, told him the truth unfettered, encouraged him to be as friendly and kind, and dear Merlin and Morganna, as brave as he dared. Then something unforeseen happened."

His eyes landed on Rose and Albus. The meaning was clear.

He continued. "So we took advantage of the moment. Our plan required for Scorpius to be an outcast from his family, that way he would bond with his new friends all the more."

His eyes found his stunned son, "I am very sorry you had to go through that son, it has been the hardest thing I have ever done in my life so far. Even so I couldn't help but send you those gloves."

Lucius finally spoke. "Why wasn't I informed?"

Draco was unrepentant, "I needed a villain. My son wouldn't have been nearly as endearing to those around him, or the press otherwise. No one is a better villain than Lucius Malfoy, not even me."

The older man took that in stride with a curt nod as if his son had complimented him.

Albus dad spoke up, "So you've been leaking all of these things to the press."

Draco nodded. "I struck while the iron was hot. Suddenly the Malfoy name no longer belonged to evil Death-Eaters, but to a brave little hero, friend of a Potter and a Weasley, struggling on against all odds."

Aunt Hermione nodded like she had already reached that conclusion. "So the Malfoy family name is rehabilitated, permanently attached to Potter and Weasley, as long as our children remain friends."

Albus felt cold. It was all so manipulated and planned. He looked over and saw Scorpius finally eyeing him with a look of fear on his face. Albus realized that his friend must think that Albus and Rose were going to hate him for this. Albus glanced over at Rose. He saw she had the same look on her face as they both did that night they got in the boat with Scorpius at the Hogsmeade dock. They both looked back at Scorpius. She stuck out her tongue and Albus rolled his eyes comically, as if the adults were being nutters. Scorpius almost deflated in his relief.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat. "So this all means?"

Draco turned to his father. "Well Father what does this mean?"

Lucius got a sly smile on his face, "I was going to ask my grandson if Hufflepuff's colors still include black, because Malfoy's don't do yellow." Scorpius whooped and the Malfoy family huddled together as Shacklebolt scratched Scorpius into Hufflepuff then rolled away the parchment.

Uncle Ron watched them with disgust written clearly on his face. "That was almost heart-warming, then why do I suddenly feel the need of a hot shower?" "You're not helping Ron," Aunt Hermione admonished.

"I can't believe that the Sorting Hat can be altered." Albus mum said, staring at the artifact in question over on a shelf. The hat smirked. Shacklebolt chuckled, "It can't be. The Sorting has to be immutable or it's invalid. The children needed to see that they were placed in the right House for themselves, otherwise they would have had doubts that might have handicapped them all seven years."

Albus' dad nodded at the older man respectfully, "That was devious, no wonder you've made such a good Headmaster." He glanced at Dumbledore, whose eyes were sparkling with mirth. Snape's portrait just sneered

Shacklebolt smiled and placed a finger to his lips.

"Oh Draco." Aunt Hermione called. He turned with an insolent smile on his face. She smiled sweetly, "If I ever hear of my daughter and my nephew's friendship with your son being manipulated again, I will make what happened to your name after Voldemort's fall, look like a kindness."

She suddenly spun in place, her wand out and shot a jet of red-light into a corner of the office. A young blond witch wearing bright acid-green robes dropped out of nowhere, her Disillusionment charm dissipating. Her hand dropped a fuchsia quill onto the grass mat. With her wand still out in her hand Aunt Hermione snapped, "I thought you were being a bit forthcoming, it couldn't have been for our benefit. You might want to take Nita with you as you go. Tell her I will be confiscating everything she has written as privilege conversation taken by stealth, therefore unprintable. She is not to come near these three again. Am I understood?"

The Malfoy's all exchanged a look. Astoria and Narcissa went over to revive Nita Skeeter.

Shacklebolt looked grave as he gave Draco the look he deserved. "There is one more issue to resolve. Your son needs a broom for the Quidditch match this afternoon. Pharrel admitted to putting illegal charms on the one he gave to him."

Draco looked a bit shaken up after Aunt Hermione's actions, but he nodded. "We'll just get his broom from home. It's a Comet 360, better than the one he was using anyway." Lucius went pale. "Actually I had his broom moved to the family vault at Gringotts, it would take three hours of paper work to get it back."

Scorpius looked lost, "I can't use a school broom. I wouldn't have a chance."

Albus's dad shrugged not understanding where the problem was. He turned to Draco. "We have a half an hour, you can floo over to Quintessential Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley, just buy him the best they have. What's the point of money if you don't spend it?"

Draco shook his head sadly. "I put our entire fortune on the line to buy Cadmus Apothecaries to move Malfoy Unlimited back into England while our name is still good. Until that closes we are about as rich as a Weasley."

Uncle Ron turned red. "You mean a Weasley used to be, don't you Ferret-boy? In case you haven't noticed, the first five names on the Gringott's Wealthiest Wizard list are all Weasley related," he declared, "you might be asking us for a loan before it's over!" Aunt Hermione placed a supportive arm around his waist and nodded agreement.

Draco looked like he was chewing glass, then he muttered, "You're right Weasley, I apologize, but nonetheless, I can't afford a broom that could touch a SkyBolt at the moment."

Albus saw his dad watching him. It was a careful considered look that he didn't understand. Albus suddenly had an idea, his dad looked expectant. "Dad? Can I ask you for a huge favor?"

Scorpius kept looking at the broom in his hand as they made their way down to the Pitch. The sound of the crowd inside was raucous, he heard the squeaks of elves adding to the din. He was willing to bet that the small grandstand was filled to capacity with the two biggest elf friendly houses vying for the cup. Shacklebolt had informed them of an announcement he was going to make concerning the game, but that was later. He saw how Scorpius was eyeing him as they walked.

"I can't begin to repay you for this." Scorpius said quietly indicating the broom in his hand.

Albus waved it off, "Just do me a favor."

Scorpius nodded eagerly, "Anything."

Albus smirked, "When you fly by James for the Snitch? Tell him Albus said hello."

Scorpius laughed, and held up Harry Potter's famous Firebolt –just newly apparated to Shacklebolt's office by Kreacher- up to the sunlight, admiring the still flawless lines and finish.

"I think that's just what I'll do," he replied.

Chapter 26: Irreplaceable

As they walked into the changing room Albus excitement immediately turned to an upset stomach. He could see from the look on his teammates faces that things were not going well.

Diana waved as they walked in but there was no enthusiasm in it.

Albus and Scorpius exchanged a look. "What's going on?" Albus stammered.

"We just got a visit from Professor Shacklebolt. He gave us a talk on what's been going on today."

Albus sunk into a bench. "Oh."

Roderick studied Albus' face with pained eyes. "Is it true? Was Professor Pharrel using Black Magic and Unforgivables, and interfering with Quidditch this year?"

Albus nodded. They all looked glum.

Scorpius spoke up, "What does Professor Pharrel being an evil git have to do with us playing this afternoon?"

Diana looked like she couldn't get the words out, so Cornelius spoke up. "Shacklebolt and the other Head of Houses decided that Hufflepuff and Gryffindor are the two best teams and should vie for the cup, but the only way to be fair about this season is to give everybody the same points. So this game means we get the cup if we win, but we don't get the House points."

Diana cleared her throat. "He said we have the option of whether to play or not, we took a vote and Roderick doesn't want to play." She shot a look at the Head Boy, but he was so dejected he wouldn't even look at the rest of them.

"You dont understand," he murmured, "if Pharrel was a dark wizard, then my whole career here at Hogwarts has been a lie. He has been my mentor, my biggest supporter, and I thought a friend. If he was evil, then nothing I've accomplished with his help and support was right or meant anything." He finished his speech and slumped even further, "it's just too hard."

Diana glared at him. "Well we won't miss Professor Pharrel. The rest of Hufflepuff never got his support, or encouragement, or defense against the other houses. He never even visited the Cellar, in all of my five years I never saw him down there once." Cornelius nodded his assent. "Maybe now we can get a Head of House that believes in all of us, not just one or two."

Roderick sighed. "I just can't go out there and win a House Cup that's been tainted by deceit. That's not what Hufflepuff is about."

To Albus' surprise Scorpius spoke up, "We were not deceitful, we went out there and earned our place. We beat those other teams, fair and square. Pharrel's interference never amounted to anything. Are you going to say that I didn't catch those Snitches with my own hand."

Roderick shook his head. "You won't stand a chance against that SkyBolt, anyway," he concluded.

Scorpius laughed. They all looked up in shock. If astonished Albus as well. Scorpius held up the Firebolt. "You haven't been paying attention," he said beaming.

They all gaped at the broom in astonishment. Cornelius couldn't even form a proper sentence. "Is tha...wha...where didja?" he stammered before losing his train of thought.

Diana spun on Roderick. "Come on Rod, we gotta play now! We have a chance to put Hufflepuff on top for once. This team can do it, but we can't without you."

Roderick sighed painfully, "You act like this is easy, I just want to do what's right, that's all."

"If the time should ever come..." came a hesitant voice with an almost indecipherable accent. They suddenly realized it was Valencia. "You haf to make a choice..." she continued looking at Violet for help. Violet smiled and picked it up, "Between what is vight, an what is easy. "Remember a boy," Albus continued. "Who was good..." came from Scorpius. "And

kind..." was said by Diana. Cornelius turned to Roderick, and met the boy's eyes, "and brave..." he finished. Roderick grinned, "Remember Cedric Diggory."

He stood up and walked to the middle of the group and held his hand out in the middle, "For Cedric?"

One by one they all joined him, on a nod from Diana they all shouted, "For Cedric!"

They cleared the tunnel into the bright sunlit day to the shouts a ramped up crowd, a crowd which included a few new faces Albus noticed. He noticed colors from at least five Quidditch clubs in the stands today. There were older men and women dictating to Quick Quotes Quills, including one disheveled Nita Skeeter sitting with the Malfoys who was staring evilly at his Aunt Hermione a few rows down in the Hufflepuff section. Lucius and Narcissa were sitting together, and they looked cozy.

"Well there are those Badgers! I was wondering if they would show up." came Victoire's commentary.

The crowd roared anew. Scorpius in a rare moment of jubilation held the Firebolt up to the sky, the crowd after a moment of shock really started to make some noise.

"Oh my, what has this crowd so worked up?"

"I think Scorpius Malfoy is carrying a Firebolt, Ms. Weasley," said Professor Flint in a voice that sounded like he nearly swallowed his tongue.

Albus saw his brother tense and turn to look. His eyes narrowed. Albus waggled his fingers at him. James looked confused then he heard a familiar bullfrog voice from over in the Elf grandstand.

"Go young Master Albus, beat young Master James!" came the gravelly shout from Kreacher.

James turned back to Albus with understanding in his eyes, then he actually smiled and nodded with a look of determination, clearly accepting the challenge. *He might be a Potter after all*, Albus mused.

They arrived at the center of the Pitch across from the Gryffindors. They all glared at each other as Victoire made the introductions.

"These are by far the two best teams we have seen this year," she crowed, "you are all in for a treat to day! It's Gryffindor verses those black Badgers of Hufflepuff. The Violent Sisters versus Fred and Ferg. The Weasley twins and their cousin and my sister versus Diana, Corny and my cannon-armed cousin, Albus Potter. Last but certainly not least, its SkyBolt versus Firebolt, the new standard versus the legendary classic. James "Red-Rocket" Potter versus Scorpius "Mad-Man" Malfoy! This might be the best match in a decade folks!"

Albus was surprised that Professor Flint would let Victoire go so far overboard, he glanced up to see the professor nearly leaning out of the announcer's box with a pair of Omnoculars trying to see the Firebolt Scorpius was carrying.

Albus looked up to find his parents and found them near Uncle Ron and Hermione on the dividing line between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor trying to look invisible, hard to do since Cormac was fanning a program over an unconscious Gas who had evidently seen Harry Potter two rows back.

Victor Krum actually looked excited as he waved the two Captains over. Diana looked grim as she flexed her fingers. Fred just smiled charmingly. Krum indicated for them to shake hands, she held hers out waiting to crush his in her vise-like grip. He reached out and gently took her hand, turned it over and kissed the back of it like a gentleman. The crowd roared its approval as Krum scowled and Diana blushed.

"You all know the rules and the penalties by now. Mount your brooms."

Albus looked at the scarlet and gold clad group across from him and at his own black with yellow trim clad team, suddenly he realized with the Violent Sisters and their skull make-up and merry pink and purple ribbons, Scorpius with his black gloves and bracers and broom, and the glowering rest, Hufflepuff looked like the bad guys.

"Very well," he murmured to himself adjusting his gloves and mounting his Nimbus Millennium, "let's be the bad guys."

Krum's whistle came suddenly.

There was a flurry of brooms swirling up into the playing field. If Albus had any fears about the Firebolt's ability to keep up they were erased when Scorpius made it to the top of the pitch before James. Albus had just long enough to register the shock in his brother's face before he was receiving a Bludger assault from his cousin Fred. He barely dodged and felt wind as it nearly grazed his shoulder. He righted himself and glanced over at his big and burly cousin and saw the cold determination on his face. The message was clear, *until this game is over we are not related*. Albus sighed. *Not good*.

"There's the whistle! So it begins! My, my these two teams are going at it. Dominique gets the Quaffle and is headed toward Roderick. She fakes and passes it off to Molly, oh she passed to Lucy here it come. Saved! Wow that was an amazing change of direction by Yates. He's talented and cute ladies and from what I hear single...now I can't be sure, but from what Joyce Carnes said..."

"Miss Weasley, stay on task!"

"Sorry professor, but that was valuable information to some people, not me I'm taken, but someone else might want to know..."

"This is a Quidditch Match not Matchmaking!"

"Ookay! Sheesh! Ok well if you insist, Diana Delaney just scored Hufflepuff 10, Gryffindor 0 so far."

The game was a back in forth affair, Roderick was brilliant, the Weasley Twins and Dominique did their best to get the Quaffle by but until Fergus nearly knocked Roderick off his broom and Molly slipped one by Gryffindor was shut out.

"Molly scores! You know I think it's Moll, they are so much alike. The only way I can tell is Luce has more freckles on her nose, of course she's been wearing concealer lately, so most of the time I have no clue..."

"Miss Weasley, the score please?"

"Oh that. Very well. Hufflepuff 30, Gryffindor 10. If you must know."

Violet and Valencia saved Albus a couple of times as Fred and Fergus seemed to go after him especially, but he finally got a clear shot and the Quaffle sizzled through the air toward Grayson. He didn't flinch but took the hit on his chest with a dull thunk.

Albus realized, *He's wearing some kind of padding!* He turned to see Diana noticed the same thing. The cornerstone of their offense was nullified. Fred had them scouted well. Without Albus' hard throws to intimidate and cause the Keeper to flinch, then Diana couldn't do the fakes and last second passing she had become adept at. They had to come up with something entirely different because Roderick couldn't keep up his shut out forever. He was going to wear down under the Gryffindor Chaser assault. As if to bear out Albus' fears, Roderick misjudged one of Dominique's fakes and she scored easily.

"And Dominique scores! Good for her! I hear she's already scoring with that cute Gryffindor Keeper!"

"Miss Weasley, focus!"

Flint wasn't the only one furious with Victoire. Dominique was glaring her face flushed almost as crimson as her robes. She looked as if she was fighting the urge to ram the announcer's box. Grayson Wood just smirked, but recovered in time to stop Cornelius from scoring with a back handed flip.

All this time Scorpius and James were circling the Pitch like a couple of vultures, one red, one black. There were a couple of near miss dives where it became apparent that the SkyBolt was faster in a straight line, but the Firebolt was still unmatched in the vertical. James nearly closed the deal twice but Scorpius was able to cut him off. It was a chess match that Albus almost wished he could have been a spectator for. James had been taught well, by the best teachers you could ask for, but Scorpius was a natural, he had a gift. With the Firebolt he was proving to be more than a match for James.

Albus got so distracted by their ballet, he narrowly dodged yet another Bludger hit from Fergus. The attack continued until Valencia nailed the muscular boy between the shoulder blades with a nasty side arm Bludger slap. The sisters were really doing their best to keep Gryffindor at bay, and their efforts slowed down the Molly and Lucy barrage somewhat. It was not enough, however, for a worn out Roderick as they scored with a few more brilliant Quaffle tosses taking advantage of his weariness.

"Time!" Diana called. It was Hufflepuff 40, Gryffindor 100 by that point.

They all gathered in a midair huddle, they all looked tired and dejected. "Any ideas as to how we can get our offense going?" Diana said between pants. "Yeah, Scorpius could go ahead and catch the bloody Snitch," Cornelius said sneering. Scorpius glared at him furiously. "Shut up Corny!" Diana bellowed. They all got silent, listening to the raucous

crowd and Victoire waxing on and on about how brilliant Gryffindor Red looked in the afternoon sun, punctuated with a growled commentary by Professor Flint trying to get her back on topic. Roderick got a far away look on his face as he watched Grayson Wood over in the Gryffindor huddle, "You know, all that padding is bound to make him a bit stiff," he ruminated. A smile dawned on Diana's face, "You're right! Here's what we'll do..."

Krum blew his whistle and the game got back under way. Diana and Cornelius dived at Grayson Wood passing the Quaffle back in forth, with Albus trailing them, suddenly Corny flipped the Quaffle back over his shoulder to Albus as they dived left and Albus tossed the Quaffle right. Score!

They all exchanged an excited look as Fred went over to talk to Grayson, who shrugged.

The next time they did the same thing but Corny kept it and dodge left as Diana and Albus went right. Score again!

Roderick was right. Grayson had so much padding on that it made him slow on his side to side recovery.

They began to score more efficiently which kept Fegus and Fred baring down on the Hufflepuff Chaser line which made Grayson even more vulnerable. Soon the score was Hufflepuff 100, Gryffindor 150. It looked as if they had a chance.

Then disaster struck for Hufflepuff.

James did a perfect Kelly Obliviator, which was a move in which a Seeker heads in the opposite direction from where he knows the Snitch to be then trails the other Seeker, slides into the other Seeker's blind spot, then pulls a twisting dive back the other direction. Scorpius didn't know what was happening until he heard the crowd roar, by then James had a tremendous head start.

Albus heart fell. The Skybolt was on the same level as the Snitch which was buzzing around the other side of the Pitch, and that straight line speed was too much to overcome.

As it so happened, it was too much to overcome for a sane person.

Scorpius didn't hesitate, he kicked the Firebolt over into a steep dive. Too steep from Albus' point of view, from the crowd's view as well. There was a collective gasp.

"Oh no. Stop this Professor! That boy is going to kill himself!" Victoire said with a gasp.

Albus glanced at Krum to see even he was watching in awe, his whistle loose in his mouth.

I think that Mad-Man Malfoy nickname is going to stick! Albus mused.

Scorpius was nearly at the ground when he began to pull up. The velocity he had achieve was beyond the manufacturing specs, of that broom, Albus was sure. Then again, the Firebolt's abilities where not something you could measure with numbers. Suddenly with a crack, the broom evened out and blasted across the Pitch after James. Albus had only time to realize that the Firebolt was actually closing the distance when they came together.

James covered the Snitch like he had been taught so Scorpius had to find a way around James to steal it. He went high and did a roll and their hands shot out at the same time.

Krum's whistle blasted as they slowed down as one and landed. Krum made the sign for a Snitch catch. Then he flew down and raised Scorpius' hand.

The crowd erupted.

Victoire's calling the final score was almost lost in the din. Hufflepuff 250, Gryffindor 150.

In the celebration Albus headed straight for his friend, but he slowed up when he saw his buddy was crying. They weren't tears of joy. He was talking to Krum as the crowd closed in, Krum looked at the broom and shook his head gravely. Scorpius slumped and let the Snitch go. James was actually consoling him.

Albus got to them. "I'm sorry Albus. Tell your dad I'm so sorry," Scorpius sobbed. James looked grim, "It broke," he said simply. Victor Krum nodded, "Da, it will never fly again, I'm afraid." Albus immediately felt like he needed to throw up. He felt nauseous. It was his idea to ask his dad for the broom. The old broom hadn't been subjected to this kind of pressure for years, maybe never, the fact it held together as long as it did was a miracle. He felt his own eyes begin to sting with tears. The crowd sensing something wrong became subdued, and watchful.

"Where's the funeral?" said Albus' dad as he made his way through.

Albus tried to say something but he couldn't get out the words. James filled his dad in.

Albus and James' dad, Harry Potter, walked over to Scorpius, and got down on one knee so he could look the boy in the eye. Scorpius couldn't even speak through his grief. Albus' dad smiled and gently took the broom from his limp fingers. He looked at it reverently, traced the hairline crack that spelled the end of its flying career, and chuckled. He placed a hand on Scorpius' shoulder until the miserable boy looked up. "Only this old girl could have pulled out that dive," he said softly, "nobody here will ever forget the best broom ever spelled now. You flew her like I never did, and I am proud of my broom and you. Thanks son."

As if taking their cue from him, the crowd erupted. They all cheered and celebrated, even the Gryffindors. When two teams play that hard and the game is that transcendent it is hard to feel like there was a loser. The Malfoy's all gathered around Scorpius, who had cheered up somewhat, and they hugged and congratulated him. Albus walked with his dad away from the din a bit. "Thanks for saying that to Scorpius dad, I know it must be hurting you." His dad was still holding the broom, he studied for a moment. "I thought I lost this broom a long time ago, the night I lost my owl, and your Uncle George lost his ear. I got it back, then I had to hang it up again. Watching Scorpius soar on her like I used to, I got a little bit of that back today. Even if she never flies again, at least she had this one more chance to show the next generation what quality looks like!" Albus hugged him careful of the broom.

Draco left his family who was fussing over Scorpius and strolled over. "I'll find a replacement for that broom, Potter, you have my word," he said almost kindly. Albus' dad turned to him, "That's the biggest thing that separates us Draco," he replied, "I know that there are some things that are irreplaceable." He hugged Albus to him and they walked past the man.

They were all in for one more surprise that day.

They got back to The Cellar, and when they went inside they all stopped in their amazement.

In the center of The Cellar's ceiling, was what looked like a tunneled hole that was showing sunlight peaking through. It was impossible. Albus knew there was nothing but castle above them, but when they all walked in and looked up they could see the outside weather reflected in the center of the opening. It reminded Albus of a cozy burrow looking out.

"Do you like it?" came a voice from one of the side tables. They all turned and saw Professor Bast and Professor Patil sharing a cup of tea. She smiled like the cat that ate the canary. "I'm sorry I missed the match, but I've been working on this as a surprise. Professor Patil helped me with some of the charms, it has some of the same spells as the Main Hall. I've always thought this place could use a window to the outside, but this one won't leak or cause the temperature to change." She looked pleased with her self and unselfconsciously she licked the back of her furry hand and straightened out her whiskers.

"It's great Professor!" said Roderick making his way to the front, "but who gave you the right to make a change like that?"

Professor Freya Bast exchanged a bemused look with Professor Padma Patil, "well, I guess a Head of House is allowed to redecorate? Wouldn't you say?"

Roderick walked over and placed the Quidditch Cup on the mantle beside Cedric's plaque. He turned to the rest smiling so wide it almost looked painful, "Yes I would say so," he concluded.

They all cheered, and the party began in earnest.

As they all dug into the snacks the happy little elves popped in with, and Scorpius relived the dive for Rose, Cormac and Gas. Albus looked over at Professor Bast as she greeted students by name and was able to be a partisan Head of House. He thought.

Now this is good!

Chapter 28: Revelations

The events of the next week went by like a blur. While it was hard to be the outcasts, Albus was finding it even harder to be heroes. He also found he was understanding his father even more as the days passed.

It all started the very next day when the *Dailey Prophet* came out.

Maybe it was to get back at Aunt Hermione, maybe it was just to get the prestige of having been the only member of the press to get wind of the showdown at Hogwarts, either way, Draco Malfoy got his wish.

It was that old sputtering tawny owl that brought the paper to Scorpius that Monday morning. It nearly collapsed from exhaustion when it landed and took out half of the condiments on that end of the Hufflepuff table. It overshot Scorpius and came to a stop further down in front of Gas and Cormac.

While Gas was petting the owl talking in low tones, checking for injuries. Cormac took one look at the headlines while taking a sip of juice, and sprayed it across the table. Summer Sutherland was brushing her perfect blond locks thinking she was far enough away from Albus to be safe, was hit by the spray. She glowered at an apologetic Cormac as she got up to go change. Iris Ivy her mousy little friend, actually allowed herself a smile before Summer tugged on her arm to "go help."

Cormac slid the paper to the person nearest to him, which was Rose. Cormac had learned, as had most of the other Hufflepuffs, to stay out of range of Rose this early in the morning, so he didn't say anything. He didn't have to, she took one look and let out girlish yip, and shoved it down to Albus and Scorpius.

Albus saw a note on the cover for Scorpius.

Dear Scorpius

This past difficult year has finally borne fruit. I hope you can begin to understand my reasons. In so doing, maybe start to forgive me, for what you endured

All my love,

Father

The headline was accompanied by a large wizard photo of Scorpius' dive, and it's Snitch catching culmination. It might have been the angle, but Albus realized that he hadn't realized the full scope of what Scorpius accomplished. The dive was beyond frightening, it was nearly suicidal. The headline read:

A New Star Dives from the Heavens at Hogwarts

by. Nita Skeeter

This reporter has been following the exploits of the youngest Malfoy for close to a year now. I have been attempting to let the Wizard World know that there was a rising star in their midst. I was wrong. This one fell from the Heavens. I have showed this photo to all of the broom experts and Quidditch fans on staff, they have all assured me that this was the most spectacularly death-defying maneuver they have ever seen pulled off on a broom with success. Before I showed them this photo, they would not have believed that degree of dive was even possible to pull out. I must say that the Firebolt has cemented it's place atop the ranks of brooms for all time. The makers of the SkyBolt can not be amused by this. Might I add, that this young Scorpius "Mad-Man" Malfoy, third member of the

Potter/Weasley/Malfoy, Hufflepuff cabal, will most likely end his career as the greatest Seeker to mount a broom. We will keep an eye on this "Tenacious Trio" from Hufflepuff, and see if they can continue elevating this most earthy of Houses to heights they have never achieved since the ill-fated Tri-Wizard tournament over two decades ago.

Scorpius was slack jawed. He had been enjoying his new-found position at Hogwart's. The fact that people were coming up to congratulate and talk to him even while others were watching was still novel to him. This, however, was a widely read publication, perused by most of Wizard England, and he was front page news.

To Albus, this was old hat, something that had been in the background of his life as long as he could remember. He gave his first interview inadvertently in the Diagon Alley branch of WWW when he was five, and didn't understand why this perfect stranger was suddenly asking him all these strange questions. When his answers showed up the next day in *Witches Weekly*, he had his first chat with dad about that dangerous entity, known as *Das Press*. It was a lesson he learned well. Now his friend was seeing himself splashed across the headlines, and he wasn't taking it well.

Albus suddenly realized there was another paper wrapped in this one.

He pulled it out. It was *The Gringotts Journal*. Scorpius was in it as well.

Hero of the Quidditch Pitch at Hogwarts Pulls off Dive for the Ages

Scorpius Malfoy, flying an antique Firebolt broom pulled off the most spectacular dive many experts have ever seen this Saturday, allowing the lowly Hufflepuff House to win the Quidditch Cup for the first time in nearly three decades...

The article had a paragraph circled near the bottom.

In other Malfoy news. Malfoy Unlimited, after seeing their stock fall to almost outlandishly low levels in recent years, has seen enough of a recovery this previous year that they have managed to acquire Cadmus Apothecaries in a daring "all-or-nothing" maneuver that has made C.E.O. Draco Malfoy the toast of the Wizard business world. It looks like the Malfoy name is back at near the top.

Scorpius read that news, but his face became cold and unreadable. Then he actually laughed, it was nearly hysterical. One year of pain, frustration, sadness and loneliness came seeping out in a gasping wheezing laugh. He put his head down on his arms to muffle it. Albus and Rose exchanged a worried look. The Main Hall seem to grow a bit quieter as "that Malfoy boy" had hysterics.

Finally, Scorpius got control of himself. His face was flushed as he wiped the tears off of his cheeks.

"Feeling better?" Rose cautiously inquired.

"Oh yes, lots," he said with a stray snigger.

Albus tried to figure out what that was all about but he just couldn't fathom it. "Do you mind telling us what that was about, or do I brew you a Calming Draught, you know I can."

"No, that won't be necessary," Scorpius replied with a gasp. "I'm not sure I can explain it, it might just be a Malfoy thing."

Rose's cheeks flushed, "Humor us," she hissed.

Scorpius seemed oblivious to the dangerous tone in her voice. "It all snapped into place for me, that's all. I hadn't really had time to wrap my brain around everything, what with Professor Pharrel, the match and all. Then it all became crystal clear," he replied cheerfully. He seemed to be searching their faces for some sign they knew where he was going.

They stared back blankly.

"It was all part of a bigger scheme! All of it! It's bloody brilliant, that's what it is! I finally understand what it means to be a Malfoy, and I finally realize that I am one," he replied happily.

Albus suddenly saw it clear. "When you made that speech and hugged your grandfather, you weren't really crying were you?"

Scorpius grinned in reply.

Rose looked appalled, then her brilliant mind connected the implications. "You manipulated your grandfather before you knew what was actually going on. Maybe you are a Slytherin."

Scorpius shook his head adamantly, "I did what I did because I was loyal to my House and my friends, I might have used Malfoy methods but I did it for Hufflepuff reasons."

Albus caught on, "So you are the first Hufflepuff Malfoy." He turned to Rose, "this House is really starting to go down hill."

Rose saw where Albus was headed, and played her part. "Well no one said the next Dark Lord couldn't be a Hufflepuff, now did they. Do you want to be a Malfoy minion or what?" Albus looked thoughtful. "I don't know," he said with a sly wink, "does he provide full medical and dental? I can't be evil with pox marks and bad teeth, that's soooooo Death Eater." Scorpius leaned in, "that's okay, you're going to be expendable anyway, it says so in the official handbook, *Dark Lord for Dummies*." Soon all three were laughing. James and Fred wandered by to give them a strange look. They laughed even harder.

The rest of the week was reviews, and studying for finals. To everyone surprise, maybe spurred on by the Quidditch victory, the Hufflepuff topaz hourglass was dead even with Gryffindor's rubies. The two Houses really got competitive. Allen Baldwin and Callum Weigand, Albus two biggest Gryffindor tormentors were strangely silent however. Albus eyed them with suspicion. He noticed that Rick Cresswell, their Gryffindor obsessed Hufflepuff bunk mate, had started hanging out with those two boys rather than Thor Boot and Micheal Nedved, his usual buddies. Micheal and Thor didn't look happy about the snub.

Albus had heard a lot of rumors about the fill-in DADA professor. Those who had already had the class refused to tell the others, stating it was a surprise. James especially was vague about it. He just winked at Albus when he was asked, and walked by.

As they arrived at the DADA classroom, there was no teacher. Everyone was so wound up about it, that they all entered early, sat in their desks and were for the most part quiet. Suddenly the door leading from the DADA office burst open and out came...

Albus' dad.

"Hello class, my name is Harry Potter," he said anticlimactically. Not a voice was heard, except Gas squeaking, and the meaty thud as he hit the floor.

The lesson was very surreal, most of the class had never met a celebrity before, certainly not one of this stature. Soon it became apparent to all, except Rose and Scorpius who already knew, that Harry Potter was a normal bloke like anybody else, and nicer than most. Gas even managed to shake his idol's hand without passing out, he just felt a bit woozy. Albus' dad sat on the desk and just asked questions about the lessons, the content, the methods Pharrel used. He perused the chapters in the text as different students recited what they learned. He was kind and funny and witty. Albus got embarrassed a few times when his dad made reference to things. Overall he realized that he had a cool dad all over again. Especially when he announced there would be no DADA final. The class cheered but Scorpius and Rose looked mournful.

As they filed out, Albus stayed behind, while Scorpius and Rose went on ahead.

"Great lesson dad. Are you going to be permanent?"

His dad smiled, the corner of his eyes crinkled. "No. I have too many responsibilities to see to. Your mother would prefer it, but I have no one to replace me, yet. I took a few weeks off to see what's what with the Defense training at Hogwarts." He stared at Albus speculatively. "I'd like your opinion, son." Albus nodded eagerly. He seemed to work on formulating the question, then he asked, "Between the Atticus Pharrel you fought, and the Pharrel who taught you, how big a gap would you say there was?"

The question took Albus by surprise. It was the most adult question he had ever been asked. "I-I'm not sure," Albus stammered. His dad chuckled, then poked Albus in a ticklish spot near his belly. Albus giggled and slapped his hand away. "What does your gut tell you?" he asked Albus kindly. Albus suddenly realized his dad was really asking his advice.

"I'm not sure what you want to hear, dad. All I know was that he had all of these trophies in his office, then he came out here and was the most dry and boring teacher we had. He never went off topic, he never answered questions that weren't in the book. My one dueling club, he was on top of everything, he instructed everybody on technique, it was like that was his main teaching time, not class."

Albus' dad took that in silence. "What about in the Arboretum?" he asked.

Albus stifled a shudder. "He was very dangerous dad. He reminded me of Dinky in a way. Same brilliant, passionate, crazed look in his eye, but he wasn't violent at first. That Golem

was the opposite. It was very violent, and I think he restrained it. It didn't try to kill me until Pharrel was down."

Albus nodded as if he understood things about what Albus said that Albus didn't. "You're going to be late. Go on. I'm not staying at the castle at night, we don't need any more of an uproar than there has been for obvious reasons. I'll see you next DADA class."

Albus, Scorpius and Rose had to field all manner of questions about the Arboretum and what happened there. There seemed to be an uncomfortable amount of information, not all correct, floating around the corridors. He was cornered by Victoire and Dominique and taken to the Gryffindor Common room for an impromptu briefing with his cousins and his oddly quiet brother. When he finished, all eyes seemed to drift to James who was staring out one of the many windows. He finally turned to his brother.

"So, you're the one," he said cryptically.

"One what?" Albus shot back.

He just shrugged, and turned back to the window. Albus talked a bit more with his cousins before he left.

James was still staring out the window.

Finals came, and Albus struggled to keep the facts straight in his head, but he was no Rose or Scorpius. Rose was intense and furiously studied her hair becoming even more bushy and profuse as she read through her mountain of notes and notations. Scorpius seemed to have a lot less trouble, he had pages of that odd short hand, and he didn't seem to be sweating it. Albus was so stuffed with information that he forgot the way to main staircase a couple of times and by the day of exams, he was literally being led around by the hand.

In the end he managed to pass all of his classes, earning O's in Potions, Transfiguration, and Astrology. Rose got straight O's except in Charms, where she got an E and was very distraught about it. "I've got my dad's brain after all!" she lamented. Scorpius who passed effortlessly with all O's, was sympathetic enough to not show his elation around Rose.

The final tally came in. Hufflepuff had won the House cup. The Badgers all stood around stunned. They didn't know how to react. Their elations, however was short lived. The day of the End-of the Year Feast, something happened that caused enough topazes to come out, to put Gryffindor on top.

The cry went out for information as to which Hufflepuff caused it. It turned out to be Rick Cresswell.

Professor Hemophilias found Rick cheating off of Allen Baldwin's paper. They were all glum at Lunch that day when Rick came into the Main Hall. He sat dejectedly at the end of the table, he refused to look anyone in the eye. Albus heard a laugh from the Gryffindor table and saw Rick flinch. It all clicked into place.

He stood and walked down to where Rick was seated, and slid in beside him.

"Why?" he demanded.

Rick glanced up, a ghost of the anger he seemed to always carry, flared up.

"Why did you betray Hufflepuff?" Albus demanded.

Rick looked up, his eyes were puffy and bloodshot from where he had been crying, "Because I'm a stupid, gullible Hufflepuff. That's why. At least that's what Allen and Callum told me afterward. I just wanted to be a Gryffindor," he said miserably. "Now nobody wants me."

Albus glanced up, his furious eyes found Allen and Callum, the smugness was clear on their faces. He looked on down the table, he saw Micheal Nedved looking furious and bear-like in his anger. Thor Boot finally resembled his namesake as he glowered at the two boys. Berry Thorn and Destiny Segreti, who Albus thought liked the two tall athletic boys, were purposely turned away from them in disgust.

Albus' eyes found his Housemates, the hope that he had been seeing in their faces, was all but gone now. What was done was done. Gryffindor had won the House cup, but it wasn't a victory they were going to savor. Not if Albus had something to do with it.

Albus stood and stormed out in search of his brother, Rose and Scorpius had been watching the exchange, they followed in his wake.

He didn't have to go far. Fred and James were coming down the stairs. Albus charged up and got into James' face. "Is this what it means to be a Gryffindor now? Do you have to cheat to win?"

"What are you yammering about Albus? It was one of your firsties that lost the points is what I heard," James declared giving him a shove against the wall. Albus didn't realize what he was doing until it was a few moments later and he was on top of James, swinging for all he was worth. James defended himself until he realized who it was on top and with a movement honed by years of being the big brother he grabbed Albus and rolled him under and pinned his arms. Albus waited for the impending beating to begin when Fred reached down and plucked James off of Albus and held him in place. James was furious, "What's wrong with you, you little nutter? You lost one thing this year and you can't deal with it, you selfish brat!" "I didn't lose, James, Hufflepuff lost because you guys cheated!" Albus shot back as he picked himself off of the landing floor.

Fred grabbed James and bodily threw him behind him. The big burly boy held out a hand to keep the two brothers apart. "Hold on James!" he shouted. He so seldom raised his voice that James stopped struggling. His eyes held violence for Albus though.

Fred made sure that James wasn't going to charge his brother, then said, "What happened?"

Albus spat out the details. He lost his venom when he saw how disgusted James and Fred looked. "I can't believe two Gryffindors would do something like this." James said sitting down on the stairs in his shock. Fred was grave, "Are you sure?" "They're not making a secret of it." Scorpius stated, "I heard them bragging earlier."

James and Fred exchanged a look. "Gryffindor's honor has been impugned. I think we need to make sure this never happens again," Fred said with anger in his voice. James nodded, "I

think it's time for a little Weasley payback." Fred nodded with a sly smile, "I concur. What do you have in mind?" James thought for a minute, "we need some first year Gryffindors."

"You've got two." came a pleasant tenor voice from behind them. They turned and saw Thor and Micheal making their way up with a chastened Rick in tow. "What do you need us to do?" said Micheal.

James walked over to his brother, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "If I beat you, it will be fair and square, Albus. You can count on that. Me and Fred are going to see that this never happens again, you and your friends need what's called plausible deniability, go and get seen eating lunch."

Albus and his brother's eyes met. James gave him a cocky grin, and for once Albus didn't feel anger. Albus nodded and they went to eat some lunch.

The end of year feast arrived, but the Main Hall wasn't in yellow and black, but red and gold. Albus looked around for Callum and Allen, but they weren't there to see the fruit of their labor. Fred and James were sitting with Micheal and Thor looking grim. It seemed that none of the Gryffindors were in a celebratory mood. On the dais there were a lot of grim faces, none more dour than Uncle Neville.

Headmaster Shacklebolt stood and raised his hands for silence.

Before I make my end of the year speech, I need to make an announcement on behalf of Madam Pomfrey. Any student caught solidifying Bubotuber Puss into a bar and replacing another student's soap will be punished severely. She does not enjoy missing the feast helping two students regrow skin."

Rose and Scorpius exchanged a look that told Albus all he needed to know about Bubotuber Puss. He looked over at the Gryffindor table and saw a sly smile on his brother's lips. He glanced up at the dais just in time to catch Uncle Neville's conspiratory wink to James and Fred. Then he solemnly nodded at Kingsley's words as the older man began his speech.

"This year we have seen some amazing things. We have seen a House rise to take its place among its peers. We have lost a comrade to his own dark nature. We have all made it through safe to the other side. However there is one more bit of business to which we need to attend."

He looked at the staff table and they all nodded their agreement. "Since the tampering with Quidditch occurred, we were unable to award the bonus points to the appropriate House." He indicated Hufflepuff. "So the staff and I came up with a way to award a bonus to a deserving House to make up for this change. This year we want to award points for an academic achievement."

The Ravenclaw's all got on the edge of their seats, their House Cup bid revived. They all exchanged eager looks, all except Liam Donovan who studied his gold plated silverware in the candlelight stoically.

Shacklebolt continued, "The only way to make this fair, was to take a census of student's improvement from last year to this one and come up with an average. This was not

cumulative." The Ravensclaws deflated. "This also counts out the first year students achievements since they don't have a year in which to compare."

Albus felt a let down. He could see that Rose and Scorpius felt the same disappointment. He looked over the mixed bag, rag-tag bunch of Hufflepuff, and sighed.

Shacklebolt looked down at Professor Longbottom and nodded.

Uncle Neville stood unrolled a parchment and cleared his voice, "There was one House which showed improvement almost to the student, an average of thirteen percent. The next highest House was six. To this House we the faculty award the fifty bonus points that usually went to the winner of the Quidditch Cup."

He looked up and beamed. "Congratulations, Hufflepuff."

To a man the entire staff table stood and waved their wands, the decorations turned yellow and black. The Hufflepuff Badger bared its teeth on banners to the students below. Someone stood up and started clapping. Albus turned and saw to his surprise it was James. His cousins all stood and joined him. Soon the entire Hall was cheering all except some of the Hufflepuffs who sat in shock. Including Roderick Yates with tears flowing down his cheeks. The Slytherins glowered but politely applauded, most likely happy it wasn't Gryffindor.

Albus and James' eyes met. "Next year." James mouthed.

Albus grinned, "Bring it," he mouthed in return.

Chapter 29: As it Ends, So it Begins

Albus woke up wondering if it was time to go to Hogsmeade yet. He realized the room was lit. He rolled over and looked up and saw the starry night through the new illusionary hole in The Cellar ceiling. He shot up. He was in his pajamas, lying on the large sofa in front of the lit fireplace that was crackling comfortably. A blanket fell off of him. He felt disoriented, he rubbed his eyes.

"How did I get here?" he murmured not expecting an answer.

"How you got here is nah important. We have business you and I," came a soft female voice from behind him.

Albus jumped up holding the blanket up to his chin like a shield.

There, seated at one of the smaller tables, glimmering in the firelight was the same ethereal lady that he had seen twice before. Albus suddenly remembered the coin, the one he didn't have anymore.

"It was P-p-professor f-Pharrel," he stammered. She nodded gravely, "I know, but I didn't hear it from you. We had an agreement. You didn't keep to it."

Albus' mind was racing and terrified. Her eyes seemed to shine with their own radiance but her face wasn't turned to the light. "Where's the coin?" she asked.

"Right here mother," came the voice from the entrance tunnel to the sleeping quarters. Cormac was standing in his pajamas and robe holding a coin up to the light. His mum looked astonished for the first time since Albus met her. "Why did you take his onus Mac? That was a foolish thing to do," she scolded quietly.

He walked over to her, and slapped the coin down on the table beside her. "He didn't know what you were asking mum, he didn't know the penalty, I do." She reached up and gently took his chin in her hand, "Me boyo, so loyal and brave, and foolish just like yer Dad." She smiled. "You sent me the message, through the rainbow?" Cormac nodded. She stood and gently shook out her pretty dress robes, she gave her son a warm hug.

She turned to Albus, who was still standing with the blanket to his chin. "Me son risked his life for yers, are ya worth it?"

Albus shook his head adamantly. One thing he knew for sure was that he would never ask anyone to give their life for his. His answer seemed to please her.

She was dangerous, Albus had no doubt she was, but she had code she lived by, and she obviously loved her son. She kissed Cormac on his cheek.

Then she swept across the room before Albus had a chance to react, and gave him a gentle kiss on his cheek as well. Her piercing blue-green eyes, a startling mix of sky and clean spring grass, bore into his. She had a scent that Albus knew he would remember the rest of his life, it was a heady mix of flowers and freshly turned earth. "You have a way to go, youngling, miles and miles before you can rest, now you have the blessing of the wee folk on yer cheek. One bit o' knowledge to help you on yer way. She whispered something in his ear, but he couldn't remember as soon as she said it.

With a jolt he woke up in his own bed. He threw the curtains back, and looked across to Cormac's bunk. The small boy was seated patiently on the end of his bed with his trunk already packed ready to leave. Their eyes met. Cormac made a gesture for Albus to check around his neck. He realized he had a small chain, and it was threaded through that familiar ancient gold coin like a pendant. His hand closed on it, and he somehow knew that he had earned the Leprechaun's favor, and fervently hoped that he could survive it.

They all packed and laughed and talked. Rick Cresswell who had been standoffish, warmed up a bit when he realized his bunk mates seemed to hold no grudge. He crossed the room and held out a hand to Scorpius. Scorpius studied the hand a moment before shaking it. Rick walked off without saying a word. Scorpius went back to packing like nothing happened. Albus wondered what that one action signified. He didn't dwell on it, he just filed it away for later.

Kublai came back from his rounds and curled up on the blanket. His steady gaze showing a silent protest to the carrier he was expected to ride in. Scorpius tried to coax him inside but the cat wasn't having it. When Scorpius went to force him, a silent barring of claws stayed

his hand. Albus sniggered. "You can catch a Snitch after a suicidal dive, but you can't get a little fluff ball back into his carrier. Come on genius, you got straight O's remember." Scorpius glared at him. "If you think it's so easy, you do it."

Albus bent down on Kublai's level. "Your Highness, the carriage awaits, if you would be so kind." He bowed graciously. The cat strolled into the carrier and snuggled down in the blanket. Albus shut the door. He looked at Scorpius who was giving him a bemused look and shrugged. "You have to treat him like royalty or you're not getting anywhere, hes a Khan remember." Scorpius sighed.

They made their way through the kitchen saying goodbyes to the elves they knew. Poppy, the old long bearded kitchen manager, who was keeping his white chin hair over one shoulder while he stirred a pot of gravy, managed a wave with his right ear. Gertie, that sweet round little lady elf who often visited Hufflepuff with snacks, was cracking eggs expertly into a large bowl three at a time, but managed to squeak a greeting. Itchy, the fidgety tall one, was washing pots in the large sink, gave them a salute, before scratching his back with the brush, his ears drooping in pleasure. Lunker, the dour little elf with the pop-eye and large harry feet, was baking some bread, gave them a solemn nod as they passed. For him that was quite an acknowledgment.

Albus felt a sense of homesickness as they made the main hall and put their things with the others. They found their usual spot beside a nearly comatose Rose, grumbling and mean as usual. There was several people calling out to Scorpius like they knew him. He waved back halfheartedly, but Albus could tell he was stiff with resentment that these same persons were the some of the ones that had singled him out for insults when he first came through those doors. Scorpius was not one to forgive, or forget easily. They sat in silence, all too wrapped up in the finality of this day to speak.

It was the end of their first year, all of them had changed drastically. Albus knew he wasn't the same scared little boy who sat on that stool at the front with the Sorting Hat on his head. He knew where he belonged now.

Suddenly he got smacked on the back of the head twice, he turned furiously to see the culprits James and Fred settling in at the Gryffindor table. The ceasefire was over. The temporary alliance was completed, Gryffindor's honor had been expunged and things were back to normal. James grinned at Albus cockily, and mouthed "Good morning bro." Albus just glowered and started to turn back when he saw Allen Baldwin and Callum Weigand settling in further down the red and gold table. They both moved gingerly, wincing often. Nobody sat around them, those from their House who noticed them, glared before turning back to breakfast. It looked like those two had some tough days ahead of them in the House of the Lion. They were going to have to prove their character before they would find the acceptance they formerly enjoyed for free. Albus did not feel sorry for them.

After breakfast he was crossing the main hall when he heard that creepy, too-knowing voice say. "Mr Potter, before you go, I need a word."

He turned to see Growltooth crossing to him. Scorpius and Rose exchanged a look before he waved them on.

"Do you have my boon, Mr. Potter?" the Goblin asked his eyes glinting greedily, long tapered fingers intertwined.

In a flash Albus knew what he needed to do. "Gas!" he called as Cormac and Gas went by. Gaspar walked over with a confused look on his face. "Gas? Tell Growltooth what your last name is." Gas stared at Albus strangely. Then he turned to the Goblin and held out his hand, "My name is Gaspar Boon." The Goblin shook his hand, but his eyes were rested on Albus. His face was emotionless. Gas caught up to Cormac and left. "That wasn't what I meant, Mr. Potter." Albus smiled, what Cormac's mum had told him the night before running through his mind. "You just said "a boon" and that I would know it when I saw it. Gaspar is a Boon. As far as I am concerned, we're even. By the way, the Hogwart's Express has been handling student's luggage for years without fail, now suddenly, because of some anonymous complaint they have to turn the possessions over to an agent of Hogwarts upon it's arrival? I wonder who is responsible for seeing it all gets to the appropriate House, and if that particular mysterious person can resist a look at the valuables? I also wonder if that person might know, who reported the missing possessions to change that policy?"

Growltooth actually smiled. It made Albus uncomfortable. "Well played, young Mister Potter, well played. I will consider us even, as long as we have an agreement?"

Albus silently thanked Cormac's mum and held out his hand, Growltooth shook it, but he didn't let go. Albus felt the fierce potential in the Goblins long fingers, he stared into the creature's dark eyes. "Beware the Leprechauns, Albus, we don't deal with them, they play for keepsies every time."

He let go of Albus' hand and waddled off. Albus rubbed his sore hand and watched him go. "What have I gotten myself into now?"

The ride back to London was a lot different from the ride to Hogwarts. Albus, Rose and Scorpius were in the same compartment, but rather than having people stay away because of Scorpius, they actually turned people away at the door. They did let Cormac and Gas in, and the five of them played Exploding Snap, and Wizard Chess. Well all except Rose who was studying her Charms text and moping. Scorpius and Albus exchanged a wry smile. Kublai somehow picked the lock on his carry-all, and leaped down. He spent his time playfully batting Celestina and Nox's cages, to their concern and expressed disdain. Albus inquired after Gas and Cormac's pets, it turned out that Gas had an irritable owl named Hooty in the baggage car, and Cormac had a frog named Uncle Pat, but no explanation were it was at the moment.

The Trolley Witch came by and actually asked Scorpius to sign a bit of parchment for her, and they munched on snacks while ragging him on his new-found celebrity. "Oh look!" Rose exclaimed, "There's Scorpius Mad-Man Malfoy! I think I'm feeling faint," she wilted on the bench dramatically. "Oh shut it," Scorpius grumbled, but with a tiny smile on his face.

They arrived at Platform nine and three quarters before they realized it. They all filed out. Albus barely made the platform when he was nailed by a little yellow-bowed red-haired rocket in the chest "Albus, Albus, Albus!" it squealed. "Hey Lil's, you're crushing my ribs! No wonder Kreacher tells you to back off every morning," he gasped. She looked up, not letting go and crinkled her nose cutely, like Rose had been known to do, "you're so silly." James cleared the platform further down, loudly talking to his friends. Suddenly Lily was gone, zeroing in on her older brother. Albus rubbed his ribs listening to James' loud voice suddenly being cut off with an, "Ooooff!"

Albus saw his Mum and Dad standing with Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione and Hugo, who was staring at some caged pets mournfully, probably thinking about liberating them. Uncle

Ron looked stiff. Albus saw why. The Malfoy's were standing aloof and proud, just down the platform. Draco and Astoria were craning to see through the smoke. Scorpius made their job easier by running across and nearly tackling them both. They started talking eagerly all pretense to sophistication gone in joy of reunion. Albus gave his Mum and Dad a shy smile as he crossed the distance. His Mum was trying to let him be mature, and make his way to them, but he didn't care. He ran into her arms like the little boy he was. Rose took his cue and she was enveloped in her parents arms as well.

They greeted James but he acted like a big boy and accepted a kiss on his cheek from his mum like he was doing her a favor. They all found the luggage and owls and piled it into a cart for the trip to the car. While Aunt Hermione explained to Hugo, that those caged animals were pets and would be freed soon enough.

"Hey Albus," called Scorpius. Albus turned to see him with his parents, he held the handle to Kublai's carry all with its glowering occupant, looking nervous. "Send me an owl, ok?"

Albus realized that Scorpius wasn't sure if Albus would be his friend over the Summer like he was in Hogwarts. Even after everything they had done together, he was still unsure about this friendship. Albus grinned. "Do you mean send you an owl about coming to visit? You are you know!" The brightest smile that Albus had seen yet lit Scorpius' face. "If it's okay with your mum and dad of course," Scorpius called. Albus dad called, "Sure, we'll let everyone get settled in, and then we'll see." Draco Malfoy didn't look extremely happy about it as he and his wife exchanged a look, but then again the man didn't show anything on his face that wasn't calculated. However his eyes softened as he looked at his son's happiness, and he nodded. "Then it's settled," Aunt Hermione stated, "Scorpius is welcome to visit us as well." She shot Uncle Ron a look that would have peeled paint. "Am I Right, Ron?" He nodded, sheepishly. Rose smiled at Scorpius encouragingly.

"See you Albus, see ya Rose," said Scorpius.

"See you soon," Albus replied. Rose waved.

As they walked to the car he heard James say, "I guess Lily is going to be the Slytherin." Suddenly he yelped, "Ow! Mum! Lily pinched me!" "Well stop picking on her James!" Albus' Mum said with a small chuckle. Albus' Dad swept his giggly little girl off the ground and up to his shoulders. "Come here you." Once there she crossed her arms and stuck out her tongue at James from her new vantage point. Unlike with Albus, James was in for a war if he wanted to pick on Lily. She never played fair.

They walked out to the car, as they had walked to the station months before, as a family.